

## On Sculptured Clay Dog: Inheritance and Development

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### Abstract:

*Sculptured Clay Dog in Huaiyang China, a kind of clay toy sold at the annual temple fair in Taihao Mausoleum, boasts a history of more than 6000 years and plays an important part in Chinese traditional culture. Beginning with its manufacturing technology and development history, this treatise expounds the artistic value, the status quo and the embarrassing current situation of Sculptured Clay Dog, and puts forward some recommendatory solutions and plans.*

**Key words:** Sculptured Clay Dog; procreation worship; Chinese handicraft; Inheritance

As the saying goes, “If you intend to learn the history of China in the past 1000 years, you can study Beijing. If you want to know that in the past 3000 years, you need to research into Xi’an. If 5000 years, you may investigate Anyang. For 8000 years, you must explore Huaiyang.” Huaiyang, located in the southeast of Henan Province, is the place where three ancient kingdoms were founded during different periods. In history it had also been made the capital of the nation for five times. As an important birthplace of Central-Plains civilization, the city possesses a great deal of traditional cultural treasures, one of which is Sculptured Clay Dog. Sculptured Clay Dog is a kind of clay toy at the annual temple fair in Taihao Mausoleum<sup>1</sup>, sold from every lunar February 2 to March 3 and enjoys much popularity among local folks. Carried over by words from ancient times, it has received wide attention as a unique form of folk art at the present day.<sup>[1]</sup> Because of the long history of its manufacturing craft and a strong color of totem worship, Sculptured Clay Dog is called “real totem” and “living fossil”, which, with rich colors and vivid images, has great artistic and academic value.

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<sup>1</sup>Taihao Mausoleum is one mausoleum honoring the ancestor of Chinese people, Taihao Fuxi, the greatest of the “Three Emperors” of ancient China. It is regarded as the No.1 mausoleum in the world.



### **The History of Sculptured Clay Dog**

More than 6000 years ago, Tai Hao Fuxi, the first of “the three emperors” in Chinese history, was born in Chengji (Tianshui, Gansu Province) and moved to Wanqiu, which is now Huaiyang, where he established his capital. Hence Huaiyang got the name “the Ruins of Taihao”. According to Chinese myths, when disasters frequently broke out in ancient days, there were only brother Fuxi and sister Nuwa left in the world. God ordered them to marry and reproduce offspring, so they made man out of the earth and became “Adam and Eve of the East”. The name “Tai Hao” is a description of Fuxi as bright as the sun and moon, while Nuwa was regarded as Goddess of fertility and reproduction because she created humans out of the earth.

Sculptured Clay Dog, “ninigou” in Chinese, has three Chinese characters. The first “ni” is a verb, meaning “to pinch and mould”, with an implication of intimacy; the second “ni” is a noun, referring to the material, which is similar to that used by Nuwa. Also, the many paintings of totem on the theme of primitive reproductive worship implicitly coincide with the plot of Nuwa-Fuxi story. Dog, the first animal tamed by Fuxi in the Creation myth, occupies a large proportion of the images of Sculptured Clay Dogs and hence the name. Besides, traditional Sculptured Clay Dog takes black as the base color, which also coincides with the narration in the myth that “Taihao Fuxi was fond of blackness”.

As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, Sculptured Clay Dog has been successfully added to the list of the non-material cultural heritage of the world, formally recognized as valuable cultural and historical wealth of all mankind.

### **The Manufacturing Process of Sculptured Clay Dog**

The making of Sculptured Clay Dog Generally includes six steps: selecting soil, hammering mud, drying, kneading, dyeing and coloring.

First is the selection of soil. The skilled artists are very particular about soil. Often they choose the soil two meters below the surface of the earth, namely, clay. The clay is molded into blocks, which are placed on slabs and beaten repeatedly with sticks in order to make the texture soft but compact and improve the toughness as well as the cohesion of the clay to meet the needs of the later molding. This is called “clay-hammering”, followed by the process of drying, which usually takes a few days. After the clay is dried in the shade, the artist will reprocess the treated clay and knead it into various sizes by hand, just like kneading noodles. Next, the artist shapes the clay according to the pre-designed image, mainly by pinching. The main image is created first, and then detailed patterns are carved out with wooden sticks, sorghum stalks or other small tools. It takes no more than several minutes for a skilled artist to finish a fist-size Clay Dog. The process mainly depends on the artist's experience: although the body and wings are relatively simple, the eyes or eyebrows on the head and other details rely heavily on the artist's proficiency. While small Clay Dog can be made with molds to save labor, some multi-headed or large ones need to be connected together with separately pinched parts.

Till this stage, a Sculptured Clay Dog has been finished only in shape; it remains uncolored. After a short period of settling, the interesting process of boiling and dyeing begins. Sculptured Clay Dogs are put on a large wire mesh (sometimes a spoon-shaped wire mesh) above a pot filled with paint, which in ancient times is made from pot bottom ash, rye seedlings and some special raw materials, all stewed for an hour. Nowadays, artists often replace these materials with propylene.

The process of dyeing is also called priming. As we know, most Sculptured Clay Dogs take black, the color of Fuxi, as its grounding color. The artist first uses a spoon to pour the black paint evenly on the Clay Dog, which is turned over and dyed again after one side is finished. This process looks very much like cooking delicious food, requiring great patience and care. All the Sculptured Clay Dogs must be covered with black paint and no origin color of clay is allowed.

The last step is painting. Huaiyang Sculptured Clay Dog has been known for its “thirty percent being pinching and seventy percent being painting”, which tells that the color modification is more important than shaping. The coloring of Sculptured Clay Dog is very distinctive.[2] In ancient times, artists used sorghum straw as a pen and looked for natural colors in nature, but now people use chemical pigments instead of ecological ones. Nevertheless, the tradition of using sorghum stalks as brushes has been inherited. The sorghum stalk, with a little hardness and soft strokes, is very different from the brush, according to the finding of our several tests. They are masterly controlled by artists to give birth to colorful and elaborate Sculptured Clay Dog.

Usually the Sculptured Clay Dog has been finished till this step, but nowadays some artists added another step---lacquering.

Traditionally the manufacturing of Sculptured Clay Dog includes no such step. The toys have been sold at temple fairs where people buy for children or throw them around house to pray for safety or fortune. They are made of clay covered with black surface, color being beautiful, characteristic of traditional culture. The problem, however, is that it is difficult to preserve, and they can fade and break up if kept for a little longer (traditionally, preservation is not considered, for they are just

disposable either as toy or totem). But nowadays, as Sculptured Clay Dog has developed into handicraft or tourist commodity, its fragility and discoloration become a major trouble. Some artists used lacquering technology to solve the problem. This treatment endows Sculptured Clay Dog with a bright color, making it more of pretty handicraft, but the original texture of clay disappeared, along with the lost of the cultural and historical peculiarity. Much to our regret, it seems that we cannot simultaneously eat cake and have it.

### **The Artistic Value and Procreation Worship of Sculptured Clay Dog**

Sculptured Clay Dogs are rich in shapes, which can be divided into animal and totem types. Animals are mainly queer lions, human-headed dogs, human-faced monkeys, straw-capped tigers and cat-pulled monkeys, most of which are highly allegoric. Polygon is another kind. Despite the name, there are actually unicorns, double horns, triangles, and even octagons. In terms of modeling they fall into male, female, and also hermaphrodite ones. While the unicorn or polygon male looks powerful and mighty, symbolizing masculinity, the female is flowery and gorgeous with Pink Oval drawing on the main body, implying reproductive worship for femininity. Femininity worship is also embodied by decorative patterns: fish pattern, mosaic pattern, sun pattern, zigzag pattern, triangle pattern and so on---variant signs of vulva.<sup>[3]</sup> The straw-capped tiger and cat-pulled monkey are especially interesting. The cat of cat-pulled monkey is actually a tiger, connected with the monkey length ways or width wise, mystically expressing ancient people's worship for this powerful creature.

In ancient times when human beings struggled for life under tough living conditions, their life expectancy was generally short. So fertility in tribes and clans was the greatest expectation for survival and prosperity. Mr. Song Zhaolin, a famous folk-custom expert, once suggested that Clay Dogs had existed for the purpose of fertility witch, because there was a traditional custom in ancient TaihaoMausoleum where Clay Dogs were used to beg for children. In those days, after praying in Nuwa Temple of TaihaoMausoleum, the women might hide a clay doll in arm before leaving. This doll was Sculptured Clay Dog.

Clay Dogs of totem type are mainly produced in Wuzhuang, located to the east of TaihaoMausoleum, Huaiyang. Created with rich imagination, this kind of clay dog is totally free of restrictions on shape. While the upper body is often combined by various animals' parts, the lower body is mostly columnar, with graphics and colors implying male and female reproductive organs. Similar to the tribal totem poles of Indians, it forms one kind of tribal totem cultures.

The patterns of Clay Dog, vivid or abstract, usually revolve around reproductive organs and animal totems; all lines are smooth and stretching. Similar to the totem symbols of many ethnic tribes, they contain primitive cultural codes and reflect the spiritual beliefs of ancient people. Essentially, the existence of Huaiyang Sculptured Clay Dog is an expansion of primitive art. As a typical but rare national art in Chinese folk culture, it faithfully records the development of human culture and particularly reflects the symbiotic kinship between folk art and primitive art;<sup>[4]</sup> it is of great academic value for the study of Chinese history and culture.

### **The Status Quo of Sculptured Clay Dog**

Nowadays Sculptured Clay Dog is in an awkward predicament. During the course of our visit, many veteran artists lamented that their children are reluctant to produce Clay Dogs and there are no more than 10 manufacturers left, while in the past hundreds of families in a village were Clay Dog makers and people went from far away to purchase Dogs on fair.

To solve the problem, the government had attempted to take advantage of the fame of Huaiyang as God Fuxi's Capital to promote the transformation of Clay Dog bazaar from traditional temple fair to a modern market. However, Clay Dog rid of religious significance only to be degraded into pure tourism commodity and can no longer enjoy popularity, so the production and sales are declining year by year.

The main cause is that Clay Dog industry cannot bring enough profits. Farmers often earn more from farming or working as migrant workers than making Clay Dogs. More and more artists go into other business offering more economic interests. According to the Huaiyang Culture Bureau, the number of Clay Dog practitioners has decreased from several thousand to no more than two hundred.

There is also a trend of polarization among Clay Dog practitioners. Those reputed artists who have won awards at home and abroad, such as Xu Guozhang, Ren Guohe and Zhang Huawei, can receive more orders and have larger production scale. However, some producers, for the sake of short-term economic benefits, organize production lines with family members and neighbors to produce low-quality handicrafts at lower costs. Their Clay Dogs have lost the essential characteristics of traditional art and reduced to mass-produced clay toys or handicrafts, which shapes become monotonous, uniform and the drawings simple, scribbled without novelty. Other artists, less famous and less productive, depend more on other sidelines for livelihood or totally abandon the career. Fewer and fewer young people are willing to learn how to make Clay Dogs, thus old artists are losing their successors and the inheriting of the folk art goes into trouble.

Besides, for the reason of the difficulties in transportation, many collectors and culture enthusiasts at home and abroad must go to Huaiyang in person to buy Clay Dogs, only to find the toys more or less damaged during the returning trip. This has greatly undermined the enthusiasm of purchasers.

### **The Development Strategy of Clay Dogs**

From my perspective, what restricts the development of Sculptured Clay Dogs is the fundamental problem of marketing positioning.

A sold customer groups gradually disappear, the weakbrand promotion failed to generate new purchasing groups, resulting in the shrinkage of market, which leads to increasingly fierce competition. The consequent price battle contributes to lower profits; thus a vicious circle is formed. The deepest cause is that people have not got rid of the traditional thinking that Sculptured Clay Dog is just a toy. On the one hand, a small toy is inevitably considered as cheap things and buyers will be very sensitive to price. On the other hand, when defined as toy, Clay Dog is deprived of cultural value and the problem of fading or fragility will make it less attractive than those many new modern toys,

whether it is transformers, remote-controlled planes or IPADs.

Thus, in my viewpoint, to get out of the current dilemma, Sculptured Clay Dog has to position itself as work of art rather than toy. Only as art craft can it have more added value, and then better design patterns and targeted packaging can be used to ensure that the Clay Dog remain unimpaired. The problem of packaging solved, we can further expand the domestic market, foreign market and even online shopping market. In this way we can open up a new situation where artists get enough economic returns and concentrate more on the quality, and young people also readily join in this industry. A virtuous circle thus begins.

Packaging is another concern. At present there is no any packaging on Clay Dogs, which are wrapped in old newspapers when sold at temple fair. They look old, dirty, cheap and old-fashioned. In my opinion, Huaiyang Clay Dog should strive to seek breakthroughs and development from the perspective of traditional culture. A packaging with religious and cultural connotation can be designed by the use of iconic ancient totem pattern and gorgeous colors. Such packaging may have a strong appeal to tourists. Optionally, the association of Fuxi's classic black with abstract and concise style might also be accepted. Exquisite package can not only express Clay Dog's own cultural value but also solve the problem of transporting and short-term preservation and make network sales mode possible as well. Thus a new path, brought about by the combination of traditional folk art and modern business mode, comes into place.

As a treasure of Chinese traditional culture, Sculptured Clay Dog has been regarded by Chinese and foreign scholars as "the finest dog under heaven". On the one hand, we must adhere to its own cultural heritage and properly position it as traditional work of art rather than low-quality tourism commodities. On the other hand, we should also actively explore ways for further development with modern commercial concepts. Only in this way can Sculptured Clay Dog fare well between inheritance and development.

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