

Study on Cultural Connotation of Tattoo Custom in Women of Yi Ethnic Group in Liangshan

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Abstract: Tattoo custom in women of Yi ethnic group is a human cultural phenomenon with very rich connotation. Its social and psychological motive is complex. It is a comprehensive expression of religion, culture and custom of Yi ethnic group under specific historical and regional conditions.

Keywords: Women of Yi ethnic group, Tattoo, Cultural connotation

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1 Introduction

Tattoo in Yi women is an ancient custom inherited from matriarchal clan society of Yi ethnic group. It reflects primitive religious consciousness and aesthetic concept of Yi women. It widely existed in the history of Yi ethnic group. With the development and advancement of society, economy and culture of Yi ethnic group areas have undergone drastic changes after establishment of the People's Republic of China. The cultural phenomenon of tattoo has been gradually vanishing. Today, most Yi ethnic group tattoos are seen occasionally among middle-aged women. It is becoming a relic of history.

2 Interpretation and classification of tattoos

Tattoo, in short, is to carve pattern or symbol on different parts of body using sharp tools such as knife and needle, and then to paint color to make them permanent.

The old version “*Cihai*” dictionary explains about tattoo using quotations. In the “*Biography of Guliang*”

which describes 13 years of life in Ailao Country: “Wu, is a country of barbarians, they worship tattoos but not laws.” “Tattoo is portrayed on body as an act of civilization. Those who have self-mutilation, will be able to fight against evil dragon.” This pointed out that tattoo is ‘portrayed on body as an act of civilization’, and it will not be considered as tattoo without ‘self-mutilation’^[1]. Meanwhile, interpretation of the new version of “*Cihai*” elucidates the early existence and development of tattoo. It explicates the difference between dyeing and non-dyeing tattoos, and that tattoo can be at entire body or part of human body. Its explains that tattoo is a kind of cultural custom which exists in early development stage of many ethnicities. The method is to carve natural object or geometric symbol on entire body or part of human body using needle. Tattoos can be dyeing or non-dyeing, and they are generally used as totem sign.

Modern classification and appellation of tattoo types are also varied and diverse. It is called ‘Diaoti (carve title)’ if patterns are carved and dyed on forehead. It is called ‘Jingmian (whale face)’ if patterns or words are carved and dyed on other facial part other than forehead. It is called ‘Diaqing (carve blue)’ and ‘Zaqing (prick blue)’ if patterns or words are tattooed and dyed on other body part other than face. Women of Yi ethnic group in Liangshan like to tattoo ‘plum blossom’ on the back of both hands and elbows, which is known as ‘Mazha’ by the ethnic group. According to the classification above, it should be classified as ‘Diaqing (carve blue)’.

3 Historical records about tattoo in Yi ethnic group

There are many historical records about tattoo custom.

Before the Qin and Han dynasties, the book of “*Rite, Chapter of Jade System*” mentioned that “Southern barbarians carve title on their face and decorate their toes, they do not eat food cooked with fire.” Title here refers to face tattoo^[2]. The “*Book of the Later Han Dynasty, Records of Southern Barbarians*” mentioned: “Barbarians in Ailao ancient country... All people carve elephant and dragon characters on their bodies, they wear long tailed clothes.” The same was recorded in the “*Chronicles of Huayang State*” by Jin Changqiu: in Ailao country, ‘tails are attached to the rear of clothes, tattoos are on their arms and thighs.’ It can be seen that Yi ethnic group in the southwest area already practiced tattoos before the Qin and Han dynasties. From Sui Dynasty to Yuan Dynasty, there were also records about tattoo custom of Yi people and Pu people, as recorded in “*Book of New Tang Dynasty*” and “*Guangzhi*”. The “*Book of New Tang Dynasty, Records of Southern Barbarians*” mentioned: “A thousand and five hundred miles outside of Yunnan, there are Pu people with face tattoo. The Pu people have blue face and red lips. Deem that teeth bring deadly danger, they break their teeth. This makes their lips red.” The “*Guangzhi*” also mentioned: “Face of Pu people, also known as Li face, is painted in blue.”^[3] Among documentations during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the “*Dongxi Valley*” by Lu Ciyun recorded: “There are several kinds of people in Ailao country... There are those have tattoos on face, who are known as embroidered face barbarians. There are those who have tattoos on feet, who are known as flowered feet barbarians.”^[4]

Mr. Lv Simian, who is known as one of the four great historians, said: “Pu, also also known as Bo refers to Yi people today, it represents a large ethnic group in the southwest area.” This shows that Pu people are today’s Yi people^[5]. The “*Book of New Tang Dynasty, Southern Barbarians, Nanzhao Kingdom*” mentioned about southern barbarians in the article: “Nanzhao, or Hetuo, or Longwei, or Juba, or Yangjian, was originally called Ailao by Yi people, it was then renamed to Wuman.” This stated that Nanzhao ‘was originally called Ailao by the Yi people, it was then renamed to Wuman’^[6]. Therefore, Woman is the ancestor of Yi ethnic group and it is also the Ailao barbarians. Ma Changshou, a professor of History Department of Northwest University, put forward in the book “*Tribal Composition and Slavery in Nanzhao Kingdom*” that the ancient people who were called ‘Ailao barbarians’ are in fact today’s Yi ethnic group.

According to the above historical records, tattoo custom of the ethnic group has a long history and has a profound

significance in life of the ethnic group.

4 Exact procedure of tattoo in women in Yi ethnic group

Ancient Yi women had tattoo on the back of their hands and arms before they hit adulthood. Tattoo patterns were mostly totem worshipped by the Yi people such as eagle and sun which endorse their identity. Tattoo season was mostly in early winter after autumn. At this time, climate would turn cooler but not very cold so that wound would not be easily infected and develop into fester. At the same time, it was the season of reduced farming or hunting. Production would not be affected, thus they could have enough time for recovery and care. Tattooing was generally taken place at places with no sunlight, good ventilation and less people. This is because sun light would cause inflammation and discoloration of wound. Whereas, poor ventilation would delay healing of wound. On the one hand, people crowd would disturb the tattoo process and increase the possibility of bacterial infection. Most importantly, Yi people regarded this as a sacred ceremony, and that it should be carried out at a quiet atmosphere with a devout heart. So it was mostly taken place at night; under the eaves, in the warehouse or near to fire stove.

5 Reasons for tattoo in Yi ethnic group

It is worth to explore that, acquiring a tattoo is a painful process. In addition, medical and health conditions were poor in the ancient times. Nevertheless, the ancestors of Yi ethnic group always enjoyed it. What kind of social and psychological motivation underlined this?

5.1 Aesthetics cannot be the initial motivation of tattoo

Symbol system which is composed of a series of regular artificial scars, is complex and has various purposes. Odd combination of tattoo patterns often easily leads to misunderstanding as that tattoo is originated from pursuit of aesthetics of primitive people. Just as the theory of aesthetics, pursuit of aesthetics is the most common and general statement of reasons for tattoo. But if all reasons are put together, it seems to be more sensible to be originated from practical purpose rather than aesthetics. Therefore, study of original reason for tattoo custom in the ethnic society should not be explicated based on currently present reasons. It can be seen that the initial origin of tattoo has no relation with aesthetics.

Even if tattoo was due to aesthetic purpose, it was

developed later. According to Marxist theorist Plekhanov, “Barbarians first realized about benefits and they began to think that tattoos were beautiful. They then had aesthetic pleasure.” Apparently, initial tattoo of human beings is very pragmatic^[7]. Then, what are the “benefits” that Plekhanov thought of? We can imagine that when primitive Yi people faced external threats from mysterious and powerful nature and foreign forces, they would deeply feel the pettiness of individual power and thus they were afraid. In order to overcome the fear, they intended to strengthen their own strengths through various grotesque figures in the form of ‘tattoos’, so as to control or conquer foreign power, or to make themselves protected by mysterious power and gods. Therefore, the saying of tattoo is originated from practical utilitarian purpose can include many real and credible reasons that are in line with living conditions of primitive people at that time.

5.2 Reason of totem worship

When combined with general conditions of ancestors of the primitive clan in which intelligence and productivity were low and clan group was prosperous, health and well-being of each clan member were always being influenced by surrounding environment. There were unexplained mysterious forces everywhere. Naturally, they would try to use power of religion and witchcraft to communicate and demand foreign power to serve for them, and hope that these mysterious power can protect them.

Huang Shi, one of the earliest experts on primitive religion and custom in China also said: “Barbarians have tattoo custom which can be explained by induction of magic. Most patterns they tattooed were their own clan totems, or totem of individual i.e. personal patron saint, or things they believed to have protection power. Therefore, tattooing these objects on their bodies was nothing more than a talisman to fight against all kinds of dangers.” In this way, tattoo phenomenon with very rich connotation based on religion and totem worship had been existing since primitive society^[8].

‘Totem’ is an Indian oribi language, which originally means ‘his family’ or ‘brotherhood’. In short, totemism is regarding an animal or a plant as ancestor and God of protection. As Marx said, “they think that all living things and natural beings not only are different from human beings, they can also transform to each other. On this basis, there is a kind of blood relationship between human beings and nature such as animals and plants. They claim that they are handed down from the animal used by the clan, believing that their ancestors were transformed to humans from animals by the ruling God.” Women of Yi

ethnic group in Liangshan have to tattoo on the back of their palms and arms before they hit adulthood. Patterns of tattoos are mostly eagle or patterns shaped like plum blossom or copper coin. Of which, eagle patterns are exactly related to Yi People’s worship of eagle. Currently, Yi ethnic group in Liangshan commonly regard patterns of plum blossom or copper coin as ‘hell money’ after death. In fact, the author believes that this is embodiment of Yi people’s primitive totem worship of tattoo - belief in sun and moon. Meanwhile, the so-called ‘hell money’ theory may be a farfetched attachment after advent of private ownership.

Eagle is a kind of ferocious bird common seen in Liangshan area of Yi ethnic group. It fights in wide sky bravely, catches its prey with agility and vigor, overlooks all living beings with dignity, and has broad vision. These characters are naturally regarded as symbols of freedom, nobility and bravery by the Yi people. Thus, they regard it as a divine bird and worship of it. There are signs of eagle totem worship in all kinds of folklore, religious folklore and even in daily life. Zhige Along in the “*Leoteyi*” of Creation Myth of Yi People, is said to be born after blood of a holy eagle drips onto his mother’s skirt. It is of solid reason that Yi people agree that their hero Zhige Along has the blood origin of eagle. This is exactly their deep accumulation and distant response to worship of eagle totem. In the spirit sending sutra of Bimo of Yi people, the “*Guiding Sutra*” records that: “medicine hammer is made of eagle bone, medicine sieve is made of eagle wings, medicine spoon is made of eagle tailbone, and eagle skull is made into medicine pot.” In fact, making medicine processing apparatus using parts of eagle body shows no scientific evidence for increased efficacy. It is simply the expression of Yi people’s worship of eagle totem. Based on this worship psychological mechanism, Yi people fantasize to achieve purposes of exorcising and avoiding ghost through magic power of holy bird ‘eagle’. All of which imply the Yi people’s worship of eagle.

5.3 Clan symbol and worship of ancestor

Tattoo is different from ordinary scar. It is a type of repeated intentional scar. It belongs to cultural category rather than natural category. Tattoo of Yi ethnic group has the functions of ethnicity identity symbol and ancestor identity.

According to Bimo’s classical record, ancient war flags were painted with natural objects such as eagle, wild boar, sun, yak and other objects. Patterns such as sun, moon, chicken, star map, fish eye, ox, sheep horn, fish bone and others were painted on costume of Yi people. Weapons

were attached with ornaments such as eagle claw, yak tail, tiger skin and tiger tail. All of which embody the Yi people's worship of natural objects that they further make them into clan logos. In order to allow members of the same clan or tribe to recognize each other easily, ancestors of the Yi ethnic group used standardized body tattoo symbol as marker, which is usually totem of eagle or sun. According to the book of "*Ancient Society*" by Morgan, the so-called totem means 'symbol or emblem of a clan'. That is, clan symbol representing blood relationship, which is also a special sign of mutual observance of covenant or oath^[9]. Academic research results show that tattoo patterns in different ethnic groups are different. Even patterns of different subgroups within the same tribe are different and will not be confused with each other. Therefore, tattoo is a symbol of ethnicity, a symbol of clan, phratry and tribe. Tattoo plays an important role in tribal war and population reproduction. Tattoos of Yi women in different family or clan, different region, different appellation, have their own special patterns which cannot be stolen, confused, or modified. They have been passed down to generations from ancient time to the present; they embody the significance in 'distinguishing between clans'.

Yi ethnic group people regard some imaginary objects such as bamboo eagle, sun and moon that seem to be closely related to their own clan as their ancestors. They used them as tattoo patterns of the clan, or painted the symbol or totem pattern of the clan on war flags or costumes, hoping to gain victory in war. Obviously, clan was signified by flags in war. In flags, illusory form of ancestors which also served as totems of worship was depicted. At such, ancestors of Yi ethnic group had completed the journey from totem worship to ancestor worship, which was not simply based on sublation but juxtaposition. Today, there are two flags: 'Sun and Star Flag' and 'Snake Pattern Flag' being collected in Yi Slavery Society Museum in Liangshan. A silver crown with a standing 'Pigeon' on the crown top is the sign of Yi clan.

Of course, there are many reasons for tattoo. In addition to the above reasons, there are also reasons such as grade differentiation, gender attraction and so on. In the process of continuous development of history, tattoo has been given new connotation and significance.

6 Conclusions

As the symbol of cultural significance, tattoo in women of Yi ethnic group contains rich connotation in the

aspects of reproduction sign, witchcraft, identity, aesthetics and honor. However, life style, opinion of value and behavior norms of people undergoes changes and reevaluation as development progresses. Functional significance of traditional tattoo in Yi women has been gradually vanishing or disappearing due to loss of the existing cultural environment in the process of historical evolution.

In summary, tattoo custom in Yi ethnic group is comprised of many connotations in the aspects of totem worship, ancestor worship, ethnicity identity and aesthetic sentiment in Yi people. It has strong religious elements, ethnicity characteristics and regional characteristics. It is a living fossil for studies of history and cultures of Yi people and it a precious heritage of ethnic culture.

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