

# Application of Chinese Ethnic Minority Themes in Contemporary Figurative Sculpture Creation

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**Abstract:** In the field of contemporary sculpture creation, the rich culture and historical depth of Chinese ethnic minorities have attracted the widespread attention of artists. These creations not only emphasize external features such as ethnic costumes, totems, or life scenes but also touch deep spiritual contents including historical stories, religious beliefs, and living habits of ethnic minorities. This paper discusses the integration process of Chinese ethnic minority themes in figurative sculpture creation and the inheritance of the profound spirit of ethnic groups in this process. At the same time, this paper also places the diversified expression and innovative practice of these themes in sculpture art in the context of the new era for investigation and explores the far-reaching influence of its development on promoting cultural inheritance and artistic innovation.

**Keywords:** Ethnic minority themes; Contemporary figurative sculpture; Integration and development

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## 1. Introduction

In the middle and late 1950s, on the basis of returning to traditions, Chinese sculpture art started its exploration of localization and nationalization. Sculptures with ethnic minority themes, with their unique cultural characteristics, have become a model of blending artistic innovation and national emotions. Not only do these works vividly show the local conditions and customs of various ethnic groups, but they also embody the spirit of national unity. They highlight the diversity of Chinese national culture and the far-reaching influence of policies towards nationalities and are of great significance to promoting great national unity and forging a community of destiny for the Chinese nation.

## 2. The integration and rise of Chinese ethnic minority themes and contemporary figurative sculpture

### 2.1. The period of rise and convergence

At the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese sculptors devoted themselves to the exploration of localization and nationalization, aiming at “creating sculptures for New China,” and jointly promoted the establishment

of the modern aesthetic system of Chinese sculpture. The early works were influenced by the Soviet realism style, subsequently, artists began to explore the integration of traditional realistic techniques with ethnic cultural elements. These sculptures focus on national unity, national costumes, life scenes, myths, and legends, and convey the unity, friendship, and unique customs of ethnic minorities through sculpture language. These explorations not only enrich the expression forms of modern Chinese sculpture but also promote the inheritance and development of national culture. In 1951, Linyi Wang depicted the scene of unity and friendship among all ethnic groups in the country with a large-scale white marble relief titled “Great National Unity,” showing the ideal picture of national unity in New China. Since then, the marble sculpture “Korean Pas de Deux (the Chaoxian nationality)” by Chongren Zhang in 1955 and “Dai Girl” by Wanjing Wang in 1962 not only strengthened the artistic language of Chinese traditional sculpture but also vividly shaped the customs and cultural characteristics with distinctive national characteristics. In 1958, Huanzhang Liu’s sculpture “Wrestler” reflected the mental state and majestic spirit of people in that era with its full and powerful image. These works not only enrich the artistic form of modern Chinese sculpture but also profoundly embody national unity and the spirit of the times. During this period, sculptors took the initiative to closely link their personal artistic pursuit with national culture and destiny. With the deepening of inter-ethnic exchanges, artists have gone deep into ethnic minority areas to draw inspiration, and at the same time absorbed the nutrition of other art forms such as painting, music, and dance, so that sculptures have further enriched the connotation and aesthetic value of national culture on the basis of maintaining national characteristics, and showed a more diverse and three-dimensional artistic style.

## 2.2. The period of development and breakthrough

In the 1980s, Chinese sculpture art underwent changes under the impetus of social ideological emancipation, and the creation of sculpture with ethnic minority themes entered a new stage, from political narrative to realistic themes. Artists explored and tried to find new ways of expression in the historical context of red classics, going beyond the reproduction of traditional classic scenes and symbols, and focusing on the daily life, emotional world, and spiritual pursuit of ethnic minorities. Through the ontological language, sculptures in this period conveyed profound thinking about human nature, society, and nature, and discussed the survival and development in the new era, making them closely connected with the pulse of the times, with a strong sense of reality and characteristics of the times. Fuguan Xu pointed out that artistic spirit is the unique intrinsic quality or temperament of works, which distinguishes different artistic forms, and the artistic spirit of different regions reflects the fundamental ideas of their respective cultures <sup>[1]</sup>. However, the sculptures with ethnic minority themes in this period generally showed a localized and native “Chinese style.”

In this context, sculpture art showed new vitality under the impetus of cultural reconstruction and breakthrough, especially the sculpture creation of ethnic minorities. Artists began to pursue independent thinking and emotional expression, and devoted themselves to showing individuality and innovation in sculpture form language, which marked the diversification of artistic styles and the formation of personalized styles, and reflected the artistic expression from “collective” to “individual” transformation. Sculptors go deep into ethnic minority areas, experience the local lifestyle, local feelings, folk customs, and regional traditions, and make in-depth excavation and artistic transformation of themes. Tibetan culture in Tibet, Miao culture in Yunnan-Guizhou, Yi culture in West Sichuan, and ethnic cultures in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang became themes that sculptors were happy to explore and express. Mongolian sculptor Hao Wen’s works, “Our Bagxi (Teacher),” “Mongolian Mathematician-Ming’an Tu,” “Matouqin-Selasi,” etc., emphasized the authenticity of history, and while maintaining national characteristics, paid attention to showing the cultural differences of different regions, reflecting the artist’s deep understanding and unique opinions on national culture. These works not only enriched the expression forms of sculpture art but also promoted the inheritance and development of

national culture. In terms of Miao themes, Shixin Tian's works occupied an important position in the history of Chinese sculpture. Zhenhua Sun spoke highly of Shixin Tian in his book *Sculpture Space*, and believed that it was with Shixin Tian's excellent works that Chinese sculpture really began to show the unique charm of ethnic minorities <sup>[2]</sup>. Shixin Tian lived and worked in Guizhou for 25 years, during which he deeply experienced and understood the local Miao culture and absorbed rich folk art nutrition. Through the refinement of Miao culture and the integration of personal experience and ideas, Shixin Tian created a series of sculptures with Miao cultural themes, such as Miao Girl, Happy Pillar, Mountain Wind, Mountain Man, Mountain Sound, etc. These works not only show the uniqueness of Miao culture but also reflect his innovation and exploration of sculpture art. Shixin Tian's research and creative achievements have made important contributions to the development of minority sculpture in China.

### **3. The integration of figurative sculpture and ethnic minority themes continuously activates and inherits the spiritual connotation of the Chinese nation**

In the 21st century, in the context of intensified globalization and rapid economic development, the performance and changes of national culture show the risk of converging with external cultures. Zhenhua Sun <sup>[3,4]</sup> mentioned in *The History of Chinese Sculpture* that in modern art education, western sculpture concepts had become the mainstream, while Chinese traditional sculpture art had gradually faded out. This led to the conflict between tradition and modernity in contemporary sculpture creation, making it necessary to seek a balance between inheritance and innovation <sup>[5]</sup>. Faced with the trend that the cultural subjectivity of ethnic minorities is gradually weakening, the public's awareness of protecting and inheriting this cultural heritage is increasing day by day. In this context, many outstanding works have emerged in the field of sculpture art, which show Chinese cultural self-confidence, strengthen national cultural identity, and inherit traditional advantages. In 2009, the State Council issued "Several Opinions on Further Prosperity and Development of Minority Cultural Undertakings," which promoted the prosperity of ethnic minority culture and art through the implementation of major cultural projects, and promoted the enthusiasm for ethnic art creation and the improvement of artistic level. Sculptors' works not only reproduce the external form of national culture but also deeply excavate and convey its deep cultural and symbolic meaning, and express the unique understanding of nature, life, and the universe of ethnic groups and their pursuit of harmonious coexistence. These sculptures not only enrich Chinese sculpture art but also make positive contributions to the inheritance and development of minority cultures.

As a practical medium of cultural inheritance, sculpture effectively inherits and activates national culture within the framework of contemporary society through in-depth theme interpretation, exquisite concrete realistic skills, and innovative transformation of traditional materials. Chinese contemporary sculptures with the theme of ethnic minorities record the historical context and cultural characteristics of each ethnic group with the help of figurative sculpture. They not only carry the historical memory of national culture but also deeply reflect the artist's cognition and emotion of national culture. Artists combine the cultural elements of ethnic minorities with the language of figurative sculpture and refine the features of various ethnic groups <sup>[6]</sup>. These works record the history, culture, customs, and lifestyle of ethnic groups in the Chinese nation, and embody the spiritual characteristics of unity, friendship, and positive progress. In 2009, Chunsheng Cao, Xiuqing Zhou, Huidong Li, and Shu Zhang cooperated with a large-scale group sculpture "Inspiration-Great National Unity," as part of the national major historical art creation project, showed the warm scene of pride, joy, harmonious coexistence, and passion of the people of all ethnic groups in China, and highlighted the spiritual outlook and national feelings of unity and friendship of the people of all ethnic groups in China in the 21st century. In the same year, Yumin Jing's "Return to the East: Epic of Turhut (Mongolian)" took the historical facts of Mongolian

migration as the background, and adopted tragic and romantic realistic techniques to depict the historical events of Mongolian Turhut overcoming many difficulties and returning to the embrace of the motherland, showing the spiritual strength of Chinese sons and daughters to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation [7]. The sculptors of this period emphasized the importance of the localization direction more through aesthetic forms that directly present social problems and realistic contradictions. Facing contemporary social phenomena directly, they not only show the appearance of national forms but also pay more attention to grasping the integration of ethnic themes and sculptures, which is transformed into a powerful connotation to express the national traditional spirit.

## **4. Diversified perspectives and innovative development of figurative sculptures with ethnic minority themes in the new era**

### **4.1. Diversified perspectives**

In the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the General Secretary said: “We should promote the innovative transformation and development of Chinese excellent traditional culture,” pointing out a clear direction for the development of Chinese cultural construction. In the context of the new era, minority sculptures show a diversified development trend. Artists go beyond the limitations of traditional expression techniques and skills and explore innovative ways of concepts, forms, materials, colors, and scientific and technological support. They are committed to finding a new path with the characteristics of the times and cultural depth, as well as new possibilities of integration and innovation, and have constructed a cultural system that reflects the “nationality” and “orientality” of contemporary mainstream art. Taking young sculptor Hanqin Peng’s series of Yi works “Walking a Song” and “Liangshan Minor” as examples, these works are inspired by the daily life of Liangshan Yi people and combine their own emotional expression with realistic themes. While shaping the regional culture and life flavor of the Yi nationality, it also conveys the spiritual connotation of regional culture and the unique charm of oriental national culture.

In the expression of ethnic themes, contemporary sculpture has expanded from expressing traditional ethnic customs and local culture to covering practical issues such as the daily life of ethnic minorities, cultural exchanges, rural revitalization, ecological protection, and cultural inheritance. Artists dig deep into the national spirit, explore the modern transformation of national culture through the perspective of contemporary multiculturalism, and show the spiritual outlook of contemporary ethnic minorities.

### **4.2. Innovation and development**

The key to the creation of sculptures with ethnic minority themes lies in capturing and displaying the uniqueness and spiritual core of the nation, and at the same time assuming the contemporary responsibility of artistic empowerment to promote inheritance and protection. In the process of innovation, excessive symbolization and standardization should be avoided, and the simplification and generalization of the original national features should be prevented. By digging deep into local elements and enhancing the recognition of works, we can not only strengthen the uniqueness and innovation of ethnic themes in contemporary figurative sculpture but also show the sense of the times, social connection, and humanistic care of the works, thus reflecting the diversity of contemporary artistic language.

Entering a new era, the creation of contemporary figurative sculpture has shown unprecedented vitality and innovation. In the process of cultural development, interactivity and publicity have been enhanced, and more and more sculptures with ethnic minority themes have been placed in public spaces to promote the exchange between people and ethnic minority cultures; the integration of historicity and the times not only shows profound cultural heritage in the works but also brings them closer to the pulse of the times. From the



perspective of the ontological language of sculpture art, innovation is manifested in techniques and materials, the exploration of sculpture forms, and the bold experiment of color application. In terms of the expansion of the theme content, the popular cultural phenomena such as “Village BA” and “Village Super League” in recent years not only reflect the vitality of rural culture but also become a new driving force for the revitalization of rural culture. In the 14th National Art Exhibition, Zhengyuan Lu’s sculpture “Vibrant” not only captured the youthful vitality of the “Village Super League” culture, but also conveyed the charm of local cultural heritage through visual art, and at the same time reflected the contemporary people’s yearning for a better life. The author’s sculpture “An Exciting Day of Happy Cheerleader Mi Xiang” also takes the rural sports culture of “Village Super League, Village BA” as the creative background, and depicts the image of a long-horned Miao girl cheering passionately at the scene of Village BA. The popularity of the Village Super League and Village BA in Guizhou not only reflects the vigorous development of rural culture but also shows people’s vitality, unity, and pursuit of a better life during rural revitalization.

## 5. Summary

Since the middle of the 20th century, ethnic minority themes have gradually occupied a core position in Chinese art creation, which has had a profound impact on contemporary ethnic cultural themes. Facing the challenges of globalization and modernization, artists strive to balance the maintenance of national traditions with the breakthrough of innovation in their artistic creations. They apply modern aesthetics and technology to traditional art, promote the diversified development of national themes in contemporary sculpture, and devote themselves to the organic inheritance of national culture in contemporary society, showing artists’ deep understanding and pursuit of national feelings and the mission of the times.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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