



# The Inheritance of Intangible Cultural Heritage Velvet Flowers from the Modern Perspective

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**Abstract:** The velvet flower is one of China's intangible cultural heritages, which is divided into the following schools of Nanjing Velvet Flower and Beijing Velvet Flower (Velvet Bird). Its production process is very complicated. It can only be produced by hand until now, and it cannot be mass-produced by machines. A few years ago, with the popularity of dramas such as Story of Yanxi Palace, velvet flowers were trending among the public. From the modern perspective, shall the velvet flowers should be passed down, or be swallowed by the tide of the time? Can high exposure be conducive to preserving and inheriting the intangible cultural heritage of velvet flowers? What are our corresponding actions? Investigation methods such as survey method, comparative method, literature research method and others to explore and analyze the intangible cultural heritage are adopted to come to the final conclusion that the protection of intangible cultural heritage can be made with continuous expansion of horizon of craftsmen and improvement of their abilities to produce new products in line with modern aesthetics of traditional crafts. Besides, it is imperative for the governments to formulate a sustainable protection mechanism and integrate various forces for implementation.

**Keywords:** velvet flower, intangible cultural heritage, cultural protection

In recent years, with the attention paid by the film and television industry to the way of outfits, many traditional handicraft skills that can be used for shooting of film and TV series drama have returned to the public's attention, among which, the first one is the velvet flower making skill.

## 1. Nanjing velvet flowers

Velvet flower is a typical traditional handicraft with local characteristics in Nanjing with themes mostly taken from things popular among the people. With auspicious expressions, velvet is adopted to express people's desire for a better life. When making velvet flowers, the first thing to do is to cook the mulberry silk in alkali water, and then to prepare the cooked silk for dyeing. Gaudy colors can be applied in application, concerns are that the producers are not qualified in the skills of making colors. As a consequence, the work is of a flashy one. The color blending made by the ancients is not tacky, the secret depends on the allocation scale of colour and area, and the contrast color of two equal areas will not be discovered for sure. After dyeing, the cooked silk should be combed neatly with a brush. After brushed, the silk is characterized with luster and texture. Later on, piece of copper wire with small thickness can be prepared and folded in half, which should be later placed over the fire. When the copper wire is softened and annealed, the well-heated velvet that has been combed should be clamped with gent twist at the left and right ends. In light of this, like hair, the velvet is tightly fixed in place by copper wire clamps.

Soon after, the velvet silk can be tailored with long scissors with specific cut in length based on the thickness of the required "velvet strip". Generally speaking, the length of velvet is equal to one time the diameter of the velvet. The "figure ticking" is the most important step. Further more, one end of the copper wire should be held by one hand, the other end of the copper wire should be twisted by the other hand, As a result, the copper wire is suddenly twisted into a spiral one. The velvet, sandwiched in the copper wire, was presented with the shape with 360 degrees of rotation, which is truly a fluffy "velvet strip". Velvet strips are the basic material for making velvet flowers. Only after velvet strips are completed can the process of "sharpening" be carried out. Tweezers can be used to shape velvet strips into all kinds of exquisite flowers, because of their special performance techniques can not be produced by machine until now.

Velvet flowers, tracked back to the Tang Dynasty, are called ronghua in Chinese, homophonic of health and glory. According to historical records, the area scope ranging from Sanshan Street to Changle Road was "Flower Street with Full Florescence", which was the sea of velvet flowers, the shop that sold velvet flowers were in full flourish at that time. There are many kinds of velvet flowers on sale in the street, such as temples flower, corsage flower and opera flower, among which temples flower gained the most popularity. It was listed as a royal tribute in Wu Zetian Period the Tang Dynasty, which

gained momentum in development in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. It reached its peak in the Kangxi and Qianlong Periods of the Qing Dynasty. In the 1930s and 1940s, family workshops dominated the production of velvet flowers in Nanjing. The industries of velvet flower production were mainly distributed in the east and west areas of the south gate of the city, mainly in the areas of Maxiang copper workshop and Shangfuqiao. Royal velvet flowers are incomparable to common decorations. In the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, velvet flowers were mainly worn in the Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival and weddings. In the *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the palace flowers Aunt Xue asked Zhou Rui to send to Sanchun, Daiyu and Wang Xifeng are what we call velvet flowers. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, "the yarn flowers made in the palace with varieties" also refers to the velvet flowers.

The popular television series set in the Qing dynasty *Story of Yanxi Palace* showcased the miscellaneous varieties of velvet flowers to the audience. Concubines were dressed up with gold ornaments and many velvet flowers. The headwear of the imperial maids Yingluo, Myeongyu, and Erqing were mostly simple chrysanthemums, while the velvet flowers worn by the empress and concubines were the most gorgeous, and the flowers were in full bloom, with clusters of flowers on both sides of the bun. The purple velvet flowers that Queen Fucha loved appeared many times, which were presented in the style of chrysanthemum. Purple was the color of prominent status in ancient China, which was particularly suitable for queen Fucha's introverted and virtuous character. With stringent rules in ancient Palace, there were strict rules for all the accessories and things used, which was adoptable in velvet flowers based headdress. There were a few elements in Empress Fucha's headdress: Paradise flycatcher, longevity peach, Buddha's hand, pomegranate, which were endowed with specific connotation respectively. Paradise flycatchers were referred as auspicious patterns in ancient China; The longevity peach is full of immortals with implication of a long life; Buddha hand is homophobic of "Fushou" in Chinese, which represents the most original desire of living in peace with longer longevity; Because of its own characteristics of numerous kernels, Pomegranate is generally referred to renewable off spring.

The flowers of the concubines in the four seasons are also called "Seasonable Flowers". The four seasons refer to spring, summer, autumn and winter respectively. Eight Solar Terms are: the Beginning of Spring, the Beginning of Summer, the Beginning of Autumn, the Beginning of Winter, Spring Equinox, Summer Solstice, Autumn Equinox and Winter Solstice. Concubines -- the flowers of the four seasons. Concubines were not allowed to use headwears of velvet flowers superior to that of the empress. When Wei Yingluo was a palace maid, she showed her preference on small monochrome velvet flower, which is what we often say "wear a small, monochrome velvet flower". Because the decoration of palace maid should not supersede what really counts, they should keep in a low profile. However, The maidens in the palace were treated differently in terms of the seniority gap. The older mammy preferred dark velvet flowers, while the younger one showed preference on light flowers, mostly malus and daisies.

The collocation of velvet flowers in the drama is very girlish, with bright red, watery red, peach as the main tone, and sandwiched with yellow stamens and green leaves. Sometimes there is a subtle gradient at the end of the petals, which is bright and rich. Most of the velvet flowers in Nanjing are rich flowers, and these patterns also appeared on the utensils used by concubines in the harem. Tea sets, vases, ear ornaments, and headdress are mostly shaped with the pattern of velvet flowers. Most of the porcelain patterns in television series set in the Qing Dynasty are in the style of velvet flowers. Most of the designs on the flowers are in the style that the concubines like.

The great popularity of *Story of Yanxi Palace* also enable the drama velvet flower producer, Nanjing velvet flower inheritor Zhao Shuxian to be known by the public. The velvet flowers for the drama were made with reference to the Collections of the Palace Museum in an effort to restore history. In Zhao Shuxian's works, Nanjing velvet flowers enjoy more varieties and forms. From the original family pendant as a manifestation of traditional art, to the extended elements of Hanfu style, and now to the window display accessories of international first-tier brands, Nanjing Velvet flowers displayed its own unique charm after the operation of Mr. Zhao Shuxian. He said that he believed that the ideal state of velvet flower technology is to keep original in the technique, but strive for innovation and advance with The Times in the form of expression, genre and Angle of entry.

Traditional intangible cultural heritage products must be integrated into the current life, only in this way can they be accepted with passed down. This attitude of actively adapting to changes in social aesthetics made Zhao shuxian's works to be of global popularity. At the Cannes Film Festival, Chinese actresses' costumes were decorated with velvet flowers; At the Milan Expo, velvet flowers and Italian handmade hats are perfectly combined; This year, he also cooperated with an international first-tier brand, and planned to display Nanjing velvet flower works all over the world.

Under the innovative efforts of Zhao Shuxian and his disciples, contemporary velvet flowers were not just confined to traditional category of headdress, plastron, furnishing articles, nor just the image of the flowers, birds, fishes and insects, rather they can be made into earrings, framed painting, a cartoon character, and even the calligraphy stroke to form the del-

icate "central scroll banners". Young people have also provided bolder ideas for the art of velvet flowers. In *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond*, Zhao Shuxian's apprentice Li Lu used glue to represent the water in the lotus pond. The vivid fish in the lotus pond were painted, which was never seen in traditional fleece-flower art.

"This is the wisdom of ancient Chinese. What we hope is that it will be passed on from generation to generation and will not disappear. The drama brought velvet flowers back into the public with wide attention. It is also my wish to take this opportunity to encourage more young people to join in and expand the ranks of non-inheritors." Zhao Shuxian said.

Nanjing Velvet flower has been listed in the endangered intangible cultural heritage list for several years, but it is still in the endangered situation. In terms of the future career planning, Zhao Shuxian said that now is the best time for the development of intangible cultural heritage, and he hoped that more young people would like to learn it.

To find a successor to Nanjing velvet flower-makers, Zhao Shuxian never collect tuition fees, but also provide free materials to teach hand in hand. But the requirement to learn flower-making full-time deterred countless people who wanted to learn. Zhao Shuxian frankly said that this is a very complicated craft, without determination and enough time can not be learned.

## 2. Beijing velvet flower

In terms of Beijing velvet flowers, it probably dates back to the Ming Dynasty. It is clearly recorded in the *Book of The Ming Dynasty*: There are 188 kinds of crafts and 11, 800 craftsmen. Velvet flower-making craft was developed into an industry in the late Ming Dynasty, with its peak in the Qing Dynasty, mainly for the enjoyment of court nobles. Not far from the Forbidden City, Flower Fair Street gradually became a distribution center for palace flowers products, hence the name "Flower Fair". Later, they created the figure of birds, and the velvet products inherited from Beijing are collectively called "velvet birds".

The expression form of velvet flower is different from flower arrangement and silk flower, both of which are based on flowers, but the production of velvet flower prototype is not limited to flowers. In fact, the making theme of velvet flowers is quite extensive, have all kinds of flowers and plants already, also have birds and beasts. The making of velvet flowers has a history of more than 1, 700 years, the earliest can be traced back to the Wei and Jin dynasties, but at that time, velvet is only a folk product. In the Tang Dynasty, velvet flowers began to gain popularity in the court, and quickly became the new favorite of the court nobles due to its rich forms of expression and eye-catching exquisite craftsmanship. In the old Peking people's impression, velvet flowers became a status symbol, because only the rich and the poor were eligible to wear them.

Tang Sun Lu wrote in his article: In those days when Beijing was called Peiping, velvet flowers were the most delicate handicraft. On Every New Year's Day, all would go home for the annual leave for celebration of the New Year. However, the staffs in the flower shop were busy all year round. If a master came up with a novel idea, he would secretly tie hundreds of flowers in a paper box made of straw row by row. When the flowers were brought to the temple of Wealth outside the Zhangyimen Gate and returned home with blessings, he would soon grab all of them. That year not only women with velvet flowers, is the general gentry tycoon burned incense into the city, cap also want to insert a few red flowers said has been the god of wealth blessing, blessing from heaven shen.

After the Spring Festival, the craftsmen would stop their work for two months. No later than early march, they would be busy in business on Jindingmiaofeng Mountain". The temple fair on Miaofeng Mountain in Jinding lasted from the first day of April to the 28th day of April for a whole month. Both men and women, old and young, as they were making something of themselves with head full of velvet flowers and gorgeous colors. According to the craftsman in velvet flower shop that the shop could earn a year's living expenses from a temple fair on Miaofeng Mountain, and the rest of the business was profitable in the good years. One year, Mr. Mei Lanfang made the first Kunqu Opera *Stabbing Tigers*. Before the rehearsal, all the friends sat and chatted. Some people talk about the appearance of Fei Zhen'e in her bridal chamber, and it is natural to dress up in the phoenix coronet & colorful embroidered cape and a pleated dress. However, the dressing in *Stabbing Tiger* is complex and it was hard to move as dressed with pearls. So a talented man came up with a brilliant idea. There is no need to use green beads on the head for decoration, all velvet flowers were tied into a phoenix crown with characteristics of light and convenience. A look of passionate horror can be displayed with bold thoughts. After discussing the style, they immediately asked the manager to order a phoenix crown with all the big red velvet flowers at the velvet shop in Dong'an Market. Later, they sang and sang on the stage, turning round and floating, just like jade wanton cloud, which is graceful and gentle. This is also a story of velvet flowers in Beijing

## 3. Inheritance and protection

### 3.1 Inheritance difficulties

The intangible cultural heritage of traditional handicrafts is endowed with strong regional characteristics and embodies

the unique lifestyle, national personality and folk belief of a region. It relies on people and is closely connected with people's activities. In the process of creation, it has high requirements on artists' craft skills. Therefore, the issue of inheritors is very important. Although there are a lot of handicrafts, the status of traditional handicrafts is not optimistic. With the continuous progress of modern life, the updating of science and technology, and the new way of life, way of thinking and aesthetic concepts, most handicrafts are in a relatively depressed state. A large number of "intangible cultural heritage" traditional crafts emerged and retained by people in different historical periods according to the environment at that time, in line with people's way of life and entertainment at that time. For example, shadow puppetry, paper cutting and traditional Chinese silk weaving techniques. However, the demand for intangible cultural heritage in our daily life is shrinking, leading to the gradual retreat of some traditional handicrafts in contemporary life, and even the disappearance of some excellent skills. Intangible cultural heritage skills are increasingly distant from our lives. In addition to traditional ways of listening to Kunqu Opera and watching shadow puppetry, we now have a variety of entertainment options. With the development of modern science and technology, we can no longer use only brush and rice paper. In our daily life, we also have many options for bamboo products, silk and porcelain.

In addition, with our changing aesthetic, our need for traditional crafts is also decreasing. On the other hand, with the continuous development of technology, machines generally take the place of human work, and the cost of finished products is low. Traditional handicraft can be achieved with manual operation with cumbersome process and long time. Definitely, it is impossible for mass production of a large number of crafts, and the rate of return is low, leading to craftsmen changing careers or no successors. However, some things are destined to withdraw from daily life, and not all intangible cultural relics are suitable for contemporary people's life. Many practitioners of traditional handicrafts are facing an embarrassing situation: their business is difficult to survive. Many craftsmen are forced by life and have no choice but to find other jobs.

Active rheology is an important inheritance characteristic of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, the development of contemporary intangible cultural heritage should effectively access to the market, becoming a circulating commodity with high added value and cultural value with smooth interaction with the market, as a result, mutual promotion can be achieved. The combination of traditional handicrafts with modern life is more in line with the needs of the public now, traditional crafts can continue to burst of vitality

### **3.2 Excessive industrialization**

The industrialization of traditional handicraft intangible cultural heritage and its rational utilization at the same time have always been regarded as the fundamental measures to promote the development of handicraft intangible cultural heritage. However, unfortunately, in many places, the development of intangible cultural heritage was achieved with excessive pursuit of its economic benefits. In the industrialization process, there is a lack of experts' participation in review and scientific vision, and the will of developers becomes the leading force. In pursuit of high profits, low-cost imitation damages the real art.

### **3.3 Lack of protection mechanism**

The protection of intangible cultural heritage is a long-term and arduous task, which needs the unremitting efforts of several generations. Norms on laws are required besides rescue measures. During the protection of intangible cultural heritage of traditional handicrafts, the governments should advocate, manage, coordinate and integrate the forces of all parties to balance various relations. Besides, they are required for engagement in the protection of intangible cultural heritage of traditional handicrafts. The government should actively introduce market capital and intellectual capital to jointly promote the protection and renewal of cultural heritage.

The government should not only formulate relevant laws and regulations, but also formulate a sound and sustainable protection mechanism based on local conditions. There are many kinds of traditional handicraft intangible cultural heritages in China. However, with the acceleration of modernization, these excellent cultural heritages are facing great challenges, some show declining trend in terms of protection, and some are dying out. Although China has launched a series of rescue work, but it is still relatively lagging behind, how to carry out effective protection of it is an important task given to us.

## **4. Conclusion**

From the perspective of "inheritance of intangible cultural heritage" and with the beginning from assistance for the Inheritor of intangible cultural heritage in poor areas such as mountains, plateau and borderlands for improvement of their vision and ability, through innovative modes such as design teaching in colleges and universities, more designers and brands can be involved together, and the incubation mode of new intangible cultural heritage products can be found, so that inheritors can maintain long-term cooperation with design forces and get more orders and development opportunities. Another

important aspect of inheriting intangible cultural heritage is to make young people like intangible cultural heritage. Through the design, traditional crafts, which were relatively conservatively made in the past, retain their core skills and combine them with the needs of modern life to form new products of traditional crafts in line with modern aesthetics, so that manual skills can be retained and intangible cultural heritage practitioners in poor areas can gain more incomes.

Fortunately, Retro culture has been on the rise in recent years. There are more and more young people wearing Hanfu, with hands carrying cattail leaf fan on the streets. and many traditional handicrafts are beginning to revive, which is coming back again to the main stream view. Intangible cultural heritage has long been more than a traditional cultural product placed in a museum for viewing.

The velvet flower-making technique is expected to witness the next boom. Just like velvet flowers, more and more intangible cultural heritages are coming into life, so that they can be replaced with vitality in a more “down-to-earth” way, and traditional crafts can be truly passed down.

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