



A Brief Introduction to Chinese Mascot

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Abstract

Chinese mascot as the embodiment of auspicious concept is one of the important components of the folk culture and also a mirror reflecting the spirit of the Chinese nation's character and the pursuit of happy life. In China, mascots are both culture symbols and cultural objects. Coming into being in the specific context of Chinese society, they are the products of multiple political, economic and cultural forces. Chinese mascot has been developing along with its long history. Chinese traditional mascot embodies profound national ideas and it is outstanding cultural heritage with a glorious history, while the Chinese modern mascot follows the tradition and at the same time links with the modern trend of international design. So there exist cultural differences between the traditional and modern mascots in plastic art, form component, cultural psychology and social function and so on.

Key words: Auspicious concept; Chinese mascot; Cultural differences

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Chinese mascot, with its rich art form, takes up an important position in Chinese folk culture. It is an extremely important branch of the Chinese traditional culture. It has the integrated developing process and the multiplex auspicious significances. It has aesthetic, educating and regulating functions for people's manufacture and daily life (Lin, 2005).

1. THE ORIGINS OF CHINESE MASCOTS

Chinese mascots date back to cavemen in early societies who hunted for their livelihood. In the primitive society, because of the sense of insecurity, confusion and fear brought by disease, pestilence, death, disaster and so on, people need a kind of real or imaginary object to help them drive fierce things, exorcise evil spirits, notice disasters, stay healthy and pursue prosperity, then the concept of auspice comes into being. Mascot, as the embodiment of auspicious concept, is an important component of the Chinese auspicious culture. Based on the long-term social practice and the special psychological factor, the concept of auspice is gradually given rise to the pursuit of a better life. Hence people regard some natural or cultural objects as the concept of auspice to worship (Sun, 2001, p. 34). For example, ancient tribal people would regard the likeness of animals as a belief of worship on totem poles. Also, ancient creatures would dress up in masks or animal like figures for purposes of fertility (Nutt, 2008).

Worship is a kind of idea or activity, resulting from the auspicious concept by praying, blessing and asking for protection. Besides satisfying people's spiritual living in original times, it was also closely related to social organizational system, legal system and marriage system and engendered a complex religious cultural system which played an important role in mankind's initial society (He, 2006). There are several kinds of worship relevant to the Chinese mascots, including totem worship, reproduction worship, and fetish worship and so on.

"Totem" is an etymology of North America India origin. For primitive people totem refers to an animal, plant or other object serving as the emblem of a family or clan and is often regarded as a reminder of its ancestry (Webster, 1986, p. 2415).

Totem worship is a belief in kinship through common affiliation to a totem, which can be a plant, an animal, a natural phenomenon or even an imaginary sign. In ancient times, the living conditions of Chinese ancestors were very hard. Their knowledge about nature was limited. They believed the totems were emblem of their ancestors who could protect them and avert disasters. Therefore, the totem animal has an important position in the Chinese ideology. It not only has the aesthetic value but also has the formidable witchcraft strength (Gao, 2008). The representative examples of the totem among the Chinese mascots are Chinese dragon and phoenix totems, fish totem, bird totem, wolf totem and snake totem.

Reproduction worship refers to the cultural phenomenon that people worship the male and female genitalia to beget and conceive offspring.

In order to keep survival and development of the race, people aspire after having a growing family. The strong desire for reproduction reflects its corresponding animal image and makes the animal as the symbol of reproduction and multiplication. In Chinese folk culture, the image and pattern of bird, fish, frog and lotus contain the profound meaning of reproduction worship.

Fetish worship refers to a being of supernatural powers or attributes, believed in and worshipped by people, especially a male deity thought to control some part of nature or reality.

Pantheism, which means the value each kind of being has a soul, is regarded as the first achievement for our ancestors to recognize nature and society (Sun, 2001, p. 4). Some of these gods can manipulate the weather or natural forces. For instance, "dragon kings", the administrators of the sea, are in charge of water-related weather. Sometimes gods are endowed with Super Magical Powers, such as Kuan-Yin, a goddess of mercy, who can help infertile women to have children and Tsao Wang, the god of the hearth, who watches over the house, reports on how a person has behaved and brings him good luck if he has behaved well and bad luck if he has behaved bad.

2. INTRODUCTION TO SOME REPRESENTATIVE CHINESE MASCOTS

Chinese mascot has a long history. And there are various traditional and modern mascots. And there exist some differences between them. Our ancestors create many images (mascots) to express their pursuit of a happy life, while modern Chinese mascots mainly play a communication role.

2.1 Traditional Chinese Mascots

Traditional Chinese mascots take traditional myths and stories as their themes, and take beast, bird, sun, moon or stars as their main content so that Chinese traditional mascots are pregnant with meanings.

As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese traditional mascots represent human's aspiration to exorcise evil spirits, yearn for a happy life. The four traditional representative mascots include dragon, phoenix, tiger and lion.

2.1.1 Dragon and Phoenix

Chinese dragon is referred to as the divine creature that brings with abundance, prosperity and good fortune. It is the ultimate representation of the forces of the Mother Nature. Many legends drew connections between the dragon and the emperor and some emperors claimed to have descended from dragon.

In China, dragon occupies a very important position in Chinese mythology. It shows up in arts, literature, poetry, architecture, songs and many aspects of the Chinese culture. The origin of dragon is unknown, but it certainly exists before the history which has begun to record it.

The Chinese dragon, or Loong, symbolizes power and excellence, valiancy and boldness, heroism and perseverance, nobility and divinity (Qiao, 2008, p. 4). It is made up of nine entities, which include a head like a camel's, horns like a deer's, eyes like a hare's, ears like a bull's, a neck like a snake's, a belly like a frog's, scales like a carp's, paws like a tiger's, and claws like an eagle's (Qiao, 2008, p. 3).

The Chinese dragon has the ability to live in the seas, fly up the heavens and coil up in mountains. Being the divine animal, dragon can drive out wandering evil spirits, protect the innocent and bestow safety (Qiao, 2008, p. 3). Therefore, the Chinese dragon is the embodiment of the concept of male and is believed to be the ruler of water. In Chinese belief, rainfall was the key part for crops, so many Chinese villagers, especially those living close to rivers, had temples dedicated to their local "dragon king".

Because the Chinese dragon is looked upon as the symbol of good fortune, people have dragon dance to pray for good weather in order to achieve bumper harvest. Flying dragon kite in spring is also popular among the people. Every 2nd of lunar February is the Dragon Raising Head Day in China (Qiao, 2008, p. 4). People would like to cut hair on that day for good luck.

The Chinese dragon boat race is always a symbol of Chinese culture and spirit. As one of the most important Chinese festivals of a year, this mythical celebration can now be witnessed around the world. As a result, the Chinese dragon is an essential symbol of the spirit of Chinese nation and Chinese race itself. Dragon pattern is a traditional graphic for the Chinese people with rich cultural connotation and symbolic significance.

The Chinese phoenix, likewise, exists only in legends and fairy tales. Phoenix, also called firebird, is a Chinese mythical creature and also exists in Greek mythology. In Chinese culture the phoenix is known as Fenghuang and is used to represent the empress. It is worshipped as one of four sacred creatures presiding over China's destinies.

The four sacred creatures which are also called “Si Ling”, include dragon, tiger, unicorn (or deer) and phoenix (Qiao, 2008, p. 13).

In Chinese folk custom, phoenix is regarded as the king of hundred birds, predicting luck, expressing love, driving evil etc.. It is the symbol of auspicious sign, imperial power and national culture (Zhong, 2005). It is thought to be a gentle creature, which eats nothing but dewdrops.

Recorded on scripture Erya – chapter 17 Shiniao, Fenghuang is said to be made up of a beak of a rooster, a face of a swallow, a forehead of a fowl, a neck of a snake, a breast of a goose, a back of a tortoise, hindquarters of a stag and a tail of a fish. Today, however, it is often described as a composite of many birds including the head of a golden pheasant, a body of a mandarin duck, a tail of a peacock, legs of a crane, a mouth of a parrot, and the wings of a swallow (Qiao, 2008, p. 13).

The phoenix is often depicted in a pair with a male and a female phoenix facing each other, symbolizing a duality, the yin-yang, mutual interdependence in the universe. The male phoenix named “feng” is the yang and solar, while the female “huang” is the yin and lunar (Qiao, 2008, p. 13). The Feng and the Huang together symbolize everlasting love, and as a bridal symbol signifies “inseparable fellowship”.

Around 2000 years ago the Feng came to represent the power sent from the heavens to the Empress and was always found paired with the dragon. Hence it is used to say that the dragon represents the Emperor and the phoenix represents the Empress (Qiao, 2008, p. 13).

Fenghuang has very positive connotations. Its body symbolizes the six celestial bodies. The head is the sky, the eyes are the sun, the back is the moon, the wings are the wind, the feet are the earth, and the tail is the planet. Its feathers contain the five fundamental colors: black, white, red, blue and yellow (Qiao, 2008, p. 11). It is recorded that each part of Fenghuang’s body symbolizes a trait: the head represents virtue (De), the wing represents duty (Yi), the back represents propriety (Li), the abdomen says belief (Xin) and the chest represents mercy (Ren). (Li & Chen, 2006)

Down the ages, “Loong” (the Chinese dragon) and “Fenghuang” (the Chinese Phoenix), embedded with people’s blessing and hope, are the symbols of blissful relations between husband and wife, and common metaphors of yin and yang.

2.1.2 Lion and Tiger

Lion is a profound image in Chinese culture. Though statues and symbols of the lion can be seen in various countries across the world, Chinese culture embraces the image of the lion in a variety of cultural settings.

The lion in Chinese folk culture has the spirits of avoiding evil, noticing disasters in advance, telling right and wrong, employing wealth and helping people to lead a

happy family life, administering parenting and so on (Lin, 2005). It is the symbol of strength, power, auspicious sign and national culture.

People worship lion as a magical animal and the cultural meanings of lion worship have been developing for a long time. At first, Chinese regarded and worshipped lion as a patron saint. About during the Tang Dynasty, lion became a symbol of power. In the areas of the Han nationality, the reason for lion worship forming was that the lion catered to the traditional taboo of fierce beasts (Qiao, 2008, p. 24). For the people, lion was a symbol of auspicious things in the past, and even nowadays lion is a general mascot and a target of amusement.

Lion sculptures with different shapes and textures, not only appeared in front of the gates of administrative buildings and palaces of the upper classes, but also on temples, tombs and large bridges. The supremacy of the lion’s position among the beasts in nature was compared to the position of the upper classes in ancient China (Lin, 2005).

Lion statues outside official palaces and buildings symbolize social status. Even ordinary residents in ancient China used lion statues in front of their houses to ward off evil and protect those living inside. Lion statues should be put on elevated land with a commanding manner to amplify their status of deterrent and they always need to be in pairs, with a male on the left and a female on the right (Qiao, 2008, p. 25).

The folk custom of the Chinese lion worship is the witness of national cultural exchanges, the prism that refracts history, and the outstanding cultural heritage of Chinese nation.

The Chinese tiger is the direct descendant of the ancestral tiger, which originated in China two million years ago. Tiger represents the masculine principle in nature and is the king of all the animals. There are four stripes shown on his forehead, which look like the Chinese character “王”. It is also a common family name, meaning “king” (Qiao, 2008, p. 24). Or rather, because of tiger’s power as the king of the forest and the marking on its head, it takes on the Chinese meaning “king”.

Tiger is associated with the powerful male principle of courage, bravery, dignity and austerity and also known as the king of the mountain with the power to drive away evil. Tigers are believed to be such powerful creatures that they are endowed with the ability to defend authority, drive disasters, protect children and bring good fortune (Xing, 2008). In Chinese folktales, tigers kill evil men and protect kind ones and they are used to keep away disease and represent the greatest earthly power as well as protection over human life.

Tiger, together with other animals which contain luck and auspice, such as Loong and Kylin, is a protector of Chinese people. While different from other Chinese fictional animal mascots, tiger is the rare one that exists in real world.

2.2 Modern Chinese Mascots

The mascot of modern culture as a vector, fully displays the image ambassador of the mascot role and value of the cultural productive forces. With a special symbolic meaning, it shows a unique Chinese historical and cultural implication.

“Fuwa”, five lovely mascots of Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and “Haibao”, the mascot of Shanghai 2010 World Exposition are the most representative mascots in modern society. With modern design principles and practices, we innovate and transform the traditional auspicious patterns so as to reveal our spirit of the new generation, promote the mascots’ heritage and the Chinese auspicious culture of a new era.

The modern Olympic Games, with a history of more than a century, has gradually changed from a mere sporting event to a world-famous cultural movement. Olympic mascot, as the logo design of the Olympic Games, is not only the symbol of a nation’s culture, image and extract of the Olympic spirits, but also a product blessed with multiple values, especially the great value in business and culture.

The Olympic mascots are designed on the basis of the representative animals of the host countries as prototypes. Olympic mascot took its initial appearance at the 10th Winter Olympic Games in France and the first mascot for the Summer Olympic Games was at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games (Admin, 2005). Later Olympic mascot has become an important carrier of the Olympic culture.

The mascot of Beijing Olympic Games, five lovely “Fuwa” with typical Chinese features has fully interpreted the variety of oriental culture in its novel design and profound conventions. They express the eternal spirit of Olympiad as well as the particular Chinese tradition, aiming at the theme of “New Beijing, Great Olympics” and the idea of “Green Olympics, High-tech Olympics and People’s Olympics” (Admin, 2005). This colorful and significant design, with its exuberant connotations, is not only a part of history but also a symbol deeply engraved in the hearts of all Chinese people.

Like the Five Olympic Rings from which they draw their color and inspiration, the Five Friendlies (Fuwa) serve as the Official Mascots of Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, carrying a message of friendship and peace and blessings from China to people all over the world. The Five mascots embody the natural characteristics of four Chinese most popular animals – the Fish, the Panda, the Tibetan Antelope, the Swallow and the fifth mascot is the brightly burning Olympic Flame.

Each of the mascots has a rhyming and two-syllable name, which is a traditional way of showing affection for children in China (Admin, 2005). BeiBei is a fish, JingJing, a panda, YingYing, a Tibetan antelope, NiNi, a swallow and HuanHuan, the Olympic flame. When put together, they will read “Bei Jing Huan Ying Ni” which means “Welcome to Beijing”. It offers a warm invitation

that reflects the mission of Fuwa as young ambassadors for the Olympic Games.

BeiBei is a fish which symbolizes surplus in Chinese culture and carries the blessing of prosperity. BeiBei is known to be gentle, pure and strong in water sports, so she reflects the sea and the blue Olympic ring; JingJing is a giant panda. As an endangered species, the panda is both a national treasure of China and an international symbol of environmentalism. JingJing, representing the black Olympic ring and athletes noted for strength, is chosen to symbolize the lush forest and the harmonious relationship between man and nature; HuanHuan is the oldest brother in the Fuwa, symbolizing the Olympic Flame, the passion of sport and the Olympic spirit of “faster, higher, and stronger”. He excels at all the ball games and represents the red Olympic ring; YingYing is a Tibetan antelope from western China, carrying the blessing of health. Strong in track and field events, YingYing is a quick-witted and agile boy who represents the yellow Olympic ring; NiNi is from the sky and is a swallow who is a messenger of spring and happiness in Chinese culture, and is seen as a symbol of good fortune. NiNi’s figure derives from a traditional Beijing Kite. She is strong in gymnastics and represents the Green Olympic ring.

Carrying the invitation to Beijing 2008 to every part of the globe, the Five Friendlies (Fuwa) spread prosperity, happiness, passion, health and good luck to every continent. Dedicated to helping Beijing spread its theme of “One World, One Dream”, they also reflect the deep desire of Chinese people to reach out to the world in friendship and to invite every man, woman and child to take part in the great celebration of human solidarity that China will host in the light of the flame in 2008. (Admin, 2005)

The World Expo mascot has not only become the representative of Expo images, but also, as the symbol featuring the hosting country, embody the history, development, culture, concept and social background of the country and therefore plays an important role in the communication in political, economic and cultural fields (Johnson, 2008).

Unveiled at the end of 2007, the name of the World Expo 2010 Shanghai China Mascot is Haibao, which means the treasure of the sea and the source of life. Haibao, with a modern appearance, meets the principle of “good looking, easy to understand, easy to remember and easy to use” and represents the core concept of World Expos, innovation and high-technology and a Chinese spirit which could pass on Chinese culture to the world.

The name of Haibao is a typical lovely name in Chinese tradition and it shows Chinese brand-new gesture to embrace the world. The blue color of the mascot represents the elements including earth, dream, sea, future and technology. Created from the Chinese character “人” which means people, the mascot embodies the character of Chinese culture and echoes with the designing concept of the emblem of World Expo Shanghai (Johnson, 2008).

Using the Chinese character as the mascot of an international event is an innovation. The structure of Chinese character, in which two strokes support each other, manifests the concept that a good life should be created by all the people. The world should be supported by “people” and people should have harmonious relationships with nature and society, so that the life in cities would be better (Johnson, 2008).

Human being, as the most creative part in the urbanization, is the creator of good life and the core to push the city development (Johnson, 2008). And therefore, the design of the mascot selects the Chinese character of people to be the main image. Haibao is a good ambassador of the prosperous Shanghai and a messenger between the east and the west, and he is embracing friends from all over the world with his arms and confident smile.

Haibao embodies ideal of the coexistence of different cultures in cities; embodies the appreciation of economic development and environmental sustainable development; embodies the wish to remodel the city communities; embodies the anticipation of the well-off both urban cities and countryside (Johnson, 2008).

3. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TRADITIONAL AND MODERN CHINESE MASCOTS

From the analysis above, we can find there exist cultural differences between the traditional and modern Chinese mascots. They are different mainly in plastic art, forming component, cultural psychology and social function.

3.1 The Plastic Art

In ancient times, people would select real shapes as their elements of mascots. The traditional Chinese mascot is inseparable from the nature image, abstracting graphic elements from the natural form of real object and then re-created by processing and sorting. Many traditional Chinese mascots, such as tiger, lion, dragon, phoenix, bird, fish etc. are always presented as their real forms or derive from some real animals.

The traditional Chinese mascot uses the expression form of “enjoyable”, shows the shape by meaning, supposes the shape by meaning, describes the shape by meaning, while the modern Chinese mascot utilizes the cartoon symbolic language or one kind of completely abstract visual mark (Xing, 2008).

Fuwa, the mascots of Beijing Olympic Games, are five lovely cartoon models with typical Chinese features, which has fully interpreted the variety of oriental culture in its novel design and profound convention. Mi Qiu, an artist, thinks the conflicts between fashionable icons and traditional elements can be avoided by three ways: break through traditional worship and representation, cut in through the processing of urbanization or merely pursue visible beauty. “From my points of view, the mascot is light, thin, soft and lovely. And it is the design from the

kids and teenagers that could realize these feelings. They will bring us things beyond our imagination and beloved by everyone.” he says.

Thus it can be seen the Chinese mascot should not only grow out of Chinese traditional culture but also represent the tendency of the modern world.

3.2 The Forming Component

From ancient times to the present, there are many Chinese mascots that assemble some other patterns, materials or images to the final figures. Among them traditional Chinese mascots always combine with several real parts of the beings; on the contrary, the modern ones are more abstract.

The Chinese dragon is made up of nine entities, including the head of a camel, the eyes of a hare, the ears of a bull, the horns of a deer, the neck of a snake, the belly of a frog, the claws of an eagle, the scales of a carp and the paws of a tiger.

Similar to the dragon, it is said that the Chinese phoenix is a divine bird in the legend, regard chicken as its original shape and has assembled many kinds of animal’s characteristics in the integrative imagination animal as an auspicious bird in minds of people.

On the headpieces of the modern mascots, Fuwa, we can find five elements of events of nature – sea, forest, fire, earth and sky, which are rendered in ways that represent the deep traditional influences of Chinese folk art and ornamentation. The decorative lines of the water-wave designs on BeiBei’s head are taken from well-known Chinese paintings; the lotus designs in JingJing’s headdress are inspired by the porcelain paintings of the Song Dynasty (AD 960-1234); the fiery designs of HuanHuan’s head ornament are drawn from the famed Dunhuang murals; YingYing’s head ornament incorporates several decorative styles from the Qinghai-Tibet and Sinjiang cultures and the ethnic design traditions of Western China; the decoration on NiNi’s head is a beautiful kite of the golden-winged swallow, which is traditionally one of the most popular kite designs.

3.3 The Cultural Psychology

The Chinese mascots have a long-term change on people’s cultural mentalities. A growing trend from blessing and praying to amusement and education gradually appears for the present.

Fish mascot is an example to show the change from blessing towards entertainment. The traditional fish mascot has a long history in the glorious Chinese culture and it is still popular today. In traditional Chinese culture, fish represents prosperity, happiness and good fortune, as the Chinese character for fish sounds the same as that for surplus. The “carp leaping over the dragon gate” is an allegory of following one’s dreams and achieving them. With the development of modern society, the technical progress, and the increasing dissemination of information

platform, fish has integrated with the modern designs and spirits. The Chinese character for fish sounds the same as that for entertainment; therefore, the mascot fish begin to take on a new meaning “entertainment”.

Another example is about the educational trend. The Chinese dragon mascot is a kind of traditional folk art form involving abundant cultural meaning and having special value for Chinese people. Dragon is regarded as the mythical creature and symbol of nobility, heroism and divinity. In the modern society, the connotation of dragon has changed qualitatively and people draw its spirit on rising to power and position. Nowadays, dragon has become a national common symbol and the cultural link between China and the world.

The collision between modern and traditional ideas still makes Chinese traditional mascots recreate their images with the application of mascots in modern graphic design. The Chinese mascots show the free ideology in modern era with newer life and vigor. They melt new ideas and play an important role on folk artistic forms.

The folk spirits and the totem functions of some mascots have already declined. It has been substituted for new ones which presents the spirits and features of the folk auspicious concept in China’s modern era (Xie, 2007).

3.4 The Social Function

The Chinese mascot as a media of the folk culture, occupies a significant position in people’s life and plays an important role in the construction of civilization and the development of Chinese custom. With the rapid development of China’s economy, the social material is much more fruitful than before, the new ideological trend emerges constantly, and the mascot design has new creative connotation.

The social function of Chinese mascot has changed under the influence of innovation. In ancient times, if people wanted to get something but difficult to obtain in real life, they would always place hope on the mascot as a compensation for need. That is to say, compensation as a main part of traditional social function helps people in pursuit of nobility, prosperity, safety and so on.

However, the Chinese modern mascot is no more emphasizing on the mentality of praying and blessing, it should be a tool in the social communication. Fuwa and Haibao fully display the image ambassador of the affinity of the mascot role and value of the cultural productive

forces, showing the warm invitation to friends from all over the world.

CONCLUSION

Like mascots of other peoples, Chinese mascots not only satisfy the emotional demand of people to achieve the material and spiritual harmonious unification, but also combine the cultural heritage and people’s social expectation.

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