

## The Semantic Expression of Guizhou Folk Batik Patterns

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*Abstract: The national pattern is an external representation of a national culture, pinning people's hopes and aspirations. It contains people's concept of creation and aesthetic psychology. It records the historical changes of the nation. It is an identity of the minority's own culture and it is different from other ethnic groups. Cultural symbols are also the visual basis for us to interpret a nation. Guizhou folk batik patterns have been preserved in the form of unique carriers so far, revealing and expressing their rich semantic connotations.*

*Keywords: Batik Pattern, Semantic Expression*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Guizhou Batik, also known as the "Guizhou wax pattern," can be traced back to the Western Han Dynasty more than 2,000 years ago. This artistic form has developed a school of its own among all Guizhou folk artistic forms for its simple and elegant tone, graceful patterns and plentiful cultural connotation. Batik is an ancient dyeing-resist process. It was called "waxed fabric design" in ancient times and, together with the arts of lashing warping and clip knotting, has been known as one of the three basic types of dyeing and lashing arts of ancient China.

The batik patterns of the minority nationalities in Guizhou province varies in characteristic. For example, the Miao batik still follows the patterns outlined with ancient bronze drums and folklore themes. Some look like flowers, birds, insects and fish that come into contact with their daily lives, while Buyi people prefer geometric patterns. In short, each ethnic minority has a unique style of the batik patterns.

The batik floral designs of Guizhou are simple, vivid and diversified. Batik collects its themes from flowers, birds, insects and fish. However, the collection is not a truthful imitation of nature. Instead, it is an integration of observation, experience and refinement with personal imagination.

### 2. THE TOTEM SEMANTIC OF THE BRONZE DRUM PATTERN

The bronze drum pattern is the most ancient Guizhou folk batik pattern(Figure1). A bronze drum is an extremely respected apparatus. People used it for sacrifice rite, recreational activities or a campaign. Respect for a bronze drum means remembrance and worship of ancestors.

According to legend, the batik floral design was borrowed from early bronze drum patterns. Although this floral design changes during inheritance, the central pattern of a bronze drum remains common. In fact, the center pattern is the sun pattern, which radiates rays of light all around. “The worship of the sun” came into being as early as in the primitive society. Up till this day, some ethnic minorities still believe that the sun is the source of all things. All things on earth are alive only if they face the sun. Sun pattern is more popular in the Ge’s Batik in Huangping area than in any other areas.

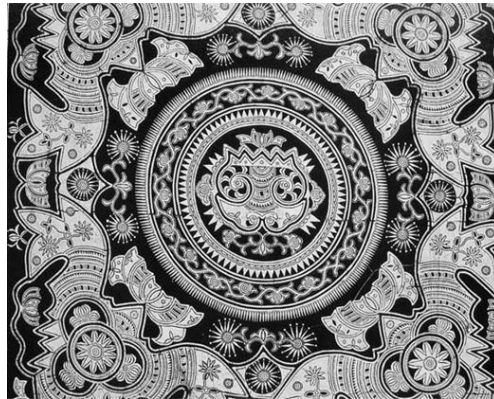


Figure1 The bronze drum pattern

### 3. THE SOURCE SEMANTIC OF THE BUTTERFLY PATTERN

The pattern of this kind is rarely seen among the batik patterns, which is particularly popular in the ethnic Miao area. The batik butterfly pattern presents itself in various looks and shapes, realistic, impressionistic, abstract or deformed and combined, as various as you can imagine. The graceful and beautiful image of butterfly is deeply loved by the people of all ethnic groups in China, and it is endowed with various meanings and legends. Among them the legend in the Miao area is the most sacred. “Ancient Song of Miao” tells the story of the origin of the ethnic Miao. According to legend, once upon a time in ancient times, in the mountains overgrown with ancient maples, there was a goddess named Niu Xiang who came down from heaven. She cut down the maple trees. A butterfly flew out from the heart of a sweet gum tree, and the butterfly ate fish as soon as it was born. Once the butterfly was pregnant with the water bubble” Wanderer,” and laid 12 eggs. Later on, after the bird Magpie’s careful incubation and feeding, there hatched 12 brothers including Jiangyang (the ancestor depicted in the ancient song of the ethnic Miao), the Thunder God, the dragon, the tiger, the snake, the elephant and the ox 12 years later. However, the ethnic Miao regarded Jiangyang as their remote ancestor, and then regarded the butterfly as their “First Ancestor.” They affectionately called the butterfly “Mother Butterfly,” and worshiped it. This legend has far-reaching influence, which has formed a unique cultural consciousness of the ethnic Miao. That is, the love and worship of butterflies is the love and worship of their ancestors. Therefore, the butterfly pattern of the Miao batik has been steeped in ancestor worship in the primitive consciousness of ancestor worship (Figure2).

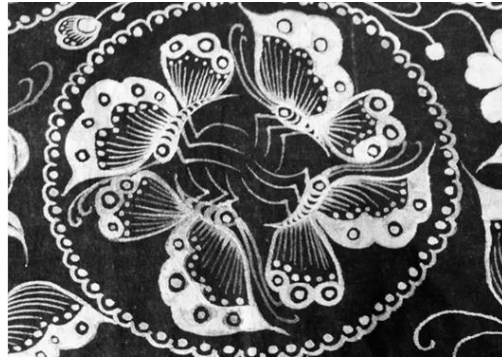


Figure2 The Butterfly Pattern

#### **4. THE SOURCE SEMANTIC OF THE BIRD PATTERN**

Some of the bird patterns in batik art are a faithful imitation of material objects such as pheasants, magpies, swallows and sparrows, turtledoves, parrots, peacocks and egrets. Some are only imitations of their rough figures, which are confounded with each other. In most cases, the figures are surrounded by flowers, with their bills open or heads holding up and warbling, whispering to one another, flying or quarreling with each other. The imitation presents a vivid portrayal of human life. The bird is the companion of happy life of the ethnic minority girls who dwell in mountainous areas, and the bird pattern is entrusted with their beautiful vision of life. In the Miao nationality, the bird pattern also contains the meaning of ancestor worship. As mentioned earlier, 12 eggs born by Mother Butterfly in an ancient song were hatched by the bird Magpie. Among all things that were hatched out there is Jiang Yang who has been known as the ancestor of ethnic Miao. Therefore, ethnic Miao owes the bird a debt of gratitude. The bird may also be the totem of the ancestors of certain clans of the Miao people (Figure3).



Figure3 The Bird Pattern

#### **5. THE REPRODUCTIVE SEMANTIC OF THE FISH PATTERN**

The fish, as a pattern, has a long history. The fish pattern was first discovered in the unearthed prehistoric pottery and jade articles. Because fish are prolific with abundant offspring in the abdomen, the original meaning of fish patterns is a symbol of reproduction, and the worship of fish is the worship of fish's reproductive ability. Later, after evolution, fish was endowed with a different auspicious meaning. For example, the Han's "a carp leaping into the Dragon's Gate"

pattern is a symbol of hilltop rise, while the fish and lotus combo symbolizes “abundance and affluence.” However, the understanding of fish patterns of the Guizhou ethnic minorities has retained the original consciousness of reproduction worship. For example, they have the analogy that their son and heir are as many as fish, and the analogy has been frequently used in their folk songs. In the Miao religious activities, fish are indispensable offerings, and the intention is to beg for flourishing offspring. Most of the fish patterns show fish big and fleshy. Some have baby fish in them, and some big fish have roe-like dense spots in their bodies. Some fish simply look like roe-like dense spots. All of these convey the information of the primitive reproduction worship(Figure4).

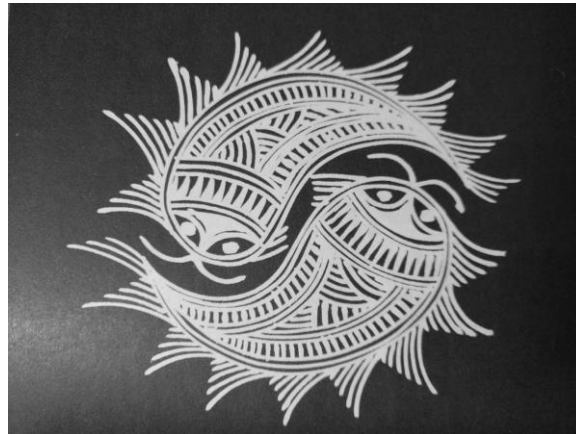


Figure4 The Fish Pattern

## 6. THE AESTHETIC SEMANTIC OF THE FLOWER AND PLANT PATTERN

In batik art, there are many patterns like the type of flower and plant pattern. Many of them appear as an auxiliary pattern. Unlike Han art which is based on peony, lotus, peach and pomegranate that symbolize wealth and auspiciousness, it is common to see the flowers and plants such as buckwheat flowers, fern flowers, plum blossoms, peach blossoms, apricot blossoms and cotton flowers in the mountains or fields, though the pattern of this type appears in batik art. Some of them have evolved into geometric patterns. These flowers and plants, close at hand, can be seen everywhere when the minority women work in the fields. They gain aesthetic feeling from the flowers and plants. By imagining and processing, they depict a picture full of rich vitality and wild taste in their arts. There is legend among the Miao people, saying that in ancient times, women drew on their dresses the flowers and plants they saw during the great migration from the Central Plains to the Southwest so as to bear in mind the hardship in the long journey. Later it was retained as a traditional pattern. Obviously, these patterns are entrusted with continuous ancient sentiment(Figure5).



Figure5 The Flower and Plant Pattern

## **7. THE SOURCE SEMANTIC OF THE HELICAL PATTERN**

The helical pattern first appeared as early as on the pottery articles in the Neolithic period of China. The pattern was an imitation of the natural water patterns created by their ancestors. In the following years, this pattern rarely appeared in the Han nationality folk arts, while it was very commonly seen in Guizhou folk batik. This is one of the conspicuous geometric patterns. People differ in opinion with regard to the connotation of the pattern, which has been prevalent in all ethnic minorities. For example, the Miao locals in Danzhai County call the helical pattern "Wotuo," but they have two different ideas about their origins: the first idea is: the pattern is the earliest pattern created by ancestors. They expressed their respect and yearn for their ancestors with the pattern, which therefore has been preserved as it was. The other idea is: as the Miao locals had to kill cows and beat drums in the ceremony for worship of their ancestors, women turned cow heads and drum heads into a pattern in memory of their ancestors. The Buyi people had a different explanation about that, saying that in ancient times there was a smart and capable girl, who unfortunately came down with a serious illness. She failed to respond to any medical treatment. Her mother went to the slope to pick up "Jiejie beans" (or "Langji Grass" as the Han people call it). The grass was a good cure for the girl. In memory of "Jiejie beans" that saved her life, the girl drew a helical pattern according to the appearance of the grass, and retained it on the dresses. The Buyi locals also said that since their ancestors lived on the seaside, the helical pattern symbolizes the sea waves, or the helical pattern looks like a coiled snake, symbolizing a snake(Figure6).

## **8. THE TOTEM SEMANTIC OF THE DRAGON PATTERN**

This pattern is very common in embroidery and cross-stitch work as well as in batik. The dragon pattern in the Guizhou minority area is very special. Its appearance and connotation are vastly different from that in the Han areas. The dragon is the original totem of China. Generally, the ancient clans and tribes of the world take animals and plants that have genetic relationship with them as the totem, which they take as the idol or clan for worship, or as tribal emblem. The Chinese dragon totem was created by man, without any solid evidence. According to Mr. Wen Yiduo's research, the dragon is an integrated totem which is composed of the main body

of a clan or tribe who takes the snake as the totem and part organs of the totems of other clans and tribes. The ethnic Han has shown great respect for the dragon since the Qin and Han dynasties, and the dragon became the supreme imperial power. So, the dragon pattern gradually became a powerful image with the towering head and horn, and pointed claws and sharp teeth. But, the dragon pattern in the Guizhou minority areas is quite different. The pattern is unadorned, childish, charmingly naïve, and very close to man and nature. And the image of the dragon, which is not fixed, has been changing a lot. For example, the ethnic Miao worships a variety of dragons such as the buffalo dragon, the fish dragon, the silkworm dragon, the tree leaf dragon, the coiled dragon, the fishtail dragon and the water dragon. The dragon pattern in the Miao batik in Rongjiang area both resembles the snake and the silkworm in shape. The dragon's connotation has the meaning of begging for good luck and happiness, and removing misfortunes and disasters(Figure7).

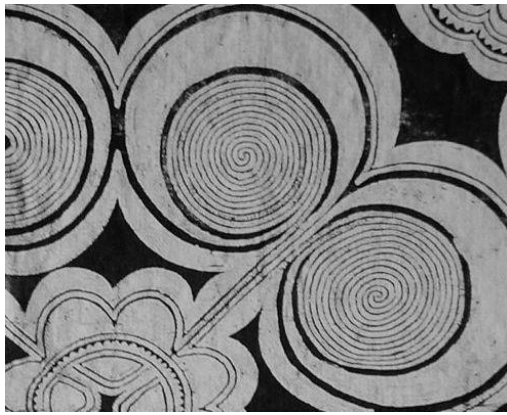


Figure6 The Helical Pattern



Figure7 The Buffalo Dragon Pattern

## 9. CONCLUSION

Guizhou batik is a valuable cultural asset. It has a high degree of beauty and traditional qualities. It needs inheritance and development. The main subject of our heritage is not the pattern, but the national culture embodied in the pattern. The inheritance of batik patterns is a continuation of the traditional culture of the Miao nationality, and also an extension of the national culture. It has very important practical significance.