

Research on the Craft and Social Change: A Case Study of the Ninigou in Huaiyang

¹Yang Li, ²Sathit Thimwatbunthong, and ³Sitthidham Rohitasuk

Faculty of Fine Arts, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand

E-mail: ¹450444782@qq.com, ²sathit@swu.ac.th, ³sittidech@g.swu.ac.th

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Abstract

Crafts serve as pivotal social artifacts that intricately intersect with the domains of economy, society, and ritual practices. This qualitative study delved into the craft and cultural values of Ninigou, scrutinizing their evolution across different developmental stages. Employing fieldwork methods and in-depth interviews, the research aimed to achieve three primary objectives. Firstly, to analyze the transformation of Ninigou as a traditional craft within the context of societal changes. Secondly, to investigate the cultural significance of Ninigou and its societal impact amid periods of social change. Lastly, to explore the evolution of Ninigou within a global context by drawing comparisons with Sia-kaban in Thailand. The findings revealed significant enhancements in Ninigou pottery, attributed to the incorporation of ceramics. The infusion of acrylic paint has enriched its colour palette, while the diversification of shapes demonstrates proactive responsiveness to market demands. This evolutionary process reflected changes in reproduction, expression, and reconstruction. Ninigou symbolizes the protection of nature, ancestral nostalgia, and aspirations for future generations. It embodied the desire for agricultural prosperity and underscored the relentless pursuit of an improved quality of life. In contemporary society, Ninigou has transitioned into a decorative and entertaining item, serving as both a souvenir and an ornament. This shift from hidden cultural traits to outward craft features signifies a progression from sacredness to secularism, ultimately embracing entertainment. The study elucidated the intricate relationship between Ninigou craftsmanship and its cultural significance, offering valuable insights into the dynamic evolution of Ninigou within an evolving social landscape.

Keywords: Ninigou; Craft; Culture; Social Change

Introduction

Crafts play a vital role in daily life and are closely linked to rituals and the commemoration of significant events. For example, it can increase income and stimulate employment (Fatt & Bakansing, 2016). Likewise, as a multifaceted phenomenon, crafts are a means for individuals to cope with social complexities, share common understandings, express values, and preserve cultural heritage (DeMarrais & Robb, 2013). However, as social change intensified, altering cultural values, socialization and development, leading to increased individualism, abstraction and innovation (Greenfield, 2016), crafts were also affected by this change (Barrère, 2016; Scrase, 2003). The result is that there are fewer consumers of handicrafts, and craftsmen are forced to change jobs or move to cities to make a living. Importantly, traditional crafts and techniques have disappeared as craftsmen grow older and fewer and fewer younger generations are interested in learning the craft (Leesuwan, 1984).

Understanding the interplay between craft and societal dynamics is crucial for researchers. Ninigou, a traditional Chinese craft with a rich history spanning over 6000 years, offers a compelling case study. Despite its significance in Chinese culture, scholarly attention has predominantly focused on its artistic aspects, overlooking its evolving craft and cultural values in response to societal changes. This oversight is compounded by the lack of comprehensive analysis and documentation of Ninigou evolution, exacerbated by the ageing of inheritors and the risk of losing invaluable firsthand information. Consequently, the rapid decline of Ninigou poses significant challenges to its heritage preservation and overall development.

It is obvious that craft, as a form of cultural expression, is not only influenced by social factors but also has a far-reaching impact on society (Costin, 1998). As a traditional cultural craft, Huaiyang Ninigou carries and reflects the traces of social changes to a certain extent (Ruan, 2022). Therefore, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to study the interrelationship between craft and social change using Huaiyang Ninigou as a case study. In other words, this study not only helps to deepen the understanding and protection of Huaiyang Ninigou but also provides lessons and inspiration for the development of other crafts amid social change.

In summary, examining the nexus between craft, cultural values, and social change, particularly through the lens of Ninigou, provides valuable insights into the intricate dynamics shaping cultural heritage in contemporary society.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how the Ninigou, as a traditional craft, develops and evolves in response to social changes.
2. To analyze the cultural values carried by the Ninigou and their impact on society during social changes.
3. Compare and contrast similarities and differences between Thailand Sia-kaban and Huaiyang Ninigou.

Literature Review

Diverse perspectives exist within academic discourse regarding the definition of crafts, particularly in the context of social change (Pierantoni, 2018). Adamson argued against the traditional view of craftsmanship as static, advocating instead for an active dialogue that recognizes crafts' role in facilitating change (Adamson, 2013). Scholars generally define craft as a skill, particularly involving practical arts and often characterized by being predominantly handmade using materials like natural fibers, textiles, and clay (Abyareh, 2009; Rogerson, 2010; Shiner, 2012).

Several scholars have made significant contributions to the understanding of Huaiyang Ninigou, exploring its folk art characteristics, historical significance, production techniques, and creative themes (Yang & An, 2008). For example, some researchers have expanded the application of Ninigou by incorporating Ninigou motifs into shirt designs (Qian et al., 2016). There are also studies on the sustainable development of the folk culture industry through the example of various craft products such as porcelain (Zhang, 2015).

Despite its domestic popularity, Ninigou lacks international recognition and study, particularly concerning its relationship with social change. The researcher points out that the specialisation of handicrafts in China was not the cause of the development of political centralisation, but evolved with the development of social stratification (Underhill, 2002). It should be noted that existing research often focuses on superficial phenomena and ignores a comprehensive analysis of changes in craftsmanship and cultural values over time (Hou & Chan, 2017; Rolfe & Windle, 2003). The ageing of inheritors poses a significant risk of losing valuable firsthand information, further complicating efforts for Ninigou preservation and development.

In summary, the dearth of in-depth research on Ninigou, combined with the challenges posed by aging inheritors, underscores the need for a comprehensive examination of its evolution

in response to social change. Comparative analysis of similar crafts, such as Sia-kaban, offers insights into the complex relationship between art and societal dynamics, facilitating innovative approaches to preserving and developing traditional crafts.

Conceptual Framework

This study is qualitative. The conceptual framework of the study was determined by examining the craft and cultural values of the research subjects. The details are as follows.

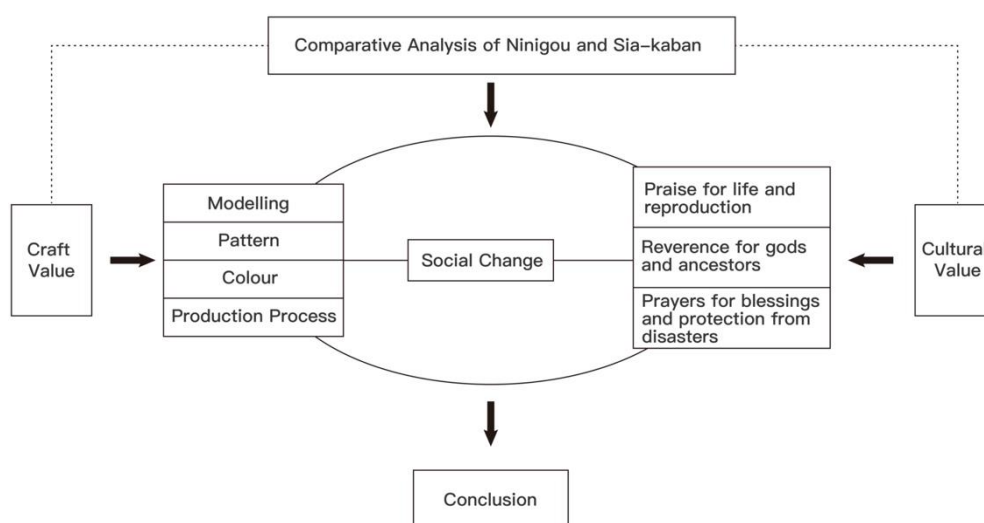


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework (Created by authors)

Research Methodology

In this paper, we studied different stages of Ninigou in Huaiyang District, Zhoukou City, China and the original type Sia-kaban in Bangkok, Thailand.

This study takes folklore as the basis of research to explore crafts and social change through oral literature passed on from one to another. The chosen research method for this study involved a combination of fieldwork and the in-depth interview approach.

Data acquisition was primarily accomplished through conducting interviews with artists who have made noteworthy contributions to the craft of Ninigou. These artists were selected based on their exceptional expertise and significant involvement in the field, ensuring that the insights gathered during the interviews would be rich, nuanced, and reflective of the profound aspects of Ninigou craftsmanship.

Continuing with the methodology, meticulous attention was given to ensuring the accuracy of recording, categorizing, and organizing the responses and opinions of each interviewee. The information was systematically arranged into two overarching categories, namely craft and culture, aligned with the questions outlined in the interview guide.

To gain a comprehensive understanding, a compare and contrast approach was employed, elucidating the perspectives of different interviewees. This method aimed to unveil both commonalities and disparities, providing valuable insights into the theme of crafts and their relationship with social change. The analyses adopted a dual focus with Horizontal and Longitudinal Analyses. Horizontal analyses delved into the differences among various interviewees, while longitudinal analyses scrutinized how the same interviewees evolved in their opinions over time on different issues.

In the presentation of results, a planned strategy involves showcasing the significant findings derived from the interview data. This will be achieved through a combination of textual descriptions, charts, and photographs, ensuring a comprehensive and visually informative representation of the research outcomes.

Research Results

Objective 1. The results showed

That there exists a diverse array of Ninigou models, many of which utilize age-old molds passed down through generations. Interestingly, this type of production does not impose excessive demands on the craftsmanship of shaping, as the molds are believed to be unalterable and under the protection of the gods, according to the local artists. In essence, Ninigou shapes embody social changes and manifest in three distinct stages: the imitation stage, composite stage, and commodity stage, corresponding to the shape characteristics of the original, composite, and modern types, respectively.

Primitive ethnic art primarily reflects a human perspective on the role of images, utilizing primitive tools to inscribe shapes and depict observed elements (Gombrich, 1995). In other words, expressions of the primitive type are determined by the productivity and aesthetic characteristics of the time, rooted in the early tribal folk culture formed by people's need for survival and hunting, coupled with their meticulous observation of the natural environment and faithful recording.

The composite type introduces more elements compared to the primitive, combining existing real-world forms with fantastical shapes. Another variant involves entirely fantastical

creatures, almost impossible to find in reality, creating a sense of absurdity and grotesqueness with a powerful visual impact. The modern type, predominantly crafted by artists attuned to contemporary characteristics, distinctly follows the changes of the times. While the techniques remain traditional, the visual presentation aligns with modern aesthetics. Noteworthy features of this transformation include personalization, trendiness, and entertainment.

In summary, the evolution of Ninigou modeling progresses from single to composite, and then from composite back to single modeling conventions, representing the reproduction, presentation, and reconstruction of social phenomena.

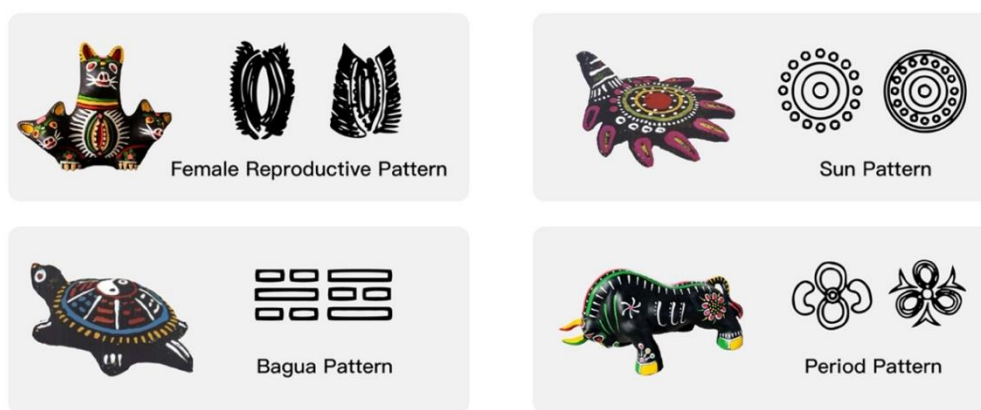


Fig.2 Analysis of Modelling in Social Changes (Created by authors)

The patterns adorning Ninigou in Huaiyang are typically composed of individual and combined dots and lines, appearing seemingly random but possessing a certain programmed rhythm. Folklore expert classified these patterns into various categories such as female patterns, sun patterns, flower and grass patterns, horseshoe patterns, rope-like patterns, and triangular patterns (Guo, 2008). Through field research, it is evident that Ninigou patterns have transitioned from programmed to random and from abstract to figurative in response to social changes. Presently, patterns exhibit greater dynamic beauty, with some even drawn based on the subject matter's structural elements, catering to contemporary market preferences. Despite these changes, traditional reproduction patterns maintain a solid position in the market.

Regarding colour, Shao Bo, a Ninigou artist, noted that early folk creations prioritized practicality over aesthetics. Colours were chosen based on common availability, and colour

coordination was not a significant consideration. Initially, plant or mineral materials provided colours, such as using black for potting grey, yellow for cattail, and green for wheat seedlings. The advent of acrylic materials replaced plant pigments, resulting in more vibrant and durable Ninigou colours. Contemporary Ninigou colours predominantly belong to the red system, featuring magenta and rose red to enhance colour contrast. Some artists incorporate the blue system for aesthetic purposes.

The production process of Ninigou primarily involves oral teaching and manual kneading by experienced artists, with the use of inherited molds for direct production. The four main steps in the production process are ‘Pounding,’ ‘Kneading,’ ‘Pinching,’ and ‘Dyeing.’ To address cracking issues resulting from natural drying, artist Shao Bo introduced pottery high-temperature firing technology. This innovation enhances Ninigou strength, lightweight nature, colour stability, and firmness. This approach not only preserves traditional cultural heritage and craft values but also introduces new styles and colourful sculpture techniques aligned with contemporary aesthetics, generating a greater visual impact.

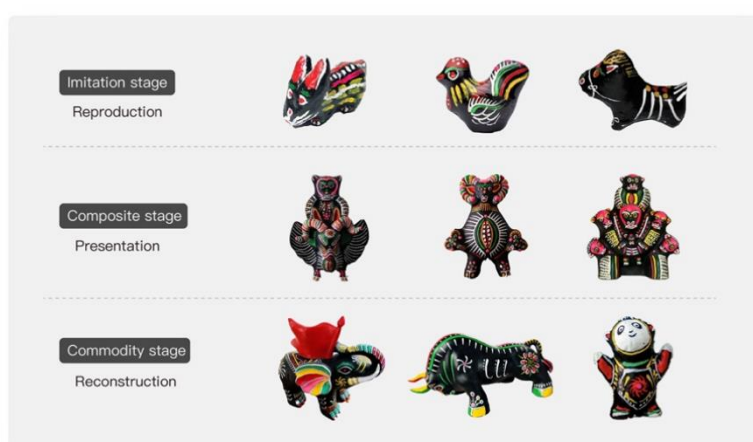


Fig.3 Analysis of Patterns in Social Changes (Created by authors)

Objective 2. The results showed

That society operates as a holistic, balanced, self-mediating, and mutually supportive system, where each part within the structure functions for the benefit of the whole. This system maintains a dynamic and balanced order through constant differentiation and integration (Parsons, 2013). Similarly, for culture to endure, it must contribute to human material production, socialize

its members, maintain social order, and remain adaptable to change in response to evolving conditions. The cultural value of Ninigou also exhibits distinct characteristics across various developmental stages. In the primitive stage, Ninigou serves as a manifestation of fertility worship and ancestor veneration, expressing primitive religious beliefs through the celebration of life reproduction. As society advances into the agrarian development stage, Ninigou acquires new cultural values, gradually incorporating real-life expectations and commercial considerations. In the modern stage, the cultural attributes of Ninigou become integrated into the modern cultural system, predominantly expressing aspirations for a better life. Another noteworthy phenomenon is the evolving scope of groups carrying the cultural values of Ninigou, transitioning from large communities to smaller units—shifting from the community to relatives and eventually focusing on individual preferences.

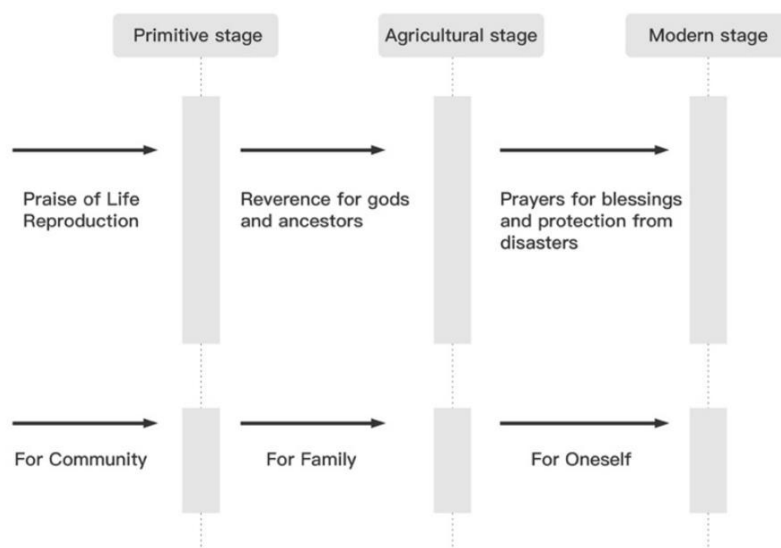


Fig.4 Analysis of Cultural Value in Social Changes (Created by authors)

Ninigou has undeniably become integrated into the everyday lives of ordinary people, serving various social functions. However, societal changes have prompted Ninigou to undergo the following transformations.

The cultural values carried by Ninigou such as the praise of life and reproduction, deity and ancestor reverence, praying for blessings to drive away disasters, and agricultural harvests were the foundation for the normal functioning of society. The reason for this is that due to the limitations of the ability to understand nature at that time and the low level of productivity at that time, the ancestors were influenced by the factors of primitive religious beliefs, the worship of all

living things and local farming practices, and the ancestors used Ninigou to support this belief. Nowadays, the content about praying for blessings and repelling disasters is even more only played by some old people in interviews. Young people's view of Ninigou is still more of an ordinary souvenir. In short, due to the needs of production and life, it has been continuously strengthened in its formation and inheritance stage, but in contemporary development by the influence of internal and external factors, so that the faith and worship of the past in the gradual fading.

Huaiyang Ninigou is made by hand, and the production procedure is complicated and the cycle is long. Importantly, the price of Ninigou in the market is low, which leads to the disproportion between the input and the income of making Ninigou, and brings about a decrease in the enthusiasm of the Ninigou artists in the production and inheritance, which affects the inheritance and development of Ninigou. Especially in the rapid development of society, this kind of inefficient handmade skill is far less than going out to work to earn more money, which leads to a lot of young people are not willing to engage in the Ninigou production industry, the production of Ninigou is mostly the old man in the scene of the lonely perseverance, which over time leads to the old craftsman's craft is lost, and is facing a serious crisis.

What cannot be ignored is that nowadays Ninigou a kind of historical and cultural value of crafts, in the modern industrialization period has appeared to be out of place, it does not have the modern industry required by safety, convenience and high-grade characteristics. Ninigou's hand-made, simple and simple materials, have been unable to meet the needs of people's modern living conditions. The author understands that many people buy them simply for fun or as souvenirs for travelling. Because of this situation, people's identification with this type of traditional folk crafts is not strong enough, which makes it difficult to form an effective and lasting purchasing power, and people's modern life needs to drift away.

Due to the lack of dissemination conditions in the context of the times, folk crafts have obvious convergence phenomena in primitive and agricultural times, making it difficult to show cultural uniqueness. However, Ninigou has developed through the ages, and today's lifestyles and aesthetic characteristics are very different from those of the past. In this environment, Ninigou is gradually exploring their unique style of expression in modern society, and the research found that there is a trend that the Ninigou is getting bigger and bigger, and the author photographed a giant Ninigou at the intersection of Huaiyang District.

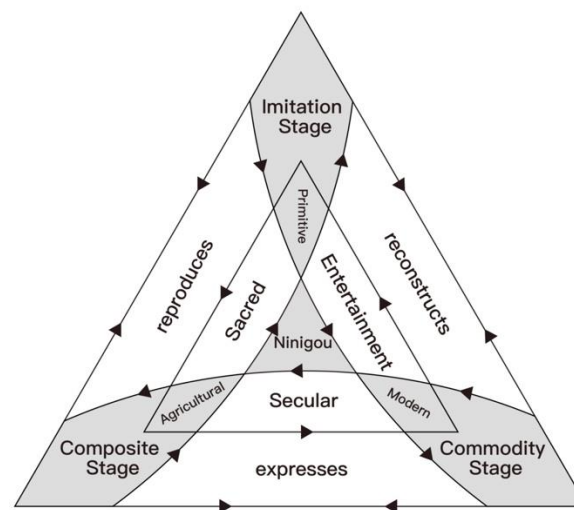


Fig.5 Changes in Crafts and Cultural Values at Different Stages (Created by authors)

Objective 3. The results showed

Sia-kaban differs significantly from Ninigou in both subject matter and form, as one is crafted to represent humans, while the other portrays animals. Further examination reveals pronounced distinctions in colouration, with Sia-kaban adopting a monochromatic palette and Ninigou featuring a multi-coloured scheme.

Sia-kaban, colloquially known as head-throwing dolls, originated from a historical Thai belief that spirits enslaved individuals by capturing their souls, leading to the person's demise (Sukham, 2018). By this belief, a ritual was performed during childbirth wherein a mother would hold her newborn and simultaneously simulate breaking its neck (Miksic, 2009). The ritual aimed to deceive the spirits, conveying the illusion that both mother and child were deceased, thus deterring any haunting by the spirits. Consequently, this ritualistic aspect constitutes the primary divergence between Sia-kaban and Ninigou.



Fig.6 Sia-kaban (Photographed by the author)

It is worth noting that the far-reaching historical background and cultural significance of Sia-kaban are dissolving in contemporary society. To my research, Sia-kaban has been largely lost in the market and can only be found in museums, and through interviews with some university students and vendors in Thailand, they are unaware of the heavy weight of Sia-kaban. Through interviews with some university students and vendors in Thailand, it is learnt that they do not know much about the heavy craftsmanship and cultural characteristics carried by Sia-kaban, which is unfavourable to its inheritance and development, and at the same time, it is also a cause for concern. The Sia-kaban is experiencing a similar plight in the development of society, with most people displaying it as a mere "decoration" and the cultural identity behind it dissipating.

Through a comparative study, the similarities and differences between Sia-kaban and Ninigou on the artistic and social levels can be drawn as shown in the following table.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Sia-kaban and Ninigou

Detail	Sia-kaban	Ninigou
Raw Materials	Soil and other material mixes	Local yellow clay
Colour	Green glaze type, white glaze type and brown glaze type	black, red, yellow, cyan and white as accents
Production Process	Handmade mainly with scratching, carving, grooving and other technical means	A combination of handmade and batch production
Shape	Most of them are figures, and most of them are women holding children	Animals as the main subject, crude and grotesque, usually 5 to 8 cm in size
Culture and Belief	They were used to deceive ghosts not to harm people and to send good wishes	Celebration of life, worship of gods and ancestors, and prayers for good luck and protection from disasters.
Social Change and Development	In the early days, it was owned by the royal family, but later it was mainly made by individuals, and its recognition gradually declined	Family-based succession with small workshops, relatively well developed and moderately recognised

Discussions

The development of the society is always changing the traditional culture, and the more the society develops towards the modern civilization, the less the traditional culture remains and the newer things are created. In modern society, people measure their activities more by real rationality. Similarly, since its birth, Ninigou has been closely connected with the evolution of the times and society, and its development has been inseparable from the development of the times. The different performances of Ninigou in different times are thoughts and reflections on society. It is precisely for this reason that Ninigou is honoured to be the recorder and reflector of social changes, providing revelations for social changes.

Analyzed from another perspective, that is, how to construct a mutual assistance model with the participation of multiple subjects, the author believes that the construction of such a mutual assistance model requires the active participation and unremitting efforts of the local government, Ninigou artists, cultural experts, relevant scholars, the media, as well as all kinds of social organizations and individuals, to form mutual assistance from the inside to the outside, and from the top to the bottom of the formation of mutual assistance – the government's legal and

institutional safeguards, as well as manpower and human resources. The government's legal and institutional safeguards as well as human and material financial support, the enthusiasm of the artists to participate in the national traditional culture and the emotional and cultural consciousness of the stimulation, experts, scholars, media and others play their respective advantages, publicity and appeal in the middle of the community at large, to cause the community at large to the modern reconstruction of the support and attention to the formation of synergy, to create a mutual assistance mode of participation of the pluralistic subjects, to stimulate its vigorous vitality.

In summary, the inheritance of traditional craft not only relies on its essence and the commonality inherent in human nature but also necessitates a foundation in the interplay between market demands and economic reciprocity. It involves a mutual permeation, transforming profound cultural implications into substantial economic benefits.

Knowledge from Research

- 1) Advances in the craftsmanship of the Ninigou have made it stronger and more colourful than the original, and the shape of the Ninigou has become more responsive to the market's needs.
- 2) The cultural values of Ninigou undergo a transformation from sacredness to secularism and entertainment.
- 3) Both Ninigou and Sia-kaban continue to embody people's aspirations and praises for a better life.

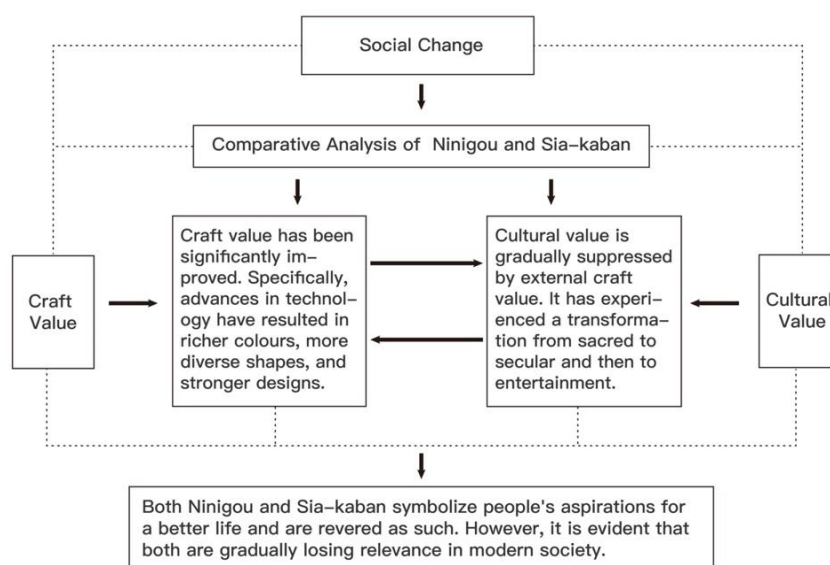


Fig.7 The Mind Map of New Knowledge (Created by authors)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the cultural values embodied by Huaiyang Ninigou have experienced a gradual weakening of faith, marked by a shift from its foundational role in praising life, deity and ancestor reverence, and agricultural rituals towards contemporary perceptions of Ninigou as a mere ordinary souvenir. Similarly, Sia-kaban has dissipated from people's daily lives and exists only in museums. This evolution can be attributed to the limitations of primitive religious beliefs, coupled with the impact of internal and external factors, leading to a diminishing emphasis on the traditional aspects of faith and worship. It should not be overlooked that the ageing population of Ninigou artists contributes to the potential loss of traditional craftsmanship, posing a serious threat to the heritage of Ninigou. Nevertheless, Huaiyang Ninigou demonstrates resilience through decorative and entertainment enhancements. While facing challenges, Ninigou adapts to modern society by exploring unique expressions.

It is evident that the inherent cultural values of Ninigou have progressively yielded to the externally observable features of the craft. This transformation signifies a shift from sacredness to secularism and ultimately to recreation. As Ninigou navigates challenges, its capacity for innovation and incorporation into modern contexts showcases its dynamic nature, ensuring its continued relevance in the ever-evolving cultural landscape. These observations offer valuable insights into comprehending the dynamic evolution of Ninigou within the constantly changing social environment.

Suggestions

In the contemporary era, the cultural practices of Ninigou in China and Sia-kaban in Thailand are increasingly becoming detached from modern life. This trend signals not merely a loss of traditional customs but also marks the end of cultural inheritance and exchange. To mitigate this issue, there is an urgent need for the integration of these cultural practices into daily life through more engaging and dynamic expressions. Such an integration is crucial to ensure that these traditions do not just survive but also thrive, embedding themselves into the modern societal fabric. This will allow them to continue evolving and be cherished by future generations. This approach is vital for preserving the richness of culture and ensuring its continuous transmission and adaptation in a rapidly changing world.

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