

Investigation on the Inheritance and Current Status of Bopai and Its Craftsmanship from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: Bopai is an entertainment tool deeply loved by the people of various ethnic groups in SiNan and DeJiang, Guizhou. It integrates folk art and folk games and has been passed down for nearly a thousand years. In recent years, with the acceleration of informationization, Bopai culture is facing huge impacts and the risk of disappearance. This paper uses field investigation methods to investigate the inheritance, craftsmanship, and Play rules of Bopai in the local area, analyzing the local characteristics and social cultural value of Bopai culture, so that we can deeply understand and better inherit this ancient traditional culture.

Keywords: Bopai; Craftsmanship; Inheritance; Current Status; Investigation

1. Historical Origins of Bopai Culture

1.1 Overview of the Socio-Economic and Historical Culture of SiNan and DeJiang County

SiNan County is located in the northeast of Guizhou Province, in the western part of Tongren Region, at latitude 27°32'--28°10' N, and longitude 107°52'--108°28' E. It borders Yinjiang Tujia and Miao Autonomous County of Tongren City to the east, Fenggang County of Zunyi City to the west, Shiqian County of Tongren City to the south, and DeJiang County of Tongren City to the north. The total area is 2230.5 square kilometers, making it a crucial land and water transportation hub linking Hunan, Chongqing, and Sichuan in northeast Guizhou. [1] SiNan and DeJiang Counties are rich in resources and have profound historical and cultural heritage with a long history of development. The area is home to a rich and diverse array of ethnic minority cultures: Tujia paper-cutting, Nuo opera, oil-paper umbrella making, Bopai, festive candles, Wujiang boatmen's songs, and Tujia flower lanterns are

all local intangible cultural heritage with distinctive regional characteristics. Among them, Bopai, with its unique and beautiful script, stands out among many folk cultures. It is both an entertainment product and a fine craft.

SiNan County's inland waterway transport is well-developed, with the Wujiang River running through the entire area, making boats an important means of transportation. Thanks to the convenience of Wujiang River navigation, SiNan County has been a gathering place for merchants since ancient times and a central area for economic development in the middle and lower reaches of the Wujiang River. Hence, it is known as the First County of Guizhou, the Pearl of Wujiang. The county has 17 towns and 8 ethnic townships, with a total population of about 680,000. It is a place where Han, Tujia, Miao, Gelao, Mongolian, and other ethnic groups live together.

1.2 Overview of Bopai as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Bopai, also known as character cards, is an intangible cultural heritage that combines the attributes of folk art with traditional sports, games, and acrobatics. Bopai is not only a beloved leisure and entertainment tool among local people of various ethnic groups but is also renowned both inside and outside the province for its outstanding flexibility, durability, non-layering, non-breaking characteristics, and high ornamental value. In 2019, it was listed as a Fifth Batch of Provincial Representative Projects of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Guizhou Province.

Playing Bopai, known locally as Kou Bopai, is a recreational activity rich in ethnic flavor and local culture, popular in SiNan and DeJiang. According to local cultural researcher Chen Qiqiang, kou has three

meanings: first, it originates from the Northern Song Dynasty when there were no abacuses, and people used small items like stones, rice, corn, and millet to count; second, after the invention of the abacus, people used it to calculate scores, producing a pop sound when moving the beads; third, during the game, players need to draw and match cards according to certain rules, all involving the action of kou. SiNan Bopai has a unique gameplay that is both recreational and competitive, making it suitable for people of all ages. For locals, Kou Bopai is an elegant form of entertainment. Friends gather, share a pot of tea, and play a game of Bopai, creating a delightful scene. While the game appears simple, it actually tests personal wisdom and courage, particularly in accurately judging the situation to achieve victory, containing many mysteries. The most important aspect of playing Bopai is honesty. Scores earned during the game are first recorded by the player on the abacus, even with dragon cards that are not revealed beforehand, relying on the player's self-awareness and integrity. Therefore, players undergo subtle social education and value guidance through entertainment.

2. Craftsmanship of Bopai

2.1 Investigation of the Lineage of Bopai Craftsmen

According to local elders, before the 1980s, due to limited leisure activities, many locals liked to play Bopai in their spare time, and almost every village had someone who could make Bopai. However, since the reform and opening up, with the diversification of entertainment and leisure activities, the number of people who enjoy playing Bopai has gradually decreased. Additionally, the influx of modern plastic Bopai has impacted the market, leading to a decline in traditional Bopai craftsmanship. Based on the author's field research, currently, there are only two families in SiNan County that still maintain traditional Bopai handcrafting skills: the Nie family in Sitang Town and the Fan family in Sunjiaba Town, with the Nie family in Sitang Town having a more significant influence.

An Tingyu is fifty-eight-year-old who living in Sitang Office, SiNan County, is the third-generation inheritor of the Nie family craftsmanship. An Tingyu married into the Bopai family at the age of 20 and learned Bopai making from her father. An Tingyu's Bopai has

four main characteristics: strong flexibility, no fading, no layering, and no breaking with a good hand feel; unique craftsmanship where the hand-written cards are almost identical in size and shape, resembling printed text; the peculiar writing style with large characters echoing oracle bone script, small seal script, and clerical script, while the small characters have running script and wild cursive script styles. In May 2015, An Tingyu participated in an intangible cultural heritage project exhibition in Anhua Ancient Street, SiNan, where her handmade Bopai received high praise for its structure, flexibility, and calligraphic artistry from the evaluation panel and industry experts, earning her the title of Ingenious Craftsman. In May 2016, An Tingyu demonstrated Bopai crafting at the Wujiang Hotel in SiNan, receiving high acclaim from media and relevant personnel both inside and outside the province. Her family was awarded the title Bopai Family and received a 2000yuan prize. In June 2017, recommended by relevant departments of Guizhou Province, Tongren City, and SiNan County, An Tingyu showcased her Bopai crafting skills in Guiyang New District, garnering widespread media praise. She was recognized as a Guizhou Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Bopai Inheritor in 2019.

In a broad sense, inheritors are those who master and spread relevant skills, but "formal inheritance is understood literally, and the inheritance behavior must be formal, and the mutual confirmation of both teaching and learning must be achieved. [2] According to An Tingyu, the Nie family's Bopai crafting technique probably started with her grandfather, Nie Jingwen, in the mid-Republican period, though the exact lineage cannot be verified. The Nie family's Bopai craftsmanship has been passed down through four generations:

Nie Jingwen (first generation) — Nie Peiquan (second generation) — Nie Zhixian (third generation) — Ao Yingxiu (fourth generation, An Tingyu's apprentice).

Before the reform and opening up, due to the limited entertainment options available to people, Bopai rapidly developed. In 1986, after the dissolution of his work unit, Nie Zhixian, the third-generation inheritor of Bopai manufacturing techniques, began

making and selling Bopai at home. To increase the popularity and influence of Bopai, Nie Zhixian opened a workshop in Guangdong, producing and selling Bopai with trademarked packaging. Despite the impact of machine-made Bopai in recent years, handmade Bopai remains in short supply, often requiring advance payment and waiting in line for purchase. After falling ill and being unable to continue crafting Bopai, Nie Zhixian did not take on any apprentices, leaving the craft to be inherited by An Tingyu. Currently, her only son works in education in Guangzhou and has no plans to carry on this traditional craft. Therefore, An Tingyu has taken on one apprentice, Ao Yingxiu, to learn the Bopai crafting techniques. Previously, her husband's cousin also learned Bopai making for a period but gave it up due to concerns about low economic returns.

2.2 Investigation of Bopai Craftsmanship

As the common saying goes, 'things are rare and valuable.' In order to improve their skills and enhance the competitiveness of the same industry, it is necessary for artisans to keep secrets and block the process.[3] However, with an open attitude, An Tingyu introduced the production process of Bo brand to us in detail. The crafting of Bopai involves not only unique materials and tools but also intricate processes.

2.2.1 Raw materials for making Bopai

Originally, Bopai was made from bamboo strips, later replaced by handmade paper. The raw material for making Bopai is high-quality handmade paper, made from paper mulberry bark using traditional techniques. This paper is slightly yellowish, soft, and highly flexible. In addition to handmade paper, other materials include tracing paper, white rice paper, Xuan paper, latex, and tung oil for soaking. All these raw materials are purchased from the market.

2.2.2 Tools for making Bopai

- (1) Brush: Used to apply latex to paste the handmade paper into card stock.
- (2) Pen and Ink: Used to write the characters on the cards; both red and black ink are used.
- (3) Knife and Ruler: Used to cut the paper into the required sizes.
- (4) Spray Gun: Used to evenly apply ink to the dried cardboard.
- (5) Grinding Machine: A dust-free grinding machine used to smooth the edges of the cut slices.

2.2.3 Crafting process of Bopai

The process of crafting Bopai includes: making the card stock, drying, applying ink, drying, writing characters, slicing, grinding, applying lacquer, polishing, packaging.

According to An Tingyu, The process of making a complete set of Bopai is very complex. It takes one person 12 hours to make a complete set of Bopai, with all the steps except drying done indoors. Nowadays, it is also difficult to purchase the raw materials needed for making Bopai. The specific crafting process is as follows:

- (1) Making the card stock. This step involves pasting 10 sheets of high-quality handmade paper together using paste made from flour to create the card stock. However, traditional flour paste has poor adhesive strength and tends to spoil easily, so now latex is used instead, which not only provides better adhesion but also greatly improves work efficiency.
- (2) Drying. The card stock is placed in a ventilated, shaded area to dry slowly, avoiding direct sunlight to prevent layering on the surface, which would affect the quality of the card stock.
- (3) Applying ink. One side of the dried card stock is evenly coated with black ink, while the other side retains its original white color.
- (4) Drying. The inked side is placed facing up in an area with a temperature not exceeding 20°C and not below 10°C to dry.
- (5) Writing characters. On the dried white side of the card stock, characters are written in both red and black ink. The large characters two, seven, ten and the small characters two, 7, 10 are written in red ink, while the rest are written uniformly in black ink. Writing must be done carefully to prevent smudging or accidentally touching the wet ink, which would affect the overall appearance of the cards.
- (6) Slicing. Using a ruler and knife, the written and dried card stock is cut into pieces of a specific size (approximately 11.8 cm in length and 2.8 cm in width).
- (7) Grinding. The edges of the sliced pieces are smoothed to ensure uniform length and width, so that when stacked, all pieces look identical.
- (8) Applying lacquer. A thin layer of varnish made from boiled tung oil is applied to the smoothed pieces as a protective coat.

(9) Polishing. The lacquered and dried cards are gently rubbed in fine rice bran left over from milling, making them smooth and glossy.

(10) Packaging. The cards are arranged in order and placed into boxes bearing the Nie family mark, completing the entire crafting process.

3. Characteristics of the Characters and Calligraphy in Bopai

3.1 Characters in Bopai

3.1.1 Overview of Bopai characters

Typically, a set of Bopai consists of large cards and small cards. The large cards have the characters: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten (one to ten in uppercase) written on them, with four of each, totaling forty cards. The small cards have the characters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 (one to ten in lowercase) written on them, also with four of each, totaling forty cards. Together, the large and small cards add up to eighty cards. Each card is written with a brush, hence the game Kou Bopai is also called character cards. Among these eighty cards, twenty-four cards (two, seven, ten and 2, 7, 10) are written in red ink, while the remaining fifty-six cards are written in black ink. Red cards score higher than black cards, possibly because the uppercase two is ranked first among the red cards.

Regarding the characters on Bopai, according to inheritor An Tingyu: The characters on Bopai are a combination of ancient tadpole script and bird-worm-seal script, which are unrecognizable to those outside the field and cannot be found in the repository of Chinese characters. Today's 'BO' refers to an ancient ethnic minority in China. Additionally, researchers Wang Changcheng and Wang Dexun speculate that the characters on Bopai might have been influenced by the unique decimal system of the ancient Yelang ethnic group. Although evidence for these claims is somewhat lacking, based on the author's on-site observations, the characters 5, five, 9 in Bopai are indeed identical to the uppercase Chinese numerals.

3.1.2 Rules of the Bopai game

According to An Tingyu, the rules of play Bopai are very strict: three players are required to form a table, no more and no less. At the beginning of the game, the dealer is determined by drawing a card, who will then be the first to play. Each player draws twenty cards in a clockwise order, with the dealer drawing one extra card. During

the game, players cannot keep the drawn cards in their hands but must accumulate points through actions like shovel cards, bump cards, open combos, and Chipai. Reaching one hundred points signifies a win, also known as de Bopai, marking the end of the game.

Taijiang: In a shuffled deck, any card drawn randomly becomes the leading card. Taijiang can be divided into large, small, or double-headed generals. For example, if a player draws a large number five, then four, five, six are the generals, forming a large general. Conversely, small numbers follow the same rule, forming a small general. A double-headed general refers to drawing either 1 or 10.

Saopai: Is also called paddle shoveling. When a player has three identical cards among their twenty cards (including those drawn during the game), they place them face down to avoid being seen, forming as many sets as they have.

Kaizao and Dragon Lantern: Kaizao involve revealing the three identical cards when another player plays a card matching one of the set. The revealed set shows others that the player wants that card, forming a combination of four cards. If a player draws four identical cards themselves, it is called Dragon Lantern, where three cards are placed face down over one face-up card, indicating self-drawing and scoring higher than Kaizao from others' cards.

Bump Cards: If another player plays a card and a player has two identical cards in hand, forming a set of three, they can call bump.

Chipai: When the player before you plays a card and you have two cards that can form a new combination with that card, you can take that card. For example, if the previous player plays a red two and you have red seven and ten, you can form two-seven-ten or seven-ten-two. The same applies to other combinations.

Winning Hand: Also known as harmonious cards. According to the game rules, a player forms combinations with the twenty drawn cards. If the score of the winning hand is below 100 points, the winning player shuffles and deals again, or shuffling is done in turn, and the winning player draws first to continue the game.

Scoring Calculation: Bopai is a game where

victory is determined by points. In the actions of shovel cards, bump cards, Kaizao, and Chipai, only Chipai do not count towards the score. The act of eating cards enhances card combinations, making the game more complete and allowing for quicker victories. Additionally, eating cards can only be done from the previous player.

When calculating scores, the points for shovel are higher than for bump. A large general that is shoveled becomes worth 12 points, while a bumped card is worth only 6 points. A small general is worth 6 points when shoveled but only 3 points when bumped. The highest scoring large general combination is the Dragon Lantern, which is worth 24 points, while the small general is worth 18 points. The next highest scoring combination is the Kaizao, where a large general is worth 18 points, and a small general is worth 12 points.

Penalties for Violations:

During the game, there is a requirement that eating cards must be compared. When you want to eat a card played by the previous player, you must reveal your own cards. If you eat without comparing, once discovered, it results in losing the game, causing the offending player to lose the round, while the other two players each win a round (each earning a Bopai). In scoring, if a player places the beads incorrectly, makes errors when moving the abacus beads, intentionally cheats, or makes any mistakes in calculating scores, it also results in losing the game. The offending player scores nothing, and all previous efforts are wasted.

3.2 Artistic Characteristics of Bopai

3.2.1 Structure

According to inheritor An Tingyu: The patterns and characters on Bopai are a combination of ancient tadpole script and bird-worm-fish script, with bird, worm, and fish being the decorative artistic fonts. Structurally, the characters blend with bird shapes, with a meticulous layout that varies in form, rich and colorful. The intertwining strokes and the decoration with birds and insects create imaginative and creative spaces that inspire endless reverie. The Bopai characters fully showcase the unique artistic wisdom and simple aesthetic of the craftsmen. During my on-site observation, I found that the structure, size, spacing, and alignment of An Tingyu's Bopai characters were perfectly balanced and contrasted.

3.2.2 Lines

In Bopai, the brushwork starts with the center of the brush. The strokes, whether lifting or pressing, show variations in thickness, combining square and round elements, exuding a restrained and implicit beauty of graceful strength, akin to a dancer gracefully moving. The lines are thick and resilient, smoothly executed with rounded turns, achieving a perfect degree of roundness and appropriateness.

3.2.3 Calligraphy style

In terms of calligraphy style, the uppercase Bopai characters exhibit traces of oracle bone script, small seal script, and clerical script, while the lowercase characters resemble running script or wild cursive script. The characters are highly decorative, and the interaction between them reflects the emotional expression of the writer. Each stroke, lift, and press brings visual pleasure, making the characters both calligraphy and painting, with high aesthetic and collectible value. Additionally, Bopai has significant value for research in chessboard crafting techniques and Chinese calligraphy.

4. Cultural Characteristics and Social Cultural Functions of Bopai

4.1 Cultural Characteristics of Bopai

4.1.1 Locality

In terms of handicraft production of different ethnic groups, it is relatively easy to learn and promote materials and craft technology. However, due to the different conditions of religious belief, geographical environment, life, all rights, habits, eating habits and other conditions, handicrafts and art products of different ethnic groups have formed different ethnic characteristics in form, meaning, color and pattern. These differences do not constitute antagonism and conflict, but create a clear identification and rich expression in the region [4]. Bopai, with its unique crafting techniques and various entertainment forms, is deeply loved by the public and has firmly rooted itself in the society of SiNan and DeJiang County. The long-standing culture of Bopai owes much to the love of the local residents. In their spare time, groups of friends gather around a table with a pot of tea and a set of Bopai, enjoying the joy it brings amid the sounds of the abacus beads. This not only enriches their

leisure time but also helps them make more like-minded friends. In the streets and alleys, before and after meals, the unique Bopai game spreads its enchanting charm, creating an ancient yet vibrant game culture that offers insights and satisfaction to both the elderly and the young, integrating the essence of Bopai into local life.

4.1.2 Ethnicity

Traditional craft is not only a kind of decorative art, a self-sufficient and open system, but also a cultural phenomenon that persistently looks back at history, firmly takes root in the present, constantly integrates with daily life, and gradually develops in a reasonable choice. [5] Ethnic culture occupies an important place in the historical and cultural heritage of SiNan and DeJiang. Through their hard work and wisdom, people have created a rich and colorful ethnic culture. SiNan is renowned not only as the First County of Eastern Guizhou, the Pearl of Wujiang but also for its long-standing history and simple Tujia ethnic customs. SiNan's historical culture is a comprehensive one that integrates the cultures of various ethnic groups in Guizhou, and to some extent, it can be seen as a microcosm of Guizhou's historical culture. The mutual influence and integration of cultures among the ethnic groups in this land have created a diverse and unique environment for entertainment and competition. Bopai emerged in this setting, making it a cultural expression rich in the distinctive features of the Wujiang region in Si Zhou's homeland, reflecting leisure and entertainment ways before the era of mobile phones and computers. It has now become an excellent tool for people to enjoy their free time away from their phones.

4.1.3 Integration

During the Ming Dynasty, the SiNan and DeJiang Prefecture area saw mutual influence and learning between Han culture and minority cultures, forming a cultural pattern where one dominant culture coexisted with multiple others in harmony. This pattern had a positive impact on the social development of the SiNan Prefecture area [6]. In this multi-ethnic coexistence environment, each culture maintained its unique beauty while tolerating differences, promoting mutual enhancement among ethnic groups and the common prosperity of China's various ethnic cultures. Bopai, as a representative of SiNan and DeJiang's ethnic culture, is not only elegant in behavior but also rich in content. More importantly, when people

gather to play Bopai during their leisure time, the laughter and joy foster inter-ethnic communication and contribute to social harmony and development.

4.2 Social and Cultural Functions of Bopai

4.2.1 Leisure and harmony function

The people in the game are complete people, of with flesh and blood, love and love. Because the game needs people's full commitment, the player needs to participate in the identity of the master. Schiller believes that the state of play is the highest state of human nature that overcomes the one-sided and alienated nature of man, and is the true embodiment of freedom and liberation. [7] During their leisure time, people leave their homes and gather in groups of three or five to participate in community leisure activities. They sit down calmly, accompanied by a cup of tea and a few friends, and begin to play Kou Bopai. This game helps them relax both physically and mentally, providing spiritual comfort. Through leisure, they exchange thoughts and feelings, eliminate barriers, resolve conflicts, and promote the harmonious development of society.

4.2.2 Educational and molding function

Kou Bopai is an intellectual game rich in the regional cultural characteristics of SiNan Wujiang. During the game, people experience the local customs and traditions of SiNan, which are diverse, civilized, and healthy. In this strong cultural atmosphere, even those with a few uncivilized or impolite habits tend to restrain themselves, beautifying their hearts. It also reflects an individual's noble character, subtly teaching morals, integrity, and the spirit of the game.

4.2.3 Economic function

Although the sports games in ancient China have always been regarded as the last skill path, they are closely related to the life of the Chinese people, and are an indispensable part of the cultural life in ancient China, and the common behavior of most people in all stages of society. [8] Kakbo is a puzzle game with rich Wujiang regional cultural characteristics. People can feel the local folk customs in the process of game, which is diverse, civilized and healthy. In a strong cultural atmosphere, even a small number of uncivilized and impolite people will be

restrained and beautify people's minds. It is the embodiment of a person's noble morality, morality and immorality, honesty and dishonesty, and there is no spirit of game, imperceptibly educating people.

With the progress of scientific technologies and changes of economic globalization, the tertiary industry centered by the service industry is rapidly developing. Folk culture has close relations with the economic development of the service industry. [9] Using platforms such as the Hometown of Bopai Culture, China's Folk Culture and Art Hometown, and Wujiang Karst National Geopark, SiNan leverages its unique history, traditions, customs, and rich natural resources to actively develop cultural tourism projects. It improves related infrastructure, enhances the aesthetic appeal of historical and traditional cultural areas, and meets the needs of various people. Every year, Wujiang organizes various traditional cultural performances, allowing tourists to appreciate the unique and excellent traditional minority culture of Wujiang. Through competitions showcasing various intricate skills, visitors gain a deeper understanding of the unique local features of Wujiang. By deeply exploring the diverse cultural connotations of SiNan's history, modernity, and folk traditions, SiNan actively promotes the sustainable development of its market economy, while also helping to preserve and promote local traditional culture.

5. Conclusion

Handmade Bopai, whether in terms of practicality or ornamental value, possesses significant artistic value. However, in recent years, the influence of machine-made cards and digital card games has impacted the development and inheritance of handmade Bopai. In the internet era, digital processing methods can be used to combine Bopai culture with digital technology, effectively protecting Bopai culture while integrating it into our lives for a broader future. Additionally, establishing a Bopai cultural museum could preserve Bopai for the long term and provide a place for people to learn about Bopai culture.

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