

The Value Implications, Realistic Dilemmas, and Practical Dimensions of Zigong Lantern Culture in Early Childhood Aesthetic Education

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Abstract: As a national intangible cultural heritage, Zigong colored lanterns play a significant role in cultural inheritance and local economic development due to their long historical context. The integration of Zigong lantern culture into children's aesthetic education can enrich the content and form of aesthetic education, promote local culture, and build cultural self-confidence; it can also cultivate aesthetic taste and promote children's personality development. Through the research, it is found that the teachers' inner motivation and the depth of cultural integration are insufficient in the process of the integration of Zigong lantern culture into children's aesthetic education. The external capacity of the garden society is not enough, and the real predicament of aesthetic education resources needs to be explored. In order to improve these conditions, the education process of understanding beauty to enlighten children's cognition, experiencing beauty to enhance children's experience and sensibility, appreciating beauty to cultivate children's appreciation, and creating beauty to activate children's creativity is proposed to promote the development of children's aesthetic education.

Keywords: Zigong colored lanterns; Zigong lantern culture; Children's aesthetic education; Practical dimension

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1. Development of Zigong lantern culture

1.1. Connotation of Zigong lantern culture

Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, Zigong colored lanterns have gradually formed the custom of burning lanterns in the New Year and decorating lanterns before and after the Lantern Festival. Its source is closely connected with the Jingyan civilization of Zigong. Then, relying on Zigong Lantern Fair to develop and grow, and integrating the customs of lantern fair in Sichuan, especially in adjacent areas, Zigong colored lantern culture has gradually evolved into a unique Zigong colored lantern culture ^[1]. Its prosperity is mainly inseparable from the inheritance of the lantern production process, the accurate grasp of the emerging art of the times, and the creative use of new technologies, so

that the lantern is more intelligent, vivid, and interactive, and enhances the audience's appreciation experience and cultural identity. Zigong colored lanterns not only carry forward the traditional beautiful meaning, but also integrate the elements of the times and the power of science and technology. The formed Zigong colored lantern culture is not only the spiritual sustenance for people to pray for happiness and peace, but also a bright pearl in the excellent traditional culture of China.

1.2. Characteristics of Zigong lantern culture

Zigong lantern culture involves creating scenery with lamps and conveying text with scenery. Each colorful lamp is like a miniature stage, which cleverly constructs a vivid story scene with lights, bringing visitors into a world full of fantasy and imagination. In the process of appreciating colored lanterns, people can not only appreciate the unique charm of Zigong colored lantern art, but also deeply feel the broad and profound Chinese culture. These lamp sets are based on historical stories, myths and legends, and vivid representations of folk customs, exquisite workmanship, and art models. "The production of colored lanterns is an extremely complex and intelligent process, which begins with on-site inspection and personalized design based on the characteristics of the terrain, aiming to finally present a stunning and large-scale three-dimensional mountain and sea of lanterns" [2]. It not only involves the clever use of silk, bamboo, porcelain, and other traditional natural materials, but also good at turning waste materials such as glass bottles, waste glass spoons, straw and other waste into treasure, combined with modern scientific and technological means, to create both traditional and modern, and complex and fine structure, smooth lines, rich color art works.

1.3. Realistic significance of Zigong lantern culture

Zigong lantern culture enhances cultural confidence and promotes international exchanges and cooperation. "Zigong Lanterns have been loved by many foreign friends since they went abroad in 1990. For example, at the Yue Hwa Garden Light Show in Singapore, Zigong Lanterns were presented with the 'first lantern in the world' banner by the then President of Singapore, Wee Kim Wee" [2]. In 2006, the Chinese Lantern Festival opened in the Amusement Palace of Ontario, Toronto, Canada, and attracted many local residents to watch it with its unique lighting sets and ingenious craftsmanship [2]. This kind of cross-cultural communication not only enhances China's international image and influence, but also contributes an indispensable force to the construction of a strong cultural country, driving local economic prosperity, innovation tourism industry development. Only in 2023, "during the lantern fair, the 18 A-level tourist attractions in Zigong City received a total of 1.0564 million tourists, an increase of 46.55%, and achieved ticket revenue of 54.3 million yuan, a significant year-on-year growth [3]. With the continuous promotion of Zigong lantern culture, more and more domestic and foreign tourists begin to pay attention to and understand Zigong, which opens up new space for the economic development of Zigong.

2. Value implication of integrating Zigong lantern culture into children's aesthetic education

2.1. Carrying forward local culture and building strong cultural confidence

As a national intangible cultural heritage project of traditional skills, Zigong colored lanterns are material forms with

both cultural and economic attributes. The production process mainly includes art design, lofting, manual binding, three-dimensional modeling, color separation pasting, etc. The main types of colored lanterns are tie-dye, paper cutting, bamboo weaving, etc. However, the low economic returns and the downturn in the lantern market have led many young people to give up learning lamp-making skills, which has caused difficulties in the inheritance of Zigong's traditional lantern-making skills. In 2021, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and The General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which clearly pointed out that the dissemination and popularization of intangible cultural heritage should be strengthened, and the content of intangible cultural heritage should be integrated throughout national education [4,5]. The colorful lantern culture of Zigong is integrated into the aesthetic education of children in a vivid and interesting form, and the innovation is carried out to adapt to the curriculum mode of the kindergarten stage, which is conducive to enriching the aesthetic education resources of the kindergarten. Taking it as the carrier, carrying out educational activities is conducive to stimulating children's aesthetic ability and imagination, and improving children's self-confidence and identity of traditional culture.

2.2. Cultivating aesthetic taste and promoting personality development

In 1795, Schiller, a German writer and thinker, first proposed “moral education, intellectual education, physical education, and aesthetic education” as the goals of school education [6]. In 1912, Mr. Cai Yuanpei, in his *Opinions on Educational Policies*, advocated that education be divided into five aspects: military national education, materialistic education, civic moral education, world outlook education, and aesthetic education, aiming at cultivating the sound personality of republican citizens [7]. In 2015, The General Office of the State Council issued *Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools*, which clearly pointed out that the function of aesthetic education in schools should be strengthened, Chinese aesthetic education resources should be fully tapped, and Chinese excellent traditional culture inheritance and development and art classic education should be given priority [8]. As an important part of preschool education, aesthetic education aims to cultivate children's aesthetic concept and initial ability to appreciate art. From the design of the lantern sample to the fixing of the finished product, from the appreciation of the lantern art works to the children's mutual evaluation of the homemade lantern works, each operation step helps the children's imagination, fine muscle movements, and aesthetic development, and then continuously develop their personal abilities in practice and exploration [9].

3. Dilemma of integrating Zigong lantern culture into children's aesthetic education

3.1. Teachers' lack of inner motivation and depth of cultural integration

Teachers are the guides, supporters, helpers, and evaluators in the development of aesthetic education teaching activities, so they need to clarify the value of activities, set the goal, control the dynamic of activities, and evaluate the effect of activities [10]. Through investigation and practice, it is found that the effect of aesthetic education activities related to colored lanterns in kindergartens is poor. The reason is that teachers themselves have different cognition of Zigong colored lantern culture. They equate aesthetic education activities with “art handicraft” activities and require children to mechanically complete “colored lantern artworks” according to teachers' demonstration actions, ignoring the exploration and cultural nature of aesthetic education. This obviously violates the initial intention of the fusion activity, narrates the cultural implication, and fails to give full play to the value of the aesthetic education activity with

Zigong lantern culture as the carrier.

3.2. Poor external capacity of garden society and unexplored resources of aesthetic education

As an important source of kindergarten curriculum, regional cultural resources should take their cultural essence, integrate educational concepts, carry out innovative and interesting education and teaching activities for all children, optimize the class environment of the kindergarten, and create the kindergarten's characteristic curriculum in exploration and practice ^[10]. For example, the kindergarten nature curriculum created with the theme of "rapeseed flower," the kindergarten characteristic curriculum developed with the theme of "Salt Dragon Lantern food," the kindergarten-based curriculum with the theme of "Yanjing culture," and the children's research activities carried out with the "journey of exploring the lamp." Through the investigation, it is found that most kindergartens carry out teaching activities, create themed environment, organize research activities, and so on when carrying forward Zigong lantern culture, and there is room for further exploration of the connotation of its culture and the development of local resources. The content of the characteristic courses between the parks is much the same; the practical and valuable goals need to be sublimated, and the logic and coherence between the themes fail to form a complete curriculum or activity system.

4. Improving quality and increasing efficiency: The practical dimension of integrating Zigong lantern culture in children's aesthetic education

4.1. Understanding beauty: Enlightening children's cognition

The rich colors, unique shapes, and profound culture of Zigong colored lanterns provide an excellent window for children to recognize beauty. For example, the theme teaching activities of "History and Legend of Zigong Colored Lanterns" are carried out to guide children to understand the deep heritage of Zigong colored lantern culture by telling the origin, development process, and related folklore and stories of colored lanterns. Organizing visits to the Zigong lantern exhibition or lantern fair allows children to observe the details of the lantern up close, feel the exquisite and complex production process of the lantern, and further experience the charm of Zigong lantern culture; carry out the language education activities of "Those things in making colored lanterns," invite the designers and craftsmen of Zigong colored lanterns to the garden to explain the production process and inspiration sources of colored lanterns for children, so as to increase children's understanding of Zigong colored lantern culture. This process not only opens the door for children to understand Zigong lantern culture, but also gradually builds their initial cognition of the entire Chinese aesthetic system and stimulates their strong interest in traditional culture and desire to explore.

4.2. Experiencing beauty: Enhancing children's experience

When carrying out various activities with the theme of "self-tribute colored lights," children can not only improve their aesthetic ability, but also gradually cultivate patience and carefulness, stimulate imagination, and guide children to feel the cultural charm behind the colored lights in the process of appreciating and personally making colored lights. This

process, in essence, is a process for children to “experience beauty” in an all-round way. For example, by organizing visits to the Zigong Lantern Museum or exhibitions, children can witness a variety of colorful lantern works. These lanterns not only have different shapes, but also integrate traditional crafts and modern design elements, showing a high artistic value. Teachers guide children to use environmentally friendly materials, such as waste cardboard boxes, colored paper, LED lights, etc., to give full play to creativity, personally design and make their own colored lights. In this process, children not only exercise their hands-on ability and spatial imagination, but more importantly, experience the fun and sense of achievement of creation in practice.

4.3. Feeling the beauty: Enhancing children’s sensibility

Feeling beauty is an important way for children to know the world and enrich their emotions and imagination. The Guide to Learning and Development for Children Aged 3–6 also makes it clear: “Young children feel and understand things differently from adults, and they express their knowledge and emotions differently from adults” ^[11]. On this basis, when designing the theme of “Zigong Colored Lantern Culture” aesthetic education activities, diversified strategies should also be adopted to adapt to children’s diverse senses and expressions. First, the activity should pay attention to experience, encourage children through direct observation, touch, and personally participate in the production of lights and other links, all-round, multi-angle contact with the art of lights, so as to deepen their unique understanding and feelings of beauty. Second, teaching activities should pay attention to the development of children’s empathy, using storytelling, role playing, and other forms to pass on the cultural significance and emotional value behind the lights to children. Third, teachers should continue to pay attention to children’s behavior in the learning process, and through observation, recording, and analysis, understand the growth trajectory and individual differences of each child in the perception side.

4.4. Appreciating beauty: Cultivating children’s appreciation

Carrying out various activities with the theme of “Zigong Lantern Culture” is not only the process of guiding children to appreciate beauty, but also an effective way to cultivate children’s appreciation. First, the Zigong lantern culture can be organically combined with the creation of the kindergarten environment to create a learning space full of an artistic atmosphere. In the corridor, wall, ceiling, and other areas of the kindergarten, hang or place a variety of Zigong lantern works or children’s homemade lantern handicrafts, so that children can contact the lantern culture at any time in daily activities, so as to realize the infiltration of aesthetic education. The second is the organic combination of Zigong lantern culture and kindergarten education activities, through a series of carefully designed activities, to guide children to deeply understand and appreciate the beauty of colored lanterns. For example, carry out activities such as lantern theme painting and hand-making, and encourage children to express their understanding and feelings of the beauty of colorful lanterns in their own way. These activities not only enrich children’s learning content, but also promote their aesthetic ability and creativity ^[12]. The third is to integrate the Zigong lantern culture into the daily life and festival celebrations of kindergartens, so that children can experience and appreciate the beauty of colorful lanterns in a broader context. Children can not only gain pleasure and satisfaction in the process of appreciating beauty, but also cultivate children’s appreciation, so as to enhance their understanding and feeling of beauty.

4.5. Creating beauty: Activating children's creativity

Creating beauty is not only an important part of children's aesthetic education, but also a key link to cultivating their innovative thinking and personality expression. Taking "Big Class Art Activity—Creative Lights" as an example, before the activity starts, it is necessary to prepare enough materials for children to make lights, such as paper, cloth, light pieces, etc., and the corresponding production tools, such as scissors, glue, brushes, etc., to ensure that they have enough space to play the imagination. At the same time, it is necessary to consider children's existing knowledge and experience of Zigong colored lanterns, clarify the core objectives of the activity, and cut into different dimensions of Zigong colored lantern culture, such as color use, modeling design, etc., in order to cultivate children's observation, practical ability, and creativity. Giving children sufficient imagination space, teachers inspire children to freely use their imagination to create, and invite children to share their creative ideas, in order to promote the development of their language expression ability. In the process of "creating beauty" activities, children not only experience the sense of achievement brought by the production of colored lights, but also deepen their understanding of the culture of colored lanterns and promote the development of their creativity.

5. Conclusion

Through the integration of Zigong lantern culture into the practice of children's aesthetic education, it not only enriches the content and form of aesthetic education, but also stimulates children's cognition, experience, feeling, appreciation, and creativity of beauty. Sowing in the hearts of children is like the germination of the flower of art, and the innovative practice of children's aesthetic education provides fertile soil and sufficient sunshine and rain for this seed. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to deepen the research on the traditional culture represented by Zigong lantern culture, explore more effective inheritance and innovation ways, and let the traditional culture bloom more brilliantly in early childhood education.

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