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Amateur decorative and applied arts as a space for preserving cultural heritage of Belarus and China

Abstract. The article examines the role of amateur decorative and applied arts as an essential but often underestimated institution for preserving national cultural heritage. Using examples from Belarus and China, it demonstrates how amateur practices, unlike museumified or commercialized forms, ensure continuity of tradition, its adaptation to modern conditions and retransmission through everyday practices. Special attention is given to how these amateur forms of artistic activity contribute to the preservation of meanings, techniques and aesthetic principles that escape formal institutional approaches.

Keywords: decorative and applied arts, amateur art, non-professional practices, folk art, cultural heritage, traditional crafts, historical memory, collective memory and national identity, Belarus, China.

In the context of globalization in today's world, the problem of preserving national-cultural heritage becomes particularly relevant. Modern official institutions – museums, exhibition halls, government programs supporting cultural heritage, etc. – primarily focus on its “canonization”, forming a normative and standardized image of traditions. National traditions continue to live and develop outside official frameworks within the sphere of non-professional practices, where amateur forms of creativity perform the function of direct recreation and actualization of folk culture. Amateur decorative and applied art serves as a unique “laboratory” for preserving and transforming traditions, combining historical memory, aesthetic principles and active involvement of participants.

Despite their obvious significance for society's cultural life, amateur practices remain insufficiently studied as an independent phenomenon in academic literature. Researchers primarily concentrate either on historical artifacts or the work of renowned masters, while amateur, non-professional forms of decorative and applied art remain marginalized in scientific interest.

The aim of this article is to identify specific features and mechanisms of functioning of amateur decorative and applied art as a space for preserving cultural heritage in Belarus and China based on comparative analysis. To achieve this goal, methods of comparative-historical analysis, systemic approach and elements of visual anthropology are employed, allowing for a comprehensive examination of practices, symbolism and social dimensions of amateur creative activities.

The theoretical framework of this study relies on a significant shift in contemporary humanities related to the reinterpretation of the very concept of cultural heritage. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, a museum-object paradigm

prevailed, wherein heritage was conceptualized as a material artifact worthy of preservation and exhibition. However, since the late 20th century, a new anthropocentric perspective has emerged, associated with the notion of "intangible cultural heritage". This turn was institutionalized by UNESCO's Convention of 2003 on the Safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, which defines heritage as "the totality of practices, skills, representations, knowledge constantly reproduced in communities and constituting the basis of their cultural identity" [10].

Following UNESCO's definition, cultural heritage began to be regarded not only as a fixed object but also as a living and dynamic phenomenon integrated into daily life and sustained through routine activities. It exists not in isolation behind museum displays but rather in the realm of social interactions. This approach allows for acknowledging diverse local expressions and recognizing the value of amateur and informal initiatives as legitimate bearers of cultural memory. Amateur creativity thus emerges as a medium where "living heritage" manifests itself in a special form – informal, everyday, free from rigid institutional constraints yet capable of shaping cultural memory and ensuring intergenerational transmission.

Amateur decorative and applied art is defined in scholarly literature as "non-commercial activity focused primarily on self-realization and internal cultural need, resulting in objects grounded in local traditional techniques, aesthetics and symbolism" [4, p. 8]. This type of creativity fundamentally differs from professional art due to the absence of market logic and strict canons. Nevertheless, it performs a crucial cultural mission because it ensures reproduction of traditional knowledge, strengthens local identity and acts as an effective means of communication between past and present.

Under such an approach, the concept of cultural memory developed by J. Assman [1] and P. Nora [8] proves to be the most productive methodological construct for analyzing amateur decorative and applied art. While official memory is embodied in monuments, museum exhibits and generally accepted historical interpretations, communicative memory operates at the level of everyday experience, becoming embedded in language, family traditions and manual practices [1, p. 134]. From this perspective, creating embroidery, ceramics, or wood carving at home may be viewed as a way of storing and transmitting memory, where symbolic and material aspects are inextricably intertwined.

Thus, amateur creativity in the field of decorative and applied arts turns out to be a space where different levels of cultural heritage intersect. Firstly, there are institutional ones connected with official recognition and protection of cultural traditions; secondly, everyday ones rooted in living informal practice. Amateur creativity shows how intangible heritage acquires both material form and symbolic meaning in concrete objects – embroideries, ceramic items, carved household utensils – not as museum exhibits but as evidence of ongoing, vibrant cultural processes.

Amateur decorative and applied art holds particular importance in both Belarusian and Chinese cultures. Both societies have experienced periods of intensive modernization and cultural transformations when official institutions frequently documented the "large" forms of cultural heritage, leaving the "small"

ones unnoticed. However, "it is precisely these 'small' practices existing in everyday life and within the domain of amateur creativity that serve as reliable mediators between past and future" [3, p. 110]. Their significance lies not only in preserving ethno-cultural traditions but also in enabling individuals to feel connected to folk culture and experience a bond with their native land. All this makes it possible to view amateur decorative and applied art not as a secondary aspect of cultural life but as a key element in the process of safeguarding and transmitting cultural heritage in both countries.

Belarusian decorative and applied art occupies a special place in the system of national culture, as craft practices have fully expressed forms of collective memory and national identity. Traditional techniques such as embroidery, weaving, pottery, woodcarving, straw plaiting and willow basketry evolved over centuries as organic components of peasant life, reflecting ideas about harmony between humans and nature, sacred symbols and community social codes. These practices existed predominantly within everyday contexts, "meeting functional needs of families and villages and gradually acquiring the status of artistic creation in the modern sense" [8, p. 101].

Historically, the genesis of amateur decorative and applied art in Belarus is linked to the evolution of traditional crafts. Under agrarian economic conditions, domestic crafts provided a substantial portion of the material needs of peasant households. The production of fabrics, tableware, tools and adornments became integral parts of everyday life. "Each item carried aesthetic symbols and cultural codes embedded in ornamentation, iconography and materials" [7]. These signs passed down through generations embodied not just aesthetic traditions but also served as forms of collective memory.

During the Soviet period, amateur decorative and applied art acquired a new institutional dimension. Houses and palaces of culture, along with art circles, incorporated it into mass leisure activities and cultural education. On one hand, this contributed to the preservation of many traditional skills, making them accessible to broader segments of the population. On the other hand, the process involved some standardization and loss of regional specificity, as "state cultural policy aimed to integrate folk art into a unified cultural space" [9, p. 124]. Despite these contradictions, the Soviet experience helped establish amateur art as a significant component of national culture, laying the groundwork for its subsequent revival in independent Belarus.

In the post-Soviet era, international discussions concerning intangible cultural heritage gained particular relevance. By joining UNESCO's Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, the Republic of Belarus included elements representative of major traditions in its national list, including straw plaiting technology and vytynanka – a unique art of intricate paper cutting. However, it is important to note that this official level of heritage documentation does not exhaust the diversity of Belarusian people's artistic life, as a broad layer of amateur decorative and applied art continues to exist beyond institutional boundaries, representing genuine "living heritage".

The most illustrative examples include traditional Belarusian embroidery, straw plaiting and ceramics, which persist in local communities, often outside institutional frameworks. These crafts thrive within family circles of master-artisans who pass skills from older generations to younger ones, in school-based and cultural house workshops dedicated to decorative and applied arts, and during ethnographic festivals and exhibitions showcasing folk creativity.

For instance, Belarusian embroidery, deeply rooted in ethnic culture, represents more than merely a decorative practice – it is a form of cultural memory encoding mythopoeic perceptions of the world. Ornamental symbolism – solar signs, rhombuses, fertility motifs and the "tree of life" – serves as a means of transmitting knowledge and values uniting generations [7]. Thus, embroidery becomes an embodiment of tradition firmly entrenched in national culture. In terms of P. Nora, it exemplifies a form of "communicative memory linking everyday experience with cultural tradition" [8, p. 88].

Straw plaiting, developed in Belarus as a craft closely tied to rural life cycles, illustrates the operation of *habitus*⁷⁴ described by P. Bourdieu [2]. Skill in working with straw cannot be learned solely rationally; instead, it is anchored in a "sense of material", formed from childhood. Here, *habitus* manifests as the ability to automatically select appropriate twisting techniques, know exactly how much effort to apply and balance density and flexibility of the material.

Ceramics also serves as a space for intergenerational skill transfer. The ability to mold clay, perceive its plasticity and work on a potter's wheel develops not through verbal instructions but through bodily practice, observation and repetition after a master. Such learning forms vividly illustrate what M. Polanyi called "tacit knowledge", i.e., knowledge that cannot be fully articulated but lives in action, gesture and bodily memory [5, p. 55].

These and other forms of amateur creativity demonstrate that folk culture in Belarus persists not only in a fixed, "canonized" form but also through the process of living transmission – through everyday creativity, training and joint participation in cultural initiatives. It should be noted here that a critical condition for revitalizing and sustaining traditional art crafts and industries involves establishing mechanisms for transferring and perpetuating cultural practices. The familial model, where knowledge and skills were transmitted from generation to generation within domestic settings, is gradually losing its relevance. Alternative support forms emerge, focusing not only on preserving craft techniques but also integrating them into the modern cultural and economic environment. Specialized institutions – houses and centers of craftsmanship – play a pivotal role in this process, existing in every region of Belarus and serving as platforms for training, creative exchange and promotion of local traditions.

China boasts one of the oldest and richest traditions of decorative and applied art, where folk creativity has shaped societal cultural codes over centuries. Despite processes of modernization and globalization, amateur forms of decorative and

⁷⁴ *Habitus* (from Latin *habitus* – appearance, exterior) refers in socio-humanitarian studies to habitual ways of acting.

applied art continue to exist in contemporary China, playing a vital role in preserving intangible cultural heritage. Unlike Belarus, where many types of traditional crafts have lost their once-primary practical, utilitarian, ritualistic, or ceremonial functions, Chinese folk art maintains a direct connection to the daily life of local communities, especially rural ones.

Three areas of decorative and applied art hold particular significance in Chinese culture: traditional papercutting (剪纸 *jiǎnzhǐ*), folk ceramics and traditional embroidery as widespread amateur practices. Each direction illustrates how cultural memory, habitus and tacit knowledge are embodied in everyday skills and material forms.

Papercutting, prevalent in rural regions of China, exemplifies "communicative memory". These ornate designs adorning windows and houses during festivities encode collective notions of happiness, longevity and harmony. Passed down through generations, the technique preserves enduring symbolism (dragons, phoenixes, floral patterns), bridging past and present. Here, "cultural memory is preserved not in official monuments but in household decoration, alive in the hands of amateurs and family masters" [12, p. 89].

Folk ceramics, particularly prominent in provinces like Shanxi (山西省), Jiangsu (江苏省) and Zhejiang (浙江省), exemplify the resilience of craft practices deeply rooted in localized cultural spaces. These forms of material creativity endure less through formal instruction than through direct skill transmission – observation, repetition, collaborative work with a master. The ability to handle clay, sense its malleability, control the movement of a potter's wheel – these skills cannot be conveyed exclusively verbally. In this regard, folk ceramics "serve not only as an artistic practice but also as an epistemological phenomenon revealing the boundary between formalized knowledge and embodied intuition", according to M. Polanyi [6, p. 94].

Embroidery in China has a millennium-long history and remains an integral part of daily life in both rural and urban communities. It is used not only for clothing decoration but also for creating household items such as pillows, tablecloths, storage pouches and ritual fabrics. Many techniques, such as Su embroidery (苏绣 *Sū xiù*), are passed down through generations and retain regional characteristics. Embroidery continues to play a significant role in social and family interaction – it is a component of dowries, holiday gifts and symbolic rituals, thereby maintaining connections between tradition and contemporary life. As a widely practiced amateur form, embroidery becomes not only an artistic skill but also a meditative and self-defining practice [11, p. 146].

Therefore, Chinese amateur decorative and applied art transcends mere "hobby," becoming a dependable conduit between past and future, tradition and modern forms of identity. It plays a crucial role in strengthening cultural memory and social integration, balancing the local and global dynamics in Chinese culture.

Overall, amateur decorative and applied art in both Belarus and China must be seen as a dynamic space for preserving and transforming cultural heritage. Not only does it facilitate the transmission of traditional skills and symbolism, but it also

creates opportunities for their reinterpretation in contemporary realities. In these practices, memory merges with personal experience, tradition with innovation and local identity with processes of globalization.

A comparative review of Belarusian and Chinese amateur decorative and applied art reveals universal patterns in the processes of preserving cultural heritage, as well as specific features determined by the uniqueness of each country's cultural traditions. Despite differences in historical trajectories, both models exhibit functional similarities reflected in mechanisms of socialization, responses to challenges posed by the digital age and degrees of integration of traditional crafts and artistic practices into daily social and economic activities, as evidenced in craft festivals, educational initiatives and cross-cultural exchanges.

Both in Belarus and China, amateur decorative and applied art fulfills a significant *socialization* function, serving as a channel for individual inclusion into local communities and simultaneously providing access to the broader cultural tradition of the nation. Although certain distinctions exist, similar mechanisms of transmission prevail in both cases, where amateur creative practice acts as a mediator between individual self-realization and collective cultural memory, confirming J. Assman's thesis that cultural identity is reinforced through "repeated memory practices" [1, p. 124].

Modern urbanization and digitization create a new social demand for "*authenticity*" and "*handmade work*". In Belarus, this trend is evident in increased urban interest in workshops for ceramics, straw plaiting, weaving, etc. (Figs. 1-4⁷⁵), perceived not so much as utilitarian skills but as a way to connect with cultural roots. China demonstrates a similar dynamic, as traditional embroidery or making decorative paper objects becomes popular among middle-class city dwellers seeking a balance between technological routines and cultural traditions. In both cases, "handcrafted work" acquires symbolic capital (as per P. Bourdieu), contrasting with mass industrial production and satisfying the need for cultural distinctiveness.

The decisive role in preserving traditions belongs to the *family* and *local* environments, which naturally serve as spaces for transmitting cultural experiences. It is here, in the setting of domestic interactions, craft workshops and small communities, that a unique stratum of "living knowledge" is formed and maintained, defying complete institutionalization. Unlike museum exhibitions or formal educational programs, this transmission is based on personal engagement, shared activities and body-touch skills consolidated in practice. Amateur decorative and applied art demonstrates that "living heritage" is, above all, a practice that continues and evolves in the hands of people.

In Belarus, traditional crafts are passed down from generation to generation within families of artisans and through apprenticeship systems.

In rural communities of China, traditions of papercutting, embroidery, ceramics, etc., continue to exist, being utilized in daily life and serving to decorate houses, celebrate holidays and mark local events. In both cases, involvement in the realm of craft production guarantees the preservation of "tactile knowledge", which

⁷⁵ Figs.1-5. Photos by the author of the article.

is transferred through collaborative practice. Consequently, the family emerges as the central figure in the system of "living heritage", while the domestic space becomes the primary arena for its reproduction.



Figs. 1-4. Workshops. Museum of folk crafts "Dudutki", Ptich village, Pukhovichsky district, 2025.

These identified universal patterns confirm that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage cannot rely solely on institutional measures but requires embedding in daily life. Nonetheless, despite the undeniable significance of amateur decorative and applied art, it faces several challenges in both countries.

One challenge is *the process of commercialization*. Numerous craft practices transform into souvenir production targeting tourist markets. This leads to authenticity loss as ornaments and symbolism become simplified, techniques standardized and sacral meanings reduced to purely decorative purposes. Consequently, "living heritage" risks turning into "stylized heritage", severing ties with deep-seated cultural codes.

Another challenge relates to *intergenerational knowledge transfer*. Young people increasingly devalue craft practices, opting for global forms of leisure and self-realization. Even though clubs and festivals are preserved, there is a shortage of succession, as skills previously cultivated within family and local environments are gradually disappearing.

Thirdly, achieving *a balance between institutionalization and spontaneous creativity* poses another issue. Government programs for safeguarding intangible heritage document and sustain certain traditions, yet risk formalizing them. Amateur creativity, meanwhile, remains more flexible and lively but often lacks sufficient

support. Combining these two levels – institutional and spontaneous – is one of the main tasks facing cultural policies in both Belarus and China.

Consequently, the conducted analysis demonstrated that amateur decorative and applied art in Belarus and China serves as a vital space for preserving "living heritage", where tradition does not stagnate as a museum exhibit but continues to exist and evolve through practice. Unlike professional art or commercial crafts, amateur decorative and applied creativity retains a direct link to everyday life, local communities and embodied memory. Amateur creativity engages in dialogue with the past rather than simply conserving it. It adapts traditional symbols, techniques and materials to modern conditions, keeping heritage relevant and sought-after. This makes it a viable and flexible mechanism for cultural continuity.

Of particular significance is the potential of amateur decorative and applied art as a tool for cultural diplomacy and dialogue between Belarus and China. Both countries possess rich traditions of decorative and applied art and share common strategies for their preservation via amateur forms, creating fertile ground for intercultural exchange.

Joint exhibitions (Fig. 5), workshops and folk art festivals become platforms not only for displaying craft skills but also for enhancing mutual understanding, building trust and expanding humanitarian cooperation.

Hence, the significance of amateur decorative and applied art extends beyond the realms of leisure and self-expression, transforming it into a strategic resource for heritage conservation and fostering cultural dialogue.



Fig. 5. EXPO of Chinese decorative and applied art, Fuzhou city, 2024.

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