

Research on the Challenges and Strategies of Contemporary Development of Seal Carving Technology

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Abstract:

Seal carving, a form of traditional Chinese art, although has been increasingly gaining exposure in recent years, cannot be viewed nearly as a popular craftsmanship in modern society. This study delves into means that allow the popularization of seal carving and thus introducing this niche art to the public, and the goal of the study is to determine whether embracing transition to cater the current society is feasible and encouraged. By analyzing different approaches taken by seal carving enthusiasts in the past and their significance and influence, the study explores what are the methods that allow promotion of seal carving. This study discovers that integrating modern adaptations to seal carvings is necessary, as it is an effective method in resolving some of the prominent challenges that seal carving now faces, which are the risk of losing inheritance, the difficulty of the art itself, and its marginalized market. This article hopes that this research can provide some value for the modern adaptation of other crafts and traditional culture.

Keywords: Traditional arts; seal carving; cultural preservation; modern transitions.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of technology in modern days has caused the marginalization of traditional arts and cultures. Commercialization is the new trend in this digital era, where many value the popularity and profitability over the quality of the product itself. The traditional Chinese art of seal carving is one of those craftsmanship that are gradually fading out of public's sight. Used to being one of those most practiced crafts throughout Chinese history, it is

unfortunate that many modern Chinese, unless have practiced traditional calligraphy, do not even know what seal carving is, and even if they do, they have merely heard about it. The reasons for such decrease in popularity is largely due to the lack of media advertisement, integration of innovation and marketing for seal carving. Therefore, this research dives into why seal carving should embrace modern adaptations to suit the dynamic society as well as keeping its influence as an unique traditional craftsmanship. This research is necessary because it explores ways

of taking precaution to prevent the loss of authenticity of a traditional art form that holds cultural significance. It also serves to be an appeal for the public to be mindful of preserving ancient cultural relics. The paper will first introduce what seal carving is, then explain the predicament that seal carving now face under the era of technology boom, and then elaborate on different approaches that seal carving enthusiasts have already embarked on and its impact, as well as drawing connections from history to demonstrate the continuity of certain business models that modern day seal carving companies can replicate, and lastly provide insights to the future of seal carving.

2. The Overview and Current Status of Seal Carving

2.1 An Overview of Seal Carving

Seal carving has evolved throughout Chinese history, and it served different purposes at different points in time. From the earliest form of stamps used by government officials representing their power and identity to credit vouchers in civilian lives and to a form of art practiced by literati in the past few centuries. In modern days, seal carving became one of the traditional Chinese arts along with calligraphy writing and wash painting [1]. Early as the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 B.C.), seal carving has served as the format of office seal intending for showcasing social status and demonstrating authenticity of bureaucratic documentations, and it is until the late Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1644-1912) where carvers finally forming their own seals with distinct styles [2]. Seal carving consists mainly of two styles of carving, baiwen and zhuwen, respectively meaning white script and red script. White script being cutting inside the lines of characters, creating blank spaces inside the characters' strokes and printing against a red background thus creating white patterns, while red script is the opposite: cutting around the characters to make blank spaces in between the strokes so that the pattern of the characters would be red when stamp against the red ink. Exceptional artists such as Deng Shiru and Wu Rangzhi composed representational work that remained widely appreciated even by modern seal carvers. Deng was known for his mastery of various cutting styles, his most famous style being yuanzhuwen, where he carved out thin, round lines with smooth curvatures around the strokes to form zhuwen [2]. Subsequent artist Wu Rangzhi, influenced by Deng, has inherited Deng's forceful yet fluid style, but has surpassed Deng as he developed his distinct style by perfecting Deng's former genre of work, establishing a more completed system

of calligraphy characters [3].

2.2 Seal carving in current circumstances

Seal carving in modern society has undergone major developments. In APEC China 2001, seals were presented as national gifts to participating countries, and in the 2008 Olympics, the design of the logo has drawn inspiration from seal carving [4]. Although exposure to seal carving has increased in recent years, it is imprudent to overlook the challenges that this form of art now faces, in fact, it encounters multiple difficulties for popularization in aspects such as passings of legacy, market value, and the complication of the art itself discouraging many to practice. In terms of passing on this niche art, there is a generational gap between young and old artists where there is a lack of continuity of passing down skills, putting seal carving at risk of losing its inheritance and tradition [5]. When compared with other traditional Chinese art such as brush calligraphy and wash painting, seal carving amid a far limited and smaller market due to lack of knowledge from consumers. As traditional arts such as brush calligraphy takes merely a dozen minutes to complete while seal carving takes hours, brush calligraphy is far more effective for artists to generate income. In addition, brush calligraphy works tend to have larger inflated value when composed by famous masters. Altogether, the market for seal carving is very marginalized due to other strong and stable markets for traditional arts, creating the phenomenon of seal carving pieces worth way less than its artistic value [4]. The complexity of seal carving disheartens novices to explore this art. The high benchmark of becoming a seasoned seal carver requires practitioners to not only be skilled at using the knife, but more importantly to have an artistic expression through their work and a scholarly understanding of seal knowledge. The lack of such talents in the field is the result of inadequacy of educational institutions introducing seal carving to the public, which would both raise public's interest and allow deeper understanding of the art [4].

3. Approaches for further development of seal carving

The following explores three different approaches in tackling difficulties mentioned above. Approach one demonstrates how new media allows seal creators to invite viewers giving their attention to seal carving through an appealing and entertaining means. Approach two then addresses the issue of seal carving being too difficult for the public to get started with by using the example of technologies reshaping people's experience with seal carving.

Approach three delves into the change and continuity to the seal market and displays several effective actions taken by companies to cater the modern day market, which would provide guidance for future marketing strategies.

3.1 Advertise through new media to raise public recognitions

Seal carvings cannot be kept to the carvers themselves. To advertise for such art, it should be made appealing to the crowd, and the TikTok artist, Wang Zhen, effectively grasped this concept. Through the form of TikTok livestream, he demonstrates his process of carving each stamp, while explaining knowledge of seal carvings to the viewers. He understands that in this era of technology with dense information, people online are not as patient as they are in person. Therefore, while a piece of carving takes on average one to two hours to complete, Wang strives to complete the carving within fifteen minutes in order to keep the viewers entertained [6]. As challenging as it sounds, this is also where he demonstrates his mastery of the art by showing his precision and speed to finish a piece. Not only through livestream, Wang also successfully adopted the means of short videos to spread his work. He knows that the beginning of every video is the most important aspect, as it determines whether the audience will continue watching. In this case, he puts emphasis on the beginning of the video by enlarging the details on the carvings [6]. By successfully combining modern technology and traditional art, Wang managed to receive around seventy thousand followers within a year, proving that spreading old art crafts with contemporary approach is not only feasible, but welcomed. With such innovative forms of showcasing seal carving, it ensures the passing of the art as new media bridges the generational gap by allowing younger generations to be exposed to seal carving more easily.

3.2 Adopting technology to lower benchmark and raising accessibility

To revive seal carving, it should also be made accessible to the public. This highly skill-demanding art discourages many to give it a try, thus making it a niche culture. Students from Zhejiang University addressed this issue by establishing an online format, namely “SealCreate”, which allows users to design their own seals digitally [7]. Simply by selecting the style of the carving based on numerous of renowned seal carvers throughout Chinese history, the thickness of the carved lines, and the width of margins of the characters on the seal, users are able to easily customize their own seals without having to know how to actually practice the skill. With SealCreate, the

sophisticated crafts have become easy, fun and accessible. Furthermore, as the program aims to simulate the usage of the carving knife, programmers use Apple Pencil to exemplify the actual blade [7]. However, since the program developers did not know how to actually use the carving knife, they purchased tools for seal carving and learned as they developed the program. It shows that by adopting modern features to seal carving, not only the public is able to learn more about this traditional art, even the promoters are able to further hone their knowledge on the culture.

3.3 Catering towards modern market for greater profitability

Adapting to the commercialization of contemporary society is also proved to be necessary through the example of the Xiling Seal Art Society, a renowned brand that plays a crucial role in traditional Chinese calligraphy. A student from Columbia University composed a research paper, “The Chinese Seal in the Making, 1904-1937[8]”. In her research, she introduced adaptations made by the Xiling Seal Art Society in order to stay competitive in the changing contemporary market, as well as preserving the traditional art. In the early 20th century, the rise of the modern commercial art market in China introduced both opportunities and challenges to the Xiling Seal Art Society. As a response, Xiling expanded its product offerings from conventional literati items, to art reproductions which allows non-literati to appreciate the art as well [8]. Moreover, the establishment of the Xiling Seal Ink Qianquan Seal Ink Distributor which specializes solely in products directly related to seal carvings also proves to be a success. It catered towards the public by serving those who use seals for practical authentication, which offered them customizable seals as well as personal seals with customers’ names on the stone [8]. Xiling by reinventing itself, making adaptations to the shifting market, demonstrated that it is possible for tradition and innovation to coexist. The existence of this marketing model from nearly a century ago indicates that there have already been attempts to preserve the traditional art from the influence of contemporary culture, as well as the effort to accommodate the changing environment. Therefore, seal carvers should learn from the past, and make adjustments to correspond with the modern world, thus to enable the promotion of this uncommon art. Aware of this notion, Xiling has now released a series of products relating to the Cultural and Creative Industries such as tea sets, souvenirs and collaborations with large intellectual properties. One of Xiling’s collaborations is with the renowned Chinese science-fiction novel Three Body [9]. Products such as the planet’s pushpin model and the incorporation of mystery boxes as one of their product

features quickly became favorable among younger generations [9]. Xiling has also shown a continuity in implementation of seal carving in modern day events by providing logo designs for major international events, for instance, the G20 Hangzhou Conference, World Internet Conference Wuzhen Summit, and the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games. On a local scale, Xiling promoted seal carving

along with building its brand image through incorporating carved seals at subway stations displaying the name of the stations through seals as displayed in Figure 1 [9-10]. By implementing the marketing strategy of catering towards contemporary society, seal carving is able to spread both domestically and internationally.



Fig.1 Seal pieces displayed at subway station through collaboration with Xiling [10]

4. Conclusion

This research investigates whether seal carving should adopt resolutions that reflect on a modern approach in order to address the issue of insufficient public understanding towards seal carving. The study identified three major concerns for this art craft, and by analyzing different approaches individuals and companies have taken, the study assesses the reason why such approaches are applicable and why it could resolve problems that seal carving face. The research finds that there have already been cases where the traditional art is fused with contemporary technologies and features, which is an optimal sign, meaning that the current goal is not only for those who have been taking the initiative to maintain in their endeavors, but to expand their effort to even greater extent thus allowing more to join the action. With that being said, seal carving is still not yet anywhere close to being as popular and widely recognized as other traditional Chinese arts, and there is still considerable progress remaining in the future to be made. Limitation to the study is that seal carving for being a niche culture does not receive much exposure, which means that it is unlikely to conduct and provide a holistic review on the current state of seal carving, including evaluating its performance or challenges thus the study may reflect only partially on the actual situation. For future scholars delving into the topic of modern develop-

ment of seal carvings, it is recommended to evaluate for any impact of AI or technological advancements towards traditional culture, for the future market and society could be very largely driven by improvements of technologies, meaning there may be new breakthroughs in developing digital advertisements for seal carvings such as softwares and apps. Additionally, future research exploring these new emerging tools may offer different insights and opportunities for seal carving to utilize in order to promote wider appreciation.

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