

A Study on the Aesthetic Design of “Daily Life as the Way” in Qilu Folk Art

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Abstract:

Rooted in rural life, Qilu folk art embodies the Eastern wisdom of “the Way lies in daily life, and beauty lies in the ordinary,” serving as a quintessential concrete expression of the aesthetic philosophy that “daily life is the Way.” With the rapid transformation of urban and rural China, Qilu folk art currently faces developmental challenges characterized by an overemphasis on exhibitions at the expense of practical application and a tendency toward replication rather than innovation, making it difficult to achieve sustainable, living transmission. Adopting the perspective of the aesthetics of daily life, this paper examines various design elements in Qilu folk art and, drawing on the Taizhou School’s core theory that “the daily life of the common people is the Way,” explores pathways for the contemporary transformation of Qilu folk art design characterized by “moving away from mere spectacle, returning to everyday life, and integrating contemporary aesthetics.”

Keywords:

Aesthetics of Daily Life, Qilu Folk Art, Daily Life as the Way, Design Transformation, Living Heritage

1. Introduction

The core essence of the aesthetics of daily life lies in breaking down the boundaries between art and life, dissolving the barriers between “elite aesthetics” and “folk craftsmanship,” and asserting that aesthetic value is not found in lofty realms, but in the everyday details of clothing, food, housing, and transportation. Against the backdrop of material abundance in contemporary society, where “internet celebrity aesthetics,” homogenized cultural and creative products, and overly commercialized design run rampant, the public increasingly craves everyday objects that embody warmth, texture, and cultural depth. As a result, the practical value of traditional folk art is once again being recognized by the times. Unlike the pure aesthetics of academic art, Qilu folk art has, since its inception, adhered to the creative logic of “practicality and utility,” remaining an art form rooted in the everyday realities of ordinary life.

The philosophy of “Daily Life Is the Way” aligns closely with modern lifestyle aesthetics. Proposed by Wang Gen of the Ming Dynasty’s Taizhou School, it advocates bringing the “Way” back from the lofty realms of classical texts and the halls of power to the daily lives of the common people, thereby establishing an Eastern philosophy of creation that holds that “everyday uses embody the eternal Way,

and ordinary objects carry humanistic beauty [1]”. On the one hand, Shandong, as the cradle of Qi-Lu culture, has fostered a rich and diverse folk art tradition characterized by distinct features and profound cultural heritage; on the other hand, the Taizhou School, as a significant branch of Confucianism in the Jiangnan region, has, through the long-term accumulation of folk customs, developed a tendency toward the secularization of Confucianism.

Since modern times, as social life has evolved, folk art from the Shandong region has gradually become detached from the original everyday contexts in which it thrived, and its inherent utilitarian nature has, to a certain extent, been stripped away. As illustrated in the Agricultural Exhibition Hall section of the “Daily Life Is the Way—Thematic Design Exhibition on the Revitalization of Traditional Chinese Crafts” at the Beijing International Design Week, this issue is clearly exemplified: Designs merely extract visual symbols from folk art and pile them together, transforming objects originally rooted in daily life into collectibles and cultural tourism souvenirs intended solely for a niche audience. This completely detaches them from the general public’s everyday usage contexts, ultimately leading to a dilemma in cultural transmission characterized by “items that look good but are impractical, and culture that remains detached from reality.” Consequently, the field has fallen into a developmental impasse where “exhibitions are the end goal, and sales mark the end,” leaving the living tradition in a precarious state.



Figure 1. Poster for the “The Beauty of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Life Is the Way” Exhibition of Traditional Chinese Craft Design.

2. The Aesthetics of Daily Life and “Daily Life Is the Way”

2.1. The Aesthetics of Daily Life

Qilu folk art has achieved the unity of knowledge and action, as well as the oneness of form and function, on both philosophical and aesthetic levels—a research finding unanimously acknowledged by scholars such as Li Zehou, Liu Yuedi, Zhao Songguang, Li Pixian, and Ye Qing [2]. The aesthetics of daily life challenges the entrenched view that “art is superior to life”; aesthetics is not the exclusive domain of professional art, but rather is integrated into the everyday experiences of clothing, food, housing, and transportation, as well as the use of objects and folk customs. At its core lie commonality, practicality, and immersion. It does not pursue contrived opulence or niche aesthetics, but rather aims to meet human needs, align with the rhythm of life, and nourish the spirit and state of mind, ultimately achieving a harmonious coexistence among objects, daily life, and people.

2.2. “Daily Life Is the Way”

“Daily Use Is the Way” reconstructs the value system of traditional Chinese craftsmanship, grounding the ultimate essence of “the Way” in the daily lives, use of objects, and folk labor of the common people. Traditional folk artisans had no deliberate intention to “create beauty,” but only sought to “adapt to daily use.” The original intent behind all forms, patterns, colors, and techniques in Qilu folk art was to serve life, adapt to specific contexts, and embody aspirations. This design philosophy—“nothing is made without a purpose; no art exists without a function”—is precisely the cultural foundation that has sustained the folk art of Qilu for thousands of years [3]. Artisans transform objects into tools for daily life, vessels for folk traditions, and vehicles for aesthetic expression, ultimately achieving the unity of “use,” “beauty,” and “Dao.”

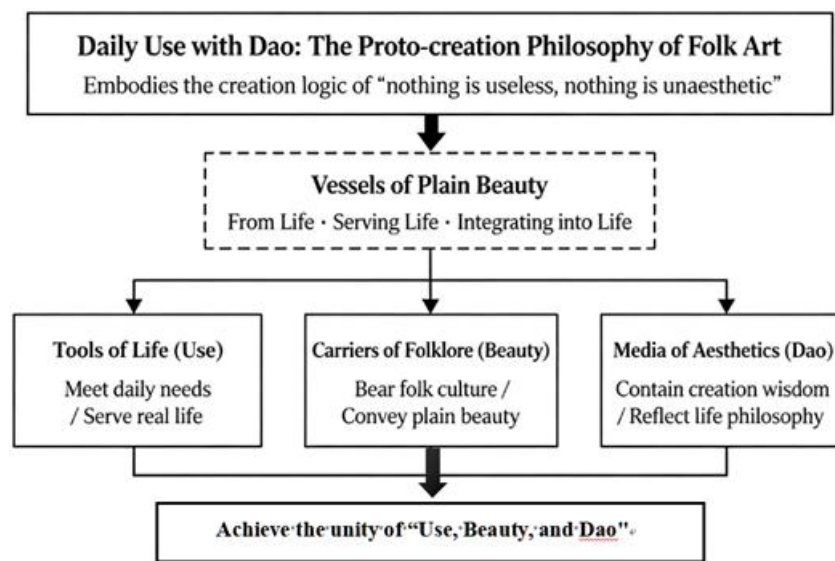


Figure 2. The Philosophy of Creation in Qilu Folk Art.

2.3. The Relationship Between the Aesthetics of Daily Life and “Daily Life Is the Way”

Today, Gaomi paper-cutting—a form of folk art from the Qi Lu region—enhances the festive atmosphere through material, object-based, and oral traditions. From daily necessities such as clothing, food, housing, and transportation to seasonal festivals, folk art has always been deeply rooted in everyday life. Over time, it has cultivated a unique aesthetic philosophy: “Daily Life Is the Way.” If folk art fails to connect with everyday life or ensure effective intergenerational transmission, it will lose its original vitality; its contemporary revitalization must not be limited to the simple replication of techniques or the appropriation of symbols. Guided by the aesthetics of daily life and oriented toward practical needs, we must rediscover the original intent of creation embodied in “daily use is the Way.” By adapting traditional crafts to modern living contexts, aligning them with contemporary aesthetic preferences, and meeting current practical needs, we can truly achieve an essential transformation from “static cultural exhibits in display cases” to “dynamic objects of daily life.”

3. Qilu Folk Art from the Perspective of the Aesthetics of Daily Life

Rooted in the agricultural civilization of Qilu and the folk culture of the Hai-Dai region, Qilu folk art has, through millennia of accumulation, developed distinctive characteristics of everyday aesthetics: “unadorned and practical, unity of form and

function, subtle beauty that permeates daily life, and exquisite craftsmanship with beautiful materials.” The artistic features of each category represent a two-way fusion of practical needs and aesthetic expression, fully embodying the Eastern wisdom that “beauty is hidden in everyday objects, and objects embody the Way.”

3.1. The Beauty of Functionality: User-Centered and Tailored to Daily Life

“Functionality first, with beauty arising from use”—this functional approach is the defining characteristic of Qilu folk art and the most fundamental embodiment of the “daily life is the Way” philosophy within the framework of the aesthetics of daily life. Unlike purely decorative art, all categories of Qilu folk art originated from the essential needs of daily life; their design, craftsmanship, and structural optimization are all geared toward everyday use. Zibo’s daily-use ceramics eschew elaborate carvings, featuring neat forms and warm glazes that suit the public’s daily needs for dining, tea drinking, and home decoration, balancing practicality with comfort; Weifang kites, originally created for folk recreation and as tools for praying for blessings, embody profound practical wisdom in their structural design, skillfully balancing flight functionality with aesthetic appeal. Beyond fulfilling practical functions such as clothing protection and household utility, they enhance the beauty of daily life.

3.2. The Beauty of Materials: Adapting Techniques to Materials, Harmonizing with Nature

Qilu folk art adheres to the creative philosophy of “harmony between heaven and humanity, reverence for heaven and love for people.” It insists on adapting techniques to materials and working with the natural flow, fully exploring the inherent textures of natural materials without forced carving or artificial embellishment, thereby fully revealing the authentic beauty of nature. The land of Qilu is rich in natural resources: the subtle charm of Lu embroidery’s stitches, the natural kiln-fired variations of Zibo ceramics, the harmonious balance of movement and stillness in Weifang kites, the rustic simplicity of Yimeng willow weaving, and the endearing, lifelike expressions of Niejiazhuang clay sculptures—all are crystallizations of the ancient wisdom of “adapting craftsmanship to the material, making the most of every resource, and appreciating the beauty inherent in all things.”

3.3. The Beauty of Symbolism: Patterns Convey Emotions and Infuse Folk Life

The tradition of Qilu folk art embodies the beauty of symbolism. Its figurative designs are never devoid of meaning in their aesthetic expression; all patterns, colors, and forms carry the people’s aspirations for a better life, weaving folk culture, auspicious symbolism, and life aspirations into everyday objects. Yangjiabu woodblock New Year prints, featuring motifs such as door gods, the character for “fortune”, bountiful harvests, and “abundance year after year,” align with the folk customs of praying for blessings during the Spring Festival. With their rich, vibrant colors and simple, flowing lines, they infuse everyday festivities with a sense of ritual; Lu embroidery’s floral-and-bird motifs, symbols of fortune and prosperity, and auspicious cloud patterns—delicate, elegant, and imbued with auspicious meanings—adorn the daily attire of the common people, weaving these beautiful aspirations into the fabric of everyday life. Everyday objects carry profound meanings, and artifacts convey warmth, elevating the folk art of Qi Lu beyond its purely utilitarian function to become a vital vessel for the public’s spiritual life.

3.4. The Beauty of Simplicity: Stripping Away the Superfluous to Embrace Everyday Life

Influenced by the Confucian values of “moderation, simplicity, and pragmatism,” Shandong folk art as a whole eschews extravagant and ornate aesthetic styles, pursuing a regional style characterized by simplicity, unadorned elegance, and a warm, dignified atmosphere that resonates with the everyday lives of ordinary people. Whether it is the unadorned glaze colors of ceramics, the simple textures of willow weaving, the fluid lines of New Year’s paintings, or the elegant compositions of Shandong embroidery, none of these feature excessive embellishment; their forms are practical, their colors suited to daily life, and their craftsmanship serves everyday needs. This unassuming and unpretentious aesthetic of simplicity aligns perfectly with the contemporary public’s pursuit of a minimalist and comfortable lifestyle, providing an objective foundation for its adaptation to the modern era.

4. Contemporary Challenges and Design Transformation

When examining Qilu folk art from the perspective of the aesthetics of daily life and the concept that “daily life is the Way,” its contemporary transformation still faces a serious problem of “detachment from daily life”; the traditional aesthetic view of object-making struggles to align with modern living environments and aesthetic demands. In the context of contemporary design, the aesthetics of daily life—drawing on traditional creative aesthetics—empowers modern product design, ensuring that every piece of folk art combines practical function, cultural depth, and aesthetic quality, thereby mitigating the homogenization and utilitarianism inherent in modern design.

4.1. Prioritizing Aesthetics Over Utility, Detached from Daily Life

Currently, the revitalization of Qilu folk art is generally plagued by the core issues of “aesthetic deviation” and “functional weakening,” with most creations and designs straying from their “daily use” origins. To forcefully adapt to the cultural tourism market and exhibition demands, a large number of folk art pieces adopt exaggerated forms, deliberately emphasize visual appeal, and pile on intricate details, thereby weakening their practical functions: traditional everyday willow-woven utensils have been transformed into art ornaments with exaggerated shapes, losing their core value for storage and daily use; traditional Shandong embroidery has evolved from clothing and home decor into niche art prints and tourist attraction exhibits; Yangjiabu New Year paintings have been detached from their everyday purpose of being displayed during the New Year festivities and have been reduced to framed cultural and creative ornaments [4]. This “de-practicalization” of application contexts has transformed folk creations—which were once integrated into the lives of ordinary people—into art objects that are detached from daily life and appreciated only by a select few, completely deviating from the original intent of “daily use as the Way” and losing the fertile ground of daily life necessary for long-term transmission.

4.2. Diverse Modern Demands and Inadequate Adaptation of Traditional Art

There is a certain disconnect between the traditional colors, forms, and patterns of Qilu folk art and the contemporary aesthetic of modern life, which emphasizes minimalism, simplicity, and naturalness. Traditional folk art features intense, vivid colors and intricate, rich patterns; while these align with the atmosphere of traditional folk customs, they struggle to meet the aesthetic demands of modern minimalist home

decor, understated luxury in daily life, and minimalist fashion; Some traditional artifacts are bulky and serve only a single function, making them ill-suited for modern compact living spaces, the pace of smart living, and the demand for lightweight, practical use [5]. At the same time, contemporary designers often focus on visual innovation while neglecting the material aesthetics and practical logic of traditional craftsmanship. Folk art inheritors, meanwhile, cling to traditional techniques and lack modern design thinking. This disconnect results in adapted works that lack both the warmth of traditional daily life and the aesthetic quality of modern design.

5. Conclusions

From the perspective of the aesthetics of daily life, this research on the design transformation of Qilu folk art—centered on the principle that “daily use is the Way”—breaks free from the traditional research pitfall of “emphasizing form over substance and viewing pleasure over practicality,” returning to the original intent of folk art to serve daily life and nourish the human spirit. On the theoretical level, this study paves the way for the integration of traditional Eastern philosophy of creation with modern aesthetics of daily life, refining the logical framework and methodological paradigm for the transformation of Qilu folk art into everyday objects; On the practical level, through design transformations that emphasize everyday use, contextual application, and aesthetic appeal, the research has transformed traditional crafts—dormant for a thousand years—into everyday objects that the public can touch, use, and experience. This approach not only firmly preserves the spiritual essence of Qilu folk culture but also infuses traditional folk art with new vitality for the modern era, effectively addressing the challenge of sustainable revitalization for intangible cultural heritage.

The revitalization and transmission of Qilu folk art goes beyond static reproduction; it places greater emphasis on carrying forward the wisdom of contemporary creation. Moving beyond niche exhibitions, it aims to permeate the lives of the general public. At its core lies the practice of “Daily Life as the Way”—bringing beauty back to everyday life, integrating culture into daily existence, and empowering the present with tradition. Moving forward, the innovative development of Qilu folk art will closely revolve around the theory of the aesthetics of daily life, adhering to the three major design principles of “transmitting culture through utility, enriching life through beauty, and empowering through the Way.” It will continue to transform traditional forms through design, actively adapting to modern living contexts, aligning with the public’s aesthetic needs, and integrating into the trajectory of contemporary development—thereby infusing Qilu folk creations with renewed vitality, achieving an ever-renewing, living tradition in the daily lives of contemporary people, and laying a solid design foundation while charting practical pathways for the high-quality development of the “Qilu Handicrafts” industry and the revival of regional traditional culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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