

Study on Sheepskin raft

Wang Lei

Northwest normal University, Lanzhou Gansu 100084, China

ABSTRACT. *Since ancient times, Lanzhou has three treasures of local characteristics. As the saying goes, “auspicious gourd and beef noodles, and sheepskin raft like warship.” Not only the sheepskin raft is the wisdom crystallization of ancient people who face the natural danger of the Yellow River, but also reflects the spirit of fighting waves of people of all ethnic minorities who dare to challenge the nature. With the development of economy and technology, advanced freighters have replaced sheepskin rafts as means of transport. However, people gradually pay attention to the intangible cultural heritage identity of sheepskin rafts. So, how does the sheepskin raft reflect the past of history? In this paper, literature research and comparative analysis to discuss the sheepskin rate of the development of history and the process of production.*

KEYWORDS: *Sheepskin raft; The history of Gansu; Cultural heritage*

1. Introduction

The sheepskin raft created in Guangxu period of Qing Dynasty. It is important to use the sheepskin raft to cross the Yellow river for people who live in the provinces of Gansu and Ningxia on the bank of the Yellow River. Sheepskin raft also is an important cultural heritage of Lanzhou. (flag.1) It not only carries the historical mission of labor, transportation of generations and life, but also inherits and develops the wisdom of the people on both sides of the Yellow River to adapt to local conditions and fight against heaven and earth. In the process of development, the transportation function of sheepskin raft carrying people and goods has gradually changed into a way of tourism activities. Finally, sheepskin raft developed into local cultural heritage. Owing to economic globalization, the western region is carrying on ever-growing economic exchanges with other region across the China.



Figure.1 Sheepskin raft

There are two aspects about studying sheepskin raft and studying cowhide raft.

The first aspect, “Objectively speaking, Gansu local chronicles, hall chronicles, county chronicles and government chronicles have many specific records about sheepskin rafts. The sheepskin rafts are simply to describe in the official archives of other governments at all levels. It is difficult to recover the craft of the sheepskin raft and understand its history through the official archives. The official archives will not easily record the sheepskin rafts in detail. (Jiang Hongyuan, 2011) The sheepskin raft is generally composed of thirteen leather bags. First, make a frame made of wood. Generally, willow is used to wood. Then, cut two willow branches flat. Use a small knife to chisel out several nests in this plane, and then insert the willow branch into it. Finally, the frame tied up with ropes. (Chang Qinming, 2005)

The second aspect, looking up the data, the development of sheepskin raft related to the development of cowhide raft. “The bottom and surrounding of the cowhide raft are covered with cowhide, and when it rains, you can open the tarpaulin to block the wind and rain. The leather has good elasticity, which can effectively avoid the boulders in the valleys of the Yellow River. If there is no leather package, many rafts will destroy when encountering the reef. Sheepskin rafts are made of the thin skin of the whole sheep. They are used to cross the river and carry passengers.” (Chen xianjia, Sixth volume) It mainly describe the cowhide raft of making process and foundation.

2. History of raft

2.1 Geographical Environment

In ancient times, when it comes to the role of sheepskin raft in Lanzhou, it must introduce the geographical location and landform of Lanzhou. Moreover, Lanzhou called “Jincheng”. It is located in the transition zone from the Qinghai Tibet Plateau

2.2 The History of Sheepskin raft

The history of leather boat in China can trace back to ancient times, and many of the kayaks, including rafts, recorded in Chinese historical records. Fu Chai was

granted the Ou Yi and the floating river.”(Liuxiang, 2003)“Ou Yi 鸥夷” is the skin bag, which looks like a gourd from afar. This also shows that at that time, Fuchai used buoyancy to cross the Yangtze River with a Hulu like animal skin bag, which indirectly shows that leather rafts developed mature in the Warring States period and were widely used in water transportation and combat tools. “Dengxun recruited more than 6000 soldiers in Huangzhong area at that time, and appointed Long Shi Ren Shang to lead the team, sew leather to make boats, put them on wooden rafts across the Yellow River, attack the troops of the Tang Dynasty, kill and capture many people.”(Fanye, 2000)According to the description, it is similar to the cowhide boat in Tibet. This is also the earliest document to record the Yellow River leather boat. The minority lived on both sides of the Yellow River, not only can they make and use sheepskin raft, but also have mastered the crossing skills of sheepskin rafts. (Wang Yande, 1990)This document indicates that the minorities in the upper reaches of the Yellow River used sheepskin rafts in production and life in the Northern Song Dynasty. “In the history of the Yuan Dynasty, Wang Shixian was born in wanggute, Longxi County, Gansu Province. In the early years of the Yuan Dynasty, Wang Shixian followed the yuan army to invade Sichuan, and the song army were stationed on the South Bank of Wanzhou. Wang Shixian gave advice to the yuan army to pretend to build a ship on the north bank to confuse the song army. Later in the night, he used the revolutionary ship to transport the soldiers to the south bank and finally defeated the song army.”(Songlian, Wangwei, 1976)

After the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the sheepskin raft not only used for river crossing in the upper reaches of the Yellow River, but also for waterway transportation. The upper reaches of the Yellow River is the home of ethnic minorities, and the materials for making sheepskin rafts are closely related to animal husbandry. According to historical records, the Huns were the first to use this kind of river crossing tool. Therefore, it speculated that sheepskin raft should originate by ethnic minorities. Recently, through the dictionary of Turkic language written by marimud Kashgar, a famous Turkic philologist in the 11th century. the author found a record related to this: tar 格尔-raft. Blow air on a thousand leather bags, and connect these leather bags. At the end, people can sit on them. It can also be made of reeds and branches. And, Feixu, a Sogdian tribe speaks Turkic. In the 11th century, Feixu lived in the Ili River Basin. This department should be a branch of the

Rouzhi family who moved to the West. The place of residence varies with the times. The author think that the origin of this tool should be in the upper reaches of the Yellow River, and “the Rouzhi 月氏 people”(= Sogdian = the Northern barbarian tribes in ancient China with the surname of Wan 丸) are its inventors. Rouzhi mean nomadic people living in Central Asia. According to the relationship between these nationalities, it indicated that the origin of the leather boat related to the Turks.

3. Production of sheepskin raft

Sheepskin rafts are the most representative along the Yellow River in Gansu, Ningxia and Qinghai, especially in Lanzhou. Making sheepskin raft requires a high

skill of slaughter and peeling. There is a saying in the Folk: “kill a sheep, peel off a piece of skin, blow in a breath, bask in the sun for a month, and smear it with oil”.it mainly about making the all process of the sheepskin raft. First step, people need to make leather bags, which is called “leather fetus 皮胎” in Lanzhou. Meaning the whole skin of the sheep. Second step, the sheepskin raft is depilated, blow air to inflate the leather tire, and then pour a small amount of clear oil, salt and water into it. Third step, tighten the head and tail of the leather tire and the limbs. The leather tire after drying is yellow brown and transparent. And skinning is the basis of the whole production. fourth, killing cattle and killing sheep, head off and hind legs, hang them upside down, peel them from buttocks to forelegs, cut off the hooves and neck, and the skin of cattle and sheep can be taken off completely. Skilled people can complete such a process without any tools and only using fist. Five step is tanning. Soak the leather bag in water. After a few days, the leather bag will ferment. Then it can take out and drain, and the remaining meat and fat can remove with a knife. In the process of tanning, the leather bag is usually turned over, then it is tanned with feet to make it soft. Six step, a proper amount of clear oil and salt water injected to make the leather not only flexible, but also antiseptic. Lanzhou People called it “cooked leather 熟皮子”,(fig.3)meaning the sheepskin has been heat treated. Seventh and finally, dip the twine into the clear oil to make it more flexible. After drying, prick the neck, buttocks and one forelimb, flush air from the other forelimb, and then fasten it with a buckle. Usually, rafts made by blowing air from rafters.



Flagure.3 Cooked leather



Flaure.4 Injecting gas

4. Function and Protection of Sheepskin raft

4.1 Historical Function of Sheepskin raft

The earliest reference to sheepskin raft recorded in the biography of Wang Jinbao in the history of the Qing Dynasty. As early as the fifth year of Hongwu in the Ming Dynasty, Feng Sheng and Deng Yu built floating bridges in the Yellow River section of Lanzhou due to military needs, but bridges demolished due to the rapid flow of the Yellow River and the weakness of the floating bridges themselves. Before the construction of “Lanzhou Yellow River Iron Bridge” (1907), most people relied on sheepskin raft to carry goods through the holes in Lanzhou.

The function and contribution of sheepskin raft in modern, especially in the period of Anti-Japanese war. The wholesale transportation area starting from Lanzhou starts from guide, Qinghai in the West and reaches Ningxia and Suiyuan in the north. Before the Anti-Japanese War, the fur, wood, grain, medicinal materials and water smoke exported from the northwest provinces transported to Suiyuan and Baotou by Pifeng, and then transported by Pingsui line loaded vehicles. According to the length of the trip, the means of transportation are also different. The short-distance transportation adopts sheepskin raft transportation. Moreover, transportation began on both sides of the Yellow River in mid-February. In the thirty-second year of the Republic of China (1943), Dr. Joseph Needham, a British expert on the history of China scientific development, came to Gansu to give lectures and investigate. During the investigation, Needham took a sheepskin raft in Lanzhou.

Meanwhile, sheepskin raft adds a colorful chapter to the history of raft shipping. From 1939 to the summer of 1941, the national government moved its capital to Chongqing, and the Jialing River waterway became one of the targets of Japanese aircraft bombing and harassing. Moreover, the ships carrying military supplies had

to stop sailing. Under the influence of various adverse factors, the president of Lanzhou sheepskin raft chamber of commerce at that time led two skilled workers to set sail from Guangyuan, Sichuan Province, using the leather tires purchased from Lanzhou to make a leather raft with a load of more than 1000 liters. The leather rafts were loaded with military supplies such as gasoline and successfully arrived at the destination along the river. According to some data, this voyage uses sheepskin rafts to transport goods, which saves 50% of the time compared with wooden ships and 80% of the freight compared with automobile transportation. In the summer of the next year, a “raft shipping team” was set up, and more than 20 experienced people selected to rush to Guangyuan to take the initiative of transporting military materials. According to records, after 15 days of hard sailing, the shipping team arrived in Chongqing, without casualties and material loss.

Since modern times, sheepskin rafts have stopped transporting large goods. However, we need to rely on sheepskin rafts to carry out some activities. It is used to enrich people's daily life. Therefore, taking the sheepskin raft became an important folk activity at that time. In the last century, the transport function of sheepskin rafts gradually lost, but at this time, the tourism industry in Lanzhou has not yet risen, and sheepskin rafts were once interrupted and in a state of extinction. Later, with the rise of tourism, the government formulated the Yellow River style line and other projects. This ancient means of transportation reappeared in people's vision.

4.2 Cultural Value of Sheepskin raft

Sheepskin raft is the transportation tools made of cattle and sheepskin, which used by Lanzhou residents in the early period, especially the Hui compatriots in the process of obtaining the means of life, production or military battle. It closely related to the geographical environment, national consciousness and cultural psychology of Lanzhou. First, the geographical environment determines the development direction of human life style and production mode. The progress of human beings occurs at the same time as the time activities of understanding and transforming the world. Alexander von Humboldt, a German geographer, put forward that “the advancement of human civilization is almost always in inverse proportion to the fertility of the land where human live. The more human beings can overcome the difficulties brought by nature, the more human spiritual and sensory abilities develop. The faster. “As far as the Yellow River Basin is concerned, sheepskin raft is the cradle of the cultural development of the Chinese nation. People can carry food and daily necessities through sheepskin rafts. the continuous break and diversion have also caused them great losses, and these disasters have made the residents living in the Yellow River Basin obtain their inherent sense of suffering, which lies in the struggle of nature, but also created their healthy physique and resolute quality. There are mainly Han, Hui and Dongxiang People living in Lanzhou section of the Yellow River Basin. Hui people are good at handicraft production and business. Because of dietary structure, and people greatly promote the development of the Hui people in raising and killing cattle and sheep and related handicraft industry. (flag.5)



Flauge.5 Sheepskin raft in the Yellow river

4.3 Protection and utilization of sheepskin raft

In order to ensure the more standardized protection of intangible cultural heritage in China, the State Council formulated the working principle of “protection first, rescue first, rational utilization, inheritance and development”, proposed to gradually establish the four-level protection system of the state + province + city + County, and required all local and relevant departments to implement it well. Thus, it embodies the protection, management and rational utilization of intangible cultural heritage. Since 2006, the Cultural Bureau of Chengguan District and Qilihe district of Lanzhou city has made a preliminary survey of sheepskin rafts to learn about their distribution characteristics, operation status, number of inheritors and other relevant information. In the same year, Chengguan District and Qilihe district of Lanzhou city jointly declared sheepskin mirror as the first batch of intangible cultural heritage of Lanzhou City, and it approved successfully. On December 11, 2007, Lanzhou daily cancelled the “Lanzhou sheepskin lianzichong national intangible cultural heritage project” on the front page and formulated the protection plan. Since then, through further investigation, the relevant staff have formally declared the national intangible cultural heritage since the chopsticks with a history of more than 300 years officially identified as provincial intangible cultural heritage by Gansu Provincial Department of culture and entered the protection list. The purpose of applying for national intangible cultural heritage to protect it. No matter from the perspective of inheritors or production technology, sheepskin raft is the most valuable asset.

Now, the techniques for protecting sheepskin rafts are becoming more diverse. There are many parts about sheepskin raft in the museum. Local people also pay more and more attention to sheepskin rafts. For example, inheritors teach this technology to others or their own children.

5. Conclusion

In short, the production and use of sheepskin raft is a great historical invention, a crystallization of wisdom condensed in the process of human struggle with nature, obtaining means of life, production or military combat.

By understanding the history of sheepskin rafts, people can understand the history of Gansu. In this paper, although there is a new understanding of the origin of the leather boat. However, sufficient supporting materials needed. Now with the rapid development of high technology, virtual reality (VR) technology can use to recover the sheepskin raft and reproduce the scene of how people used to use the sheepskin raft to carry people and things. For the use of virtual reality in sheepskin rafts, the author is still learning the relevant software unity. The author hope that in the near future, I can gain something and inject new vitality into the sheepskin raft.

Reference

- [1] Chang Qingmin (2005). Sheepskin rafts across the Yellow River. Chinese heritage, no.03, pp. 1-2.
- [2] Chen Xianjia. Gansu Travel Notes. First volume.
- [3] Chen Xianjia. Gansu Travel Notes. Sixth volume.
- [4] Fanye (2000). The Record of Dengxun in the History of the Later Han Dynasty. Zhonghua Book Company.
- [5] Gansu Provincial Archives (2008). Impression of Gansu Since late Qing Dynasty. Dunhuang Literature and Art Press, no.5, pp. 244-265.
- [6] Jiang Hongyuan (2011). The years of sheepskin rafting. Shanxi archives, no.11, pp. 2-3.
- [7] Liu xiang (2003). The Strategies During The Warring States Period. Shanxi Ancient books Publishing House.
- [8] Song lian, Wang wei (1976). The Record of Wang Shixian in the History of Yuan Dynasty. Zhonghua Book Company.
- [9] Wang Yande (1990). The Record of Gaochang in the history of Song Dynasty Zhonghua Book Company.