

On the Craftsmanship of Kyrgyz Horse Gear in Aheqi County, Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang

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Abstract: Aheqi County, Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture, is located in the southern Xinjiang region. The Kyrgyz ethnic group belongs to the Xinjiang nomadic ethnic group, and the craft of horse harness is a traditional craft of the nomadic ethnic group. In the course of historical development, the craft of horse gear has been continuously updated, iterated, and improved, making it an important cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz ethnic group. The traditional horse equipment culture of the Kyrgyz ethnic group still retains its unique ethnic artistic style and cultural characteristics. Horses not only have practical life functions and meet the needs of nomadic production and life, but also carry unique cultural values in the process of ethnic development, making important contributions to regional civilization and ethnic cultural inheritance. The unique natural geographical environment and the outstanding manual creation ability of the Kyrgyz people have laid a solid foundation for the birth and long-term development of horse harness craftsmanship. Relying on the natural advantages of using local materials and adhering to the traditional craftsmanship of pure handmade production, the craft of horse gear has gradually settled into a highly representative classic traditional handicraft category of the Kyrgyz ethnic group, deeply integrated into the daily life and cultural system of the ethnic group, and become an indispensable and important part of national culture.

Keywords: Aheqi County, Kezhou, Xinjiang; Kyrgyz ethnic group; Horse harness craftsmanship

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1. The historical origin and current development status of Kyrgyz horse harness culture

1.1. Historical origin

During the Qin and Han dynasties, the ancestors of the Kyrgyz people were recorded as “Li Kun (or Jian Kun)” in Qin and Han historical records. They lived on the grasslands upstream of the Yenisei River for

a long time, making nomadic life and hunting their core livelihood. Horses were not only a means of transportation for hunting and migration, but also an important support for ancient tribal warfare. Early horse equipment such as simple leather ropes and wooden saddles emerged. During the period known as the “Xia Jia Si” in Tang Dynasty historical records, handicrafts continued to develop, tanning and wood forging techniques became increasingly mature, and complete sets of horse gear shapes were initially formed ^[1].

During the Tang Dynasty, historical records of the Tang Dynasty referred to this ethnic group as the Xia Jia Si. With the improvement of ethnic handicrafts, tanning, wood processing, and metal forging techniques continued to advance, and scattered simple horse harnesses were gradually integrated, forming a preliminary set of horse harness shapes. The status of horses in tribal warfare and long-distance nomadic transitions has been further elevated, promoting continuous improvement in the practicality of horse equipment ^[1].

In the 9th century AD, after the fall of the Khaganate, ethnic groups gradually migrated westward and eventually settled in the southern Tianshan Mountains and Pamir Plateau region (now within the territory of Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture). The plateau mountains are crisscrossed with ravines, and camels have a large physique and slow movement, resulting in insufficient flexibility for mountain travel; Horses are more suitable for rugged mountain roads and have become the most essential means of transportation for herdsman for grazing, short-distance travel, and festive entertainment. The continuous changes in the living environment have forced the improvement of horse equipment, and the handmade production mode of using poplar, birch, cowhide, leather, and natural mineral metals on-site has been steadily inherited. The epic Manas records a large number of objects such as saddles, bridles, carved mattresses, leather plaited whips, etc., which proves that a mature harness system with both practical functions and decorative aesthetics has been formed at least in the Middle Ages ^[2].

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Kyrgyz ethnic group was known as the “Brut”, and various tribes had long been nomadic in areas such as Aheqi and Wuqia. Tribal trade and horse racing customs are prevalent, and horse equipment is no longer limited to production tools, gradually becoming a symbol of herder identity and wealth. Artisans applied nomadic totems such as eagles, coiled grass, and mountains and rivers to saddle carving, leather embroidery, and metal inlay, integrating leather craftsmanship, wood carving, iron forging, and felt decoration. The unique ethnic artistic characteristics of Kyrgyz horse gear were officially established. Aheqi County, relying on its settlement advantages, has gradually developed into a regional center for the inheritance of horse harness making skills ^[3].

1.2. Development status

The full name of Aheqi County is Aheqi County, Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture (hereinafter referred to as Kizilsu). Its geographical location is west of Aksu Special Zone in southern Xinjiang, adjacent to Wushi County in the area, and southwest of Artux and other places, close to the border ^[4]. The Kyrgyz people rely on the mountainous environment of the Pamir Plateau and have long relied on nomadic lifestyles as their core livelihood; With the continuous changes in social structure, the production mode is gradually transforming, forming a production pattern that combines agriculture and animal husbandry.

In modern times, although transportation has been widely used, camels and horses have become daily commuting choices in steep mountainous areas. In the long mountain nomadic life, horses and camels are important means of transportation during long-distance migration and grazing. Due to environmental factors, camels have a large body and a relaxed gait, which limits their flexibility in rugged and complex terrain.

Horses are more suitable for mountain travel and are deeply integrated into various scenes such as daily travel, festivals, and entertainment for the public. As an important carrier of Kyrgyz horse riding culture, the culture of horse riding equipment has given birth to the unique regional characteristics of traditional horse riding techniques in Aheqi County. This type of handicraft is rooted in the local nomadic civilization and combines practical functions with ethnic artistic aesthetics. Its harness craftsmanship maintains a distinct ethnic identity. Relying on the unique natural conditions of the region and the creative wisdom accumulated by the people over the long term, the production mode of locally sourced materials and handmade carving has been passed down from generation to generation, creating a unique foundation for the development of Kyrgyz horse harness craftsmanship and becoming an irreplaceable national cultural symbol.

Under the continuous impact of modern industrial products and diverse foreign cultures, a large number of simple industrial mass-produced saddles have flowed into pastoral areas at low prices, further squeezing the living space of handmade saddles. However, horse gear has long surpassed the scope of simple production tools and is the material carrier of Kyrgyz horseback civilization and national aesthetic spirit. The inheritance of the epic poem “Manas”, horse racing, ethnic festivals, falcon culture and other folk activities still retain the cultural demand for traditional handmade horse equipment ^[5].

The implementation of intangible cultural heritage protection policies has brought new development opportunities for Kyrgyz horse culture. The Kyrgyz settlement area, centered around Aheqi County, relies on the regional cultural identity cards of “Manas Township” and “Falcon Township”. Local cultural and tourism departments, as well as intangible cultural heritage departments, carry out protection work such as censuses of folk craftsmen, recording of technical images, and folk exhibitions. Some craftsmen have begun to transform traditional horse equipment from practical tools for animal husbandry to folk performance props and ethnic cultural and creative artworks. Craft creation pays more attention to the display of ethnic patterns, highlighting the characteristics of nomadic culture in the Pamir Plateau. Despite the changes of the times, the craftsmanship of Kyrgyz horse gear still retains its unique artistic characteristics, like the snow lotus growing in the Pamir Plateau, becoming an irreplaceable symbol of national culture ^[6].

2. Decorative art features and production process of Kyrgyz horse equipment craft

The Kyrgyz horse gear was initially divided into wooden, iron, and leather types, and the production process was influenced by the horse gear culture of the Central Plains, with a rich and diverse range of production techniques. There are generally two types of horse harnesses that have been used to this day. One is mainly based on practicality, and is generally made of elm wood or animal skin materials, with simplified patterns. Another type is exquisite craftsmanship, in which jewelry, gold and silver ornaments, etc. are embedded during production. Generally, silver ornaments are made from a wide range of materials and then decorated with exquisite patterns. In horse gear, the most important part is the saddle, which also poses certain difficulties in craftsmanship. The tools prepared before making the saddle are also extremely important, such as saws, axes, sharp knives, and other essential tools. There are many types and materials of horse harnesses, including leather and wood. Leather harnesses are more common because nomads have mainly grazed their livestock for a long time. In many cases, they will keep the slaughtered animal skins to make high-quality harnesses, which are highly practical.

Traditional horse harness production belongs to composite handicrafts, where artisans need to master multiple skills such as wood carving, leather tanning, metal forging, leather rope weaving, and pattern

decoration. The learning cycle is long, and the labor intensity is high. Modern employment options are more diverse, and young people are unwilling to spend years immersed in their studies. The traditional mode of transmission from master to apprentice is gradually weakening. The widespread aging of deep harness artisans in the region has led to a shortage of inheritors and an aging workforce, which has become a prominent obstacle to the continuity of Kyrgyz harness craftsmanship^[3]. In the process of making horse gear, the decorative materials used are generally silver and copper. In addition, leather handicrafts generally include inlaid gold and silver, jewelry carving, and various patterns that complement each other, making them extremely exquisite. Examples of patterns include birds and animals, flowing clouds and winds, and clusters of grass, flowers, and trees^[7]. These are all derived from nature, and after being processed by craftsmen, a pattern culture has been formed. The rich craft culture of horse gear has been developed into exquisite craftsmanship after a hundred years of refinement. Horses, as a commonly used means of transportation, have enriched the lives of the nomadic Kyrgyz people through the development of horse gear craft culture.



Figure 1. Materials for making horse gear.

A trip to explore the handicrafts of China's ethnic minorities "Journey at Fingertips" Planning: Beijing Tea Horse Advertising Co., Ltd. Exploration Magazine Editorial Board: Li Jianhong, Shi Xiaoqi, He Yihong Group Editing: Gao Hongsong, Xu Weili Editor in Chief/He Yihong Publishing House: Xinjiang People's Publishing House [Z] Page 168.



Figure 2. Saddle.

A trip to explore the handicrafts of China's ethnic minorities "Journey at Fingertips" Planning: Beijing Tea Horse Advertising Co., Ltd. Exploration Magazine Editorial Board: Li Jianhong, Shi Xiaoqi, He Yihong Group Editing: Gao Hongsong, Xu Weili Editor in Chief/He Yihong Publishing House: Xinjiang People's Publishing House [Z] Page 168.



Figure 3. The process of making horsegear.

A trip to explore the handicrafts of China's ethnic minorities "Journey at Fingertips" Planning: Beijing Tea Horse Advertising Co., Ltd. Exploration Magazine Editorial Board: Li Jianhong, Shi Xiaoqi, He Yihong



Figure 4. Horse Gear.

A trip to explore the handicrafts of China's ethnic minorities "Journey at Fingertips" Planning: Beijing Tea Horse Advertising Co., Ltd. Exploration Magazine Editorial Board: Li Jianhong, Shi Xiaoqi, He Yihong Group Editing: Gao Hongsong, Xu Weili Editor in Chief/He Yihong Publishing House: Xinjiang People's Publishing House [Z] Page 168.

2.1. Saddle making

Saddles are the most difficult craft in the entire process of making horse gear. Regardless of the material, they need to be processed into the shape of a saddle first, and then fixed with various adhesives such as wood glue specially used for making horse gear. After drying, animal leather, such as cowhide, camel skin, etc., is used as the outer layer of the saddle. Finally, silver nails are used to fix it in the corresponding position. After fixing the shape, patterns need to be added to embellish it. Their simple and hardworking spirit embodies the spiritual integrity of the Kyrgyz people, and the exquisite patterns reflect the unique cultural meaning of the Kyrgyz people. Such ethnic customs and unique decorations are concentrated in the horse gear culture.

2.2. Whips and stirrups, production of horse pads

The process of making a whip is more convenient compared to making a saddle. The whip body is generally 0.2 cm to 0.5 cm wide and made of cowhide strips about 50cm long. The whip handle is made of small sheep hooves and slightly processed ^[8]. The whip body and handle are made of mixed glue used to make horse

gear, and the production method of fixing the whip is comparable to that of a saddle, which is reinforced with silver nails. After the completion of the saddle and whip work, the final step is to make stirrups and horse pads, which together form a complete set of horse equipment. This is a gift prepared by nomads for their long-term companions, and it directly illustrates the Kyrgyz people's love for horses.

3. The artistic value of Kyrgyz horse harness craftsmanship

In the lives of the Kyrgyz people, under the influence of this horse culture, being good at horseback riding is also a subtle influence. For them, horses are not only a substitute for longer journeys, but also more like loyal friends of nomads, reflecting the importance of horses in life. On long journeys, horses often accompany nomads, and with the development of society, their feelings for horses are increasing day by day. For nomads, the saying is: "people rely on clothes and horses rely on saddles". As a means of transportation for nomads, horses are their assistants. Nomads regard horses as people's most loyal soul mates, and they regard them as highly advanced creatures. Their feelings for horses are mostly reflected in the harness. Nomads always match their faithful soul mates with the best harness they can find. This is not a belief, but a habit and culture reflected in the status quo of the natural environment. The development of harness culture has become a part of the lives of the Kyrgyz people, and nomads have long been accustomed to the companionship of horses in their daily lives. Over time, this nomadic process has formed a unique cultural phenomenon. Their primary task upon returning home is to feed the horses, which has become a habit in daily life. They then wipe the dust off the horses and tidy up their gear, placing it in a fixed location at home. Of course, this location never holds anything, firstly to keep it clean, and secondly to show respect for the horses. From the details, it can be seen that the nomads have a deep affection for horses. This deep affection that arises spontaneously is not accidental, but rather a mutual companionship that occurs overnight. Whether in life or on outings, the meticulous care for horses remains consistent, and the affection for horse equipment is understandable. After all, in their eyes, it is natural to have a good horse with a good harness. The most fitting reality for shepherds in their lives is that they are full of longing for every day in the future, and they also hope to walk further and see more scenery with their loyal partners.

The craftsmanship of horse harness is not only based on tradition, but has also been recognized by the world through years of wind erosion. Folk culture is ubiquitous in our lives, and in the later development process, we not only need to protect it, but also discover the essence of culture through real practice. The inheritance of Kyrgyz horse harness craftsmanship can be regarded as a classic, and what has been passed down in the culture for over a hundred years is still closely related to the traces of life. In the collision between traditional handicrafts and modern culture, under the impact of modern culture, its original ecological culture still exists, stands out in the traces of time, and has been elevated to intangible cultural heritage. The culture of horse gear is not just a simple craft; it endows traditional culture with vitality and has become an eternal classic in the lives of the Kyrgyz people. The deep affection for horse culture can be presented through horse gear craftsmanship, just like the rhythm of jumping on horseback, real and full of vitality.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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