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## ABSTRACT

A distinct characteristic of the technology age is that people have more leisure time while the ways of recreation are getting more material and unified. Each step-up of technology has been fully used to produce more sensory attractive and lower unit-cost recreation products. In contrast, art recreation always means being highly devoted, creative, and brings great spiritual pleasure, thus it plays a positive role in keeping mental health. This paper reports on observations in a remote county in Northwest China. Though the local economy is underdeveloped, the folk art activities are the main way people spend their leisure time. The paper discusses how technology-independent art recreation spreads out and promotes people's mental health in this remote area. It describes the characteristics of folk art activities that promote mental health: general participation, good succession, complete devotion, and high creativity. It enumerates several positive influences of folk art activities. They include: (1) a way to keep a positive self-image; (2) an efficient way to cope with stress; (3) a bridge to improve social intercourse; and (4) some degree of personal psychotherapy. Each generation passes on the folk traditions to the next. The paper reflects on the fact that folk art activities worldwide are passing away, but suggests that the inner spirit of them should be kept when spending leisure time in this stressful age. (JDM)

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## Keep Mental Health By Art Recreation

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### Introduction

A distinct characteristic of the technology age is that people have more and more leisure time while the way of recreation are getting more and more material and unified. The promotion of recreation by technology is mainly reflected in strengthening of sensory stimulus, now people can buy transient sensory pleasure more easily. Their attention was transferred from stress temporarily, but they couldn't get real spiritual enjoyment and the relaxation was limited. Recreation in the age of technology is also highly unified. The majority are likely to be involved in the popular activities without sharing the quality of being initiative, creative and unique. one of the fundamental reason is that the age of technology is an age of copy, producers always chase the large-scale efficiency to maximize the profile, instead of caring for the spiritual interest of the individual. Each step-up of technology has been fully used to produce more sensory attractive and lower unit-cost recreation products.

In contrast with this, art recreation always mean being high devoted, creative and great spiritual pleasure, thus it plays an positive role to keep mental health. Sometimes it is even taken as a method of psychotherapy ( Gladding, S. T. ,1992, p474-477 ). But in the age of technology, while the stress become more and more popular, art recreation is flooded by material recreation step by step.

The following report is based on the observation in a remote county in Northwest China. Though the local economy is underdeveloped, the folk arts activities are very colorful and wide-spread, and have been main ways people spend their leisure time. Here, we are not trying to conclude that this art recreation can only get link with a non-technology age during which economy is under developed, but to provide a sort of reference to those people who are getting more and more involved with the technology age: How the technology-independent art recreation spreads out and how it promotes people's mental health.

### I. Overview of Folk Art Activities in Ansai

The place we chose is a small county called Ansai in North Shaanxi region in China. It lies in the inner part of the famous Loess Plateau, with an area of 3,000 square kilometers,

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and a population of 150,000. It is a place with poor transport facility, bad geological condition, serious loss of water and earth, and low degree of industrial development. The average income per person for one year is only about 600 RMB. But historically, it is one of the place where the Chinese nationality originated. there are 94 places of New Stone Implement Age relies and 81 places of Qin and Han dynasty culture relies.

Benefited from the rich cultural tradition, the folk art activities are quit outstanding in china no matter judging by degree of popularizing or the art quality, though the level of economical development in Ansai is much lower than that of most place across china. The most famous activities are: Ansai Paper Cutting, Ansai Waist Drum and Ansai folk song.

Paper cutting is a kind of ancient folk art form with simple materials. It's easy to learn but sentimentally expressive. The Ansai Paper Cutting shows the magical imagination with primitive and unsophisticated style. It's deeply loved by the general public. The works of Ansai paper cutting are often shown in national and international fine arts exhibitions and awarded many times. More than 1,000 pieces of works have been collected by the first class museums in china, such as Chinese Art Gallery. More than 600 pieces have been stored up in museums abroad. Paper cutting artist are often invited to visit other country. They also gave lectures in the Central Conservatory of Fine Arts and evoke wide repercussions.

Waist Drum is an square dancing art that has lasted several thousand years. The style of Ansai Waist Drum is rigorous and graceful, natural and unrestrained. It is one of the most influential drum dances in china, and once was awarded the highest prize in the National Competition of Folk Dance. In the open ceremony of 11th Asian Games held in Beijing, Ansai Waist Drum shocked and excited the audience as the starting program.

As the home of folk song, there are several thousand of folk songs which are well kept and still often sung by many people in Ansai. He Yutang, the top one of local folk song singer, has been called " King of Folk Song " in China. His songs list is countless, and his rang of voice is several degrees wider than " King of high C " Luciano Pavarotti. Recently, he has been invited to hold a solo concert in Beijing Concert Hall - the "Carnage Concert Hall in China".

## II. Characteristics of Folk Art Activities

### I. General Participation

Essentially, folk art activities is a kind of popularized recreation that everybody is delighted in joining in. Under the long-time nurture of cultural atmosphere, nearly all the peasants are embroiled into the local folk art activities more or less in Ansai. It's mainly males who take part in playing waist drum while females are usually involved in paper cutting and embroidery. It is estimated that one third of total population can play waist drum (Yu peng, 1994). There is almost no young man who can't play. Most of the villages

have waist drum team of their own. Every year many teams take part in the competition held in county. During the time when an activity was organized for making the TV series Yellow River, a team of more than one thousand people was easily formed.

As to paper cutting, it's as usual as cooking to a local woman. As roughly counted, the number of woman who are good at paper cutting amounts more than 10,000 (Jin Zhilin, 1994). As for imitating and duplicating, almost every woman can do that. When going around a village, you can find the work of the hostess on the windows and the wall in every house.

## 2. Good Succession

Folk art activities have long lasting continuity in Ansai. Take paper cutting for a example. the age of skilled master ranged from ten to eighty. Woman kept the patterns learned or created on the wall of stove by smoking so as to pass on to their descendants. When a old woman by the surname of Yan was immediately before her death, she put a lot of her beautiful works on the window and walls around bed, and left a pack of cutting patterns to her daughter-in-law.

The picture is more clear in waist drum playing. Old people act as coach, and mid-age serve as organizers. In a playing waist drum team, the front rows are the young man, the middle rows are the younger lads while at the back are teenagers. Such an structure is always kept no mater how time goes by, so that the organization of the staff and the quality of training would be well guaranteed.

Such good continuity ensure that "tradition" is well reserved as living fossil. One of the most popular cutting patterns - "knot hair girl" is almost the same as that on a Shang Dynasty ( 1,500 B. C. ) jade piece excavated (Jin Zhilin, 1985). And there is no deference between the dancing postures of today's waist drum and that on the bas-relief in the Han dynasty Tomb.

## 3. Completely Devotion

To the individual who take part in the folk art activities, self-enjoyment is the main, sometime the only purpose, while joining the activities, they themselves can gain great spiritual pleasure, so they are very enthusiastic.

For example, it's so easy to gather all the member of waist drum team for training that all the team leader has to do is to beat a big drum in the square, there is no necessity of any oral informing or order before. As the members say: as soon as they hear the sound of the drum, it looks that their bodies themselves can't help dancing. They will stop doing whatever they are doing, and rush towards the drum. To them, playing waist drum itself is purpose. Once they start dancing, they'll always forget themselves, this is similar with Maslow's "Top experience"( Maslow, 1968, p95-100). During the Spring Festival when waist drum team dance from door to door to greet the local people, they sometimes walk

half an hour to greet an out of the way family. Though facing to only several onlookers, they still dance with a high spirit and become sweaty. In their dance, then pass the joy and benediction inner their heart to the hosts.

So are the women's paper cutting and embroidery etc.. They make full use of all their spare time to create art works to decorate all the things that can be beautified. Even for some article that can't be seen by others, such as "Doudu" (a kind of underwear), shoe-pad etc., they still spend plenty of time to paint and embroider. While doing this, they are immersed in a world of arts. It was said a famous local paper cutting artist, Gao Jinai, can't hear anything even if calling her name loudly, although she is a lively woman, enjoys talking and laughing with other people during the rest time.

#### 4. High Creativity

The participants can fully reveal their personality and be highly creative while joining in the art activities. Ansai paper cutting reflects the miraculous imagination of the artist. If ask to express the same theme, different people will produce different works with its own style, differently conceived and showing unique appeal. Most of the artists usually create works according to their imagination by using scissors directly instead of using any draft. They emphasize being willful ( "led by heart") while creating. They mean to express feeling naturally according to the circumstances. For instance, the image of a tiger can be charming by naive if means to amuse her baby, whereas it will become ferocious and scary if it's meant to be put up on the door to ward off the evil spirits (AFHRS, 1989).

When singing the folk songs, people often improvise it. The most famous tune is just called "Xin Tian You" which means walk freely in the sky. According to the tunes with which most people are familiar, the signers always improvise different lyrics to express their own passion at that time. During the Spring Festival, when the waist drum team greet local family from door to door, the song sung by head of team are always based on different situation in every family, none of them could be completely repeated. As to waist drum playing, although it is a collective activity, a excellent head can not only evoke the enthusiasm of the members, but also improvise new movement combination and pass the information to every body correctly, then all the members will devote themselves to the new creation excitingly.

### III The Positive Influence of Folk Art Activities on Mental Health

The main content of mental health are described as: positive self-estimate, adaptation to circumstances and harmonious social intercourse( Wang Xiaodao, 1994, p18-22). Folk art activities plays an important role to improve all these respects.

#### 1. An Important Way to Keep a Positive Self-image

In a monotonous agricultural environment with limited opportunity to develop education and career, folk art activities became the important way for people to express

themselves and reveal their personality. In their devoted and creative art activities, people can enjoy total mental freedom, realize their own value, enhance self-pride and self-confidence, and keep a positive self-image.

A great support to their confidence comes from the respects by others. In Ansai, people judge young people by seeing whether they playing waist drum well for males and cutting beautiful works for females. People think that paper cutting is a symbol of intelligence and deftness of a girl, so that when a young man dates a girls in her house, his eyes would glance at the windows and the walls to see whether there are paper cutting works or not and whether they are beautiful. There's a very famous folk song which reads: "If get a daughter, she should be clever, pomegranate and peony, she cut them anywhere". If a window of a cave-dwelling was not decorated with any paper cutting, it would be called "blind-eyed window".

To a young man, playing waist drum is the best way to show his vigor and beauty, brave and dexterity. thus everybody pay a lot of effort to become a formal member of waist drum team in a high competition. In fact, the most beautiful ladies in the village consider certainly it an honor to have an outstanding waist drummer as her spouse.

## 2. An Efficient Coping with Stress

People who living in an non-technology also meet their own stress. They work very hard to making a living, but still have many problem concerning necessities of life due to the limited nature resource and under developed economy. It is Art recreation to provide an efficient way to reduce the stress caused by environmental pressure.

In folk art activities, people get spiritual comfort by letting off the sentiments, that is why the waist drum dance is always so bold and powerful, the folk song so sonorous and resonant, and the paper cutting so exaggerating and imaginary. When people are immersed in the art activities, willfully, the pressure in real life would be less pressing, less important and less irresistible. Being influenced deeply by the long-term widespread folk art activities, people have developed out-going character and sanguine disposition. Their self-entertained activities are called frankly as "rich enjoyment to poor life ", the Spring Festival Events as "happiness making".

In folk art activities, people are involved to explore and enjoy, express and create beauty. The beauty bring them far away from the monotonous and unsatisfactory reality and into an idea spiritual world. The rough outlined but decorative paper works reflects perfectly that how people cut, reform and beautify the ordinary things in their eyes of aesthetics: While the women are creating, the world they face to has been changed by a large exaggerating, organizing, abstracting and transforming, and various simple hut beautiful patterns stored in their memory before also have been made use of to decorate that world (AFHRS, 1989).

People get a new understanding towards life when they return from the art world. They know better about acceptance and thanks giving. When the time of harvest comes, people will hold celebration from bottom of their heart, although the things they got is far from rich. The most important celebration will be held in Spring Festival and it will last for a whole month. Spring Festival is the hightide for all kinds of folk art activities. Not only their bodies but also their souls would be relax completely and being renewed during that time, then they will start the fight for a better life hopefully and vigorously in the coming year.

### 3. A Bridge to Improve Social Intercourse

Folk art activities are so widespread that they have become a important part of social communication. And, as being held collectively those activities would enhance the group cohesion. Those who take part in folk art activities always get into harmonic social intercourse.

In Ansai, women are often seen gather together to talk about paper cutting art and techniques. once a new and beautiful pattern comes out, it will be popularized and improved among houses very soon. Within the Spring Festival, when women visit others to greet them, they always bring some pieces of paper cutting works which are treasured by themselves as gifts to present.

Wedding ceremony is the most important event in the village. Everybody will go to give a hand. Undoubtedly the local band and waist drum team wouldn't lag behind, even musicians from neighbor village would joint in, to "send happiness". Thus, one family's business is the business of the whole village and has become a joyful art recreational activities.

### 4. Some Degree Function of Psychotherapy

Sometimes a accidents in the life would cause a sort of psychological disorder. When this happened, art activities can somehow play a role to help the patient recover. There are several examples among those paper cutting artist in Ansai. the famous late artist Cao Dianxiang, had experienced a strong stimulus, when she was alive, her ears were deafened by the sound of a shooting gun. She got into serious shortsighted and suffered from several kinds of illnesses, she became old too early. But, paper cutting helped her restoring the mental calmness. Her devotion to paper cutting brought her a strong will and an optimistic disposition. In paper cutting, she found a spiritual substance to live. However, later when her right thumb was amputated for a disease thus she couldn't cut anymore, she pass away the next year.

Another famous artist Chang Zhengfang, had been well known in the area for her wonderful paper cutting work since she was child. She also suffered from mental disorders several years ago. It was paper cutting that comforted her. Whenever she was anxious, she just picked up a pair of scissors. She kept cutting as if couldn't be controlled until she felt

relieved. The interesting thing is that the works she created at such a time appeared to more miraculous (Shanqiao, 1994).

#### IV. Implication

In contrast with material recreation in the age of technology, art recreation always mean being high devoted, individually creative. For its great spiritual pleasure, it obvious benefit to keep mental health either for the people who living in technology age or those in non-technology age. In the home of folk art, tradition and collective atmosphere involve most people in art recreation. With a good self-confidence and harmony social intercourse, they enjoy their beautified life. It seems that the folk art activities are passing away from this modern times, but the inner spirit of them should be kept when we spend our leisure time in this stressful age: create something, express yourself, share with others.

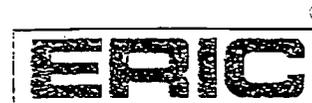
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