



Mini Review

Folk Toys and Games for Children: Cultural Heritage of Vietnam

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Abstract

Folk toys and games are elements of folklore, created by the people, which contain tangible and intangible cultures of profound value from various communities, regions, or countries. In this article the author analyzes the importance of the role of folk toys for children in educating them about their traditional culture, creative and aesthetic values, and promoting personal skills as well as community cohesion. Folk toys also contribute to the economy of many trade villages, thereby contributing to social and economic development.

Keywords: Vietnamese folk toys and games; Vietnamese cultural heritage; the education of children; craft villages; artisans.

Definition of Folk Toys

The Vietnam Encyclopedia defines toys as follows: "Toys are objects especially for entertainment and education for children. They are often scaled objects, simply shaped, with attractive colors and beautiful designs. As a generalization toys have traits that renew the activities of objects and animals. Archeologists have found toys from earliest times in the shape of house models, earthenware animals and terra cotta statues of humans. Now, Educational Science considers the toy as an important means for educating children" (Vietnam Encyclopedia, 1995, pp. 837).

Thus far, no one has put forward a formal concept of folk toys. Their nature and characteristics are usually described in terms of materials, texture, appearance, age and how to make and play with them. We can classify the lines between folk toys and modern toys. When talking about Vietnamese folk toys it is important to acknowledge them as an achievement of creativity for people from long ago. People

would follow the path manually, using the materials readily available in their environment such as leaf plants, soil, bamboo, paper, tin. Therefore the shape and the color of a certain percentage of folk toys do not follow a pattern. Folk toys also show the characteristics and culture of each region, ethnic group, and the traditional lifestyle of their resident population. In addition, folk toys also are known as traditional toys, ethnic's toys, and local area's toys (Dang, 2006). In contrast with folk toys, modern toys are made of synthetic or natural materials that have been processed by technology, and mass-produced by mechanical means.

In Vietnam, toys, tools, and instrument games are all referred to using the same word as a category - folk toys - but depending on the specific case people call the toy or instrument game by its own specific name. Most people think that toys are models of things for children to play with ranging from the age of six months to six years. These toys

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are miniature human figures, animals, and models of household items that usually help children learn about shapes, colors, names, and functions. The tools and instrument games are often used to describe and understand things that cater to a particular game. These games are competitions with rules and clear regulations. Many games always must be played with tools or equipment. For example, a rope is always used for tug of war, balls are necessary for playing bamboo jacks, and elm trees are needed for swinging. Not every game, however, has to be played with tools, just as not all toys are always tied to just one game. For example, paper masks, lanterns, and small clay drums can all be used in multiple games.

In this article folk toys include all of handmade toys for children to play with and used in the children's folk games in the Red River Delta of Vietnam.

The Role and Value of Folk Toys

Entertainment and Education

Toys and games play an important role for children's entertainment and education of comprehensive development, both physically and mentally (Pham and Nguyen, 1962). When children are in kindergarten a toy is a close friend of the children, encouraging them to learn and explore the world, provoking a rich imagination, as well as nurturing kindness, generosity, and selflessness. For example, when children play with paper masks they often express the personality of the creature through action. In order to do that they have to actively explore and observe. This helps them become more attached to the natural environment, and fosters love and care as well as a sense of protection for the family pet. Toys and folk games have different genres. There are kinds of games that are like physical challenge and kinds of games in favor of calculation or agility training, skill, and courage. All the different types of games contribute significantly to the education of children through the formation of personality. This is especially true in the games that have the frontman, the head of a team who always supervises the implementation of rules and principles of the game. Joining the game, all players are consciously submissive to this person; they understand that in the game there are winners and losers, and that the losers must comply with the requests of the winners. The children feel ashamed to be removed from the game because of a violation of the regulations; this educates players about compliance with the organization and how to be disciplined.

Most folk toys are miniature figures and household items, tools for labor and production, and a way to practice the actions of the human world. Dramatic play with toys made from readily available materials such as leaves, soil, paper are used to play by children in the roles of such things as items to sell, cook with, teach with, or carry babies in (Toan, 2011). This type of game is not just an imitation of adult

activities, but rather it is the world of children with its own rules and procedures prescribed by themselves or created through observing the actions and words of adults. Besides the mandatory academic requirements for lessons to be followed strictly in school, children imitate adults on a voluntary basis through toys and folk games. These are useful and fun lessons, helping children to easily understand and explain phenomena around them. Therefore children have been involved in shaping their own education, undetected by adults, in a way that entertains them. Learning through play is a stimulating, effective, and easy way to help children become familiar with production activities and behaviors between humans and between humans and nature (Fig.1).



Fig 1: Folk games help children to be sociable and make friends, and improve their physical and mental strength.

Some toys and folk games are associated with nursery rhymes, songs, and poetry. Many games cannot be played without their rhyme, like a shadow is always with a person in the light. Nursery rhymes can help children's physical training because they are an integral part of folk games such as 'dragon and snake', 'drop tortoise leeches', and 'bamboo jacks'. Toys and games that have nursery rhymes or lyrics attached to them can act like a catalyst to help the children remember the game better and can help nurture friendships quicker. Nursery rhymes also help assimilate and integrate children with nature through images of familiar places around them in connection with a story (Fig. 2). Some of these images can include women and men, crossing the river, the boat, vines, water hyacinth. Nursery rhymes can act as a channel to help children learn and explore the world around them with a variety of things, ranging from phenomena as close as the house, describing the kitchen

cabinet where potatoes are kept and chickens digging in the cooking place, to things as distant as goats going to school and knocking on a door in the sky. Through rhyme children know to criticize and avoid bad habits. They learn what is good and right through games like 'drop tortoise leeches'. Singing rhymes also works to train children's memory and stimulates creativity through games with brainstorming such as 'Mandarin square capturing' and 'bamboo jacks'. As a natural way, folk games penetrate deep into the life of children naturally as they play them. Eventually the children themselves create the games, and the correct way to play them spreads from generation to generation, from one region to another, and from one people to other peoples. This creates the transmission and sharing of cultural values through Vietnamese generations (Nguyen, 2011).



Fig. 2: Playing folk games with lyrics rhyme.

Culture and History

In Vietnam the folk toy is an element of folklore, created by the people throughout the process of time. The process is selective, honed, and regulated throughout every generation so it is not just a product of convergence but also contains the value of physical and mental culture of each ethnic group, region or country (Tran, 2010). Because of these characteristics, folk toys are important factors that need to be transmitted to the young generation to assert identity and ethnic soul nurturing.

In the process of creating toys and games the artisans and craftsmen always base their designs on the needs of the children, characteristics of traditional culture, and historical events. Nowadays the 'mobile lantern' and the 'lantern of five star points' are reminiscent of the success of the August Revolution in 1945, when President Ho Chi Minh read the Declaration of Independence that gave birth to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the red flag, with five yellow star points which first debuted and became the national flag. After that event the star lantern changed to five points instead of six (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: This star lantern in a 1943 Hanoi toy store had six wings.

Previously the lantern of five star points had six points, because it was associated with the experiences of agricultural people who observed the stars to learn the weather forecast for the coming days. In evening, if many stars could be seen, that would mean sunshine, and the absence of stars would mean rain (Fig. 4). These toys are used in the game of the 'star lantern procession', which praises the meaning of country independence in an educational way better than hard and dry lessons in the classroom. The game helps children's understanding of the history and the identity of their ethnic group, and helps them learn to respect the cultural values and history of the nation (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4: Since August 1945 the star lantern has five wings.



Fig. 5: Making the star lantern.

As objects for fun and entertainment folk toys are of great value in the education and formation of children's personalities. Folk toys are the manifestation of the process of labor and creativity of the people who make them, so they always contain the beauty of an inmost meaning and rich image for a culture (Nguyen, 1999). The 'paper doctor' toy praises and honors a great scholar who was successful in study. The paper doctor is a procession around the village by children that works as motivation and encouragement for children to try to learn to become talented people. A toy puppet depicting a man with stick in moonlight is a toy to enhance the exercising and expression of the role of the martial spirit of the nation. That spirit is the cultural heritage - the soul of the nation - which should be nurtured from generation to generation.

Vietnamese traditional toys have been in the minds of different generations of Vietnam and have contributed to the formation of their personality and soul nourishing through the vicissitudes of history (Tran and Bui, 2009). In recent years, along with the promotion of the power of national culture to serve the cause of national renovation and international integration, the state has invested a lot of effort for the conservation and promotion of national cultural values which are essential to preserve the traditional cultural heritages of the nation. This investment is more significant when considering the impact angle of culture in shaping human personality and training for developing human resources. The transmission of cultural values through folk toys is a very important position to consider because they help children have feelings toward, and understand the culture of, their own nationality in childhood.

Economics

Folk toys are traditional handicraft products, so creating these products is not only for their educational value, but also brings economic value to workers in traditional craft villages. In the continuing trend of globalization and international economic integration crafts produced in traditional craft villages have played an important role in economic development strategy, culture, and society. Folk toys not only help children be happy, play, and exercise, but also bring income and joy to their makers.

Toys from trade villages in the Red River Delta are not just economic units, but also contain their own character that is a unique and vivid reflection of the land and its inhabitants. Local people have developed an economic, traditional culture of craft villages, which includes folk toys, as a function of their living in one area over time. They are formed and developed on the basis of the area's strengths, and work to overcome the drawbacks of each locality. Residents of the Red River Delta, who make their living through agriculture, gain extra income by enlisting harvest time farmers to do extra jobs such as knitting baskets and weaving cloth. Making toys is usually referred to as secondary work, but sometimes it is people's main source of income in order to help farmers avoid food shortages (Department of Culture Information and Tourism *et al.*, 2010). This is especially the case in crowded areas or in areas with infertile soil. Some craft villages have reinvented craft items to meet the needs of the user. For example, in Khuong Dinh village the main tin products were oil lamps, lanterns, and betel nut mortars; but when the products could not be sold the craftsmen converted them into tin toys. Similarly, in the Bao Dap villages in Nam Dinh province, craftsmen also transitioned from traditional work such as weaving and dyeing cloths in order to make star lanterns and small clay drums.

The economic value of making toys does show elements of exploitation and uses reasonable human resources. Craft making utilizes surplus labor; each family member from the elderly to children can participate in a few steps of the toy-making process, and thus contribute to improving their lives. This is good example of family economics. Through this family inclusive process craftsmen directly offer and transmit their experience and know-how of craft making to future generations. In addition the craft of making toys in some villages contributes significantly to villagers' welfare through new construction and building renovation. An example of this is can be found in Xuan La village in Hanoi where the traditional *To he* craft, a toy made from rice powder, is the best selling toy, enabling the craftsmen to make a higher income which they use to assist the village.

Folk toys are the manifestation of the cultural values and spiritual material of a group, as made by the group's skillful, artistic craftsmen. Through toys adults send love to their

children and expectations for the future generations to be confident and powerful in life. Each toy has always been a lively tool for children's education of the love for motherland and labor. In this way children respect the cultural achievements of their fathers and continue to promote them.

Culture is both the foundation and impetus for economic development. If we want cultural development, we have to focus on economic development, and if we want economic development we need to develop culturally. Thus, culture and economics support each other in their development in a parallel relationship. Preserving and promoting the value of trade villages' traditional toy manufacturers is not only important for targeted local economic development, but also, in a deeper humanistic sense, it contributes to the preservation and development of national culture heritage. Through conservation activities and the promotion of the value of trade villages, young generations cherish the talents and fruits of the previous generation's creative labors as they have been accumulated over hundreds of years. It is a challenge to preserve and promote tradition through proper funding in terms of integration between culture and economic development today.

The international integration trend, a respect for cultural diversity, and the preservation and honoring of the nation's cultural values are the foundation of the development of spirit culture. Culture should be looked at as an organic part of the process of economic development. Therefore, the preservation of traditional cultural values should not impede, but rather motivate development in general and economic development in particular.

Aesthetics

Since ancient times folk art has appeared in various forms, including folk toys. They have been formed from the demands of life, beliefs, and customs, and continue to be an important part of the culture. Folk toys contain rich aesthetic, humanistic, and spiritual values because they are farmers' products. Farmers have many beliefs and experiences regarding their natural environment and the animals in it. For example, paper mache toys have been created for hundreds of years in the form of unicorn and dragon heads (Le, 2006). These are created to be represented as sacred animals symbolizing strength, good luck, and water resources. Paper mache toy unicorn and dragon heads not only demonstrate the ingenuity of their creators, but also convey folk knowledge, visual aesthetics, and a humanistic desire.

Folk toys for children are the product of folklore and ethnicity, representing the crystallization of the cultural values of hundreds of years of history as well as the soul and lifestyle of a people and their practices. Toys help children become familiar with people both inside and outside of their families and communities. Not only are the

toys valued as goods, but each is a product of an aesthetic culture. Many toys have been produced from simple, readily available materials such as colored paper and bamboo sticks by the skillful hands of an artisan combined with their creative imagination. An example would be how colorful lanterns are shaped like a monk's cap with handles that are used to spin the lantern. When spun with lighted candles inside the mobile lantern is fanciful, sparkling, and has a troop shadow moving on the paper. Other lanterns have toy puppets simulating a man with stick, and when the wind blows he dances with enthusiasm under the moonlight. Most folk toys are rustic and beautiful, depicting the innocence and the features of their cultural owners, so it has gone into the consciousness of many Vietnamese generations (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: The artisan demonstrates how to make a spinning top (cu) lantern.

Folk toys are created and decorated in different ways- from simple to sophisticated to meet the needs of recreational entertainment for people of all ages, but also to reflect the life, cultural spirit, and aesthetic values of the human. In many areas, adults are often interested in creating toys as a hobby to bring knowledge to children. The children can create some traditional toys such as making buffalo calf from banyan leaves, paper pinwheels and mud bangers. Children also practice simple parts of toy making like pasting decorations for star lanterns and painting masks. Learning of a craft at such a young age trains children to use their ingenuity, creativity, and enhance the aesthetic emotion of the toy through practice (Fig. 7).

Today folk toys combine the features of traditional cultures of ethnic groups with modern elements to become increasingly sophisticated, more beautiful, and more meaningful to fit the needs of present life. Artisans exploit the aesthetic value of folklore associated with elements of contemporary culture to produce toys in line with the times but that still maintain folk integrity and the soul of the nation. In the past mobile lanterns had motifs of elephants and horses running around the body of the lantern, but from 1945 to the present the motifs are of soldiers chasing invaders. If we were to compare any folk toys produced long ago to the same kinds of the products available today, we would see an ingenious combination of tradition and modern elements. All that is mentioned above helps create

vivid and compelling toys. Craftmen's creative processes incorporate values appropriate to the needs of society; characteristics of the nation become permanent and are handed down from generation to generation. Many folklore products are models of aesthetic value, which have been accepted as permanent values and become precious cultural heritage of the community, society, and nation (Fig. 8).



Fig. 7: Making a small lion head, and children practice playing with it.



Fig. 8: Artisans training volunteers to make traditional mobile lanterns.

The aesthetic form and value of folklore come from creativity of the craftsmen, artists and writers. They developed the aesthetic values that fit the times while still maintaining the soul of the nation. In the creative process the values appropriate to the needs of society reflect the cultural characteristics and history of the nation, have become permanent, and have been handed down from generation to generation. Many folklore products have reached the epitome of aesthetic value and has been accepted as a permanent value through eternity and has become a tradition and part of the precious capital of the community, society and nation. Moreover, the exploitation

and promotion of the aesthetic value of folklore are essential for building the soul of all of us. As we confront influences in foreign cultures, and we want to preserve and promote our identity, the younger generation should be equipped with knowledge of folk art. The folk toys will be the fulcrum, the potential strength of national culture, that help the inheritance and promotion of the aesthetic values so that they do not forget their ethnic origin (Institute of Vietnamese Cultural Studies, 2004).

Conservation and Development of Children's Folk Toys

Promoting Learning and Study

To preserve folk toys one first needs to learn, study, and appreciate the current use of folk toys as well as the craft of making toys. So far there have not been any in-depth studies of particular toys or folk toys in general. It is therefore necessary to research the process of formation and development of each kind of toy, become familiar with the village manufacturing the toy, and the cultural values embodied in it in order to sort them scientifically and logically for conservation purposes (Tran *et al.*, 2010).

Research begins by selecting a type of toy, learning the appropriate steps for making the toy to instruct the children, and create the folk toys with the presentation and guide of a craftsmen. Additional research and interdisciplinary collaboration is needed to retain traditional values. Innovation is necessary to produce modern folk toys of a high aesthetic and material quality in line with modern life and, at the same time, meet the demands and tastes of the customer as well as the psychological needs of children at home. All of this must be done while developing innovative and positive ways of producing these products of a high quality.

Providing information to the craftsmen and artisans about the meaning and cultural value of folk toys is important because then they have extensive knowledge of traditional culture and fall more in love with the work creating many more useful toys. The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology has developed toy-making programs with the participation of artisans and parents to guide children to create toys. These programs have been effective and have made a positive impact on both the children and the artisans. Children are extremely excited to see demonstrations and learn how to make folk toys with the artisans. Artisans, in turn, are very glad to get the attention and have an audience for their work. They are happy to introduce their craft and give instructions on how to make toys for the children and the public. By participating in these programs, craftsmen understand their roles, their responsibilities to the younger generation, and are more interested in teaching others how to make toys.

The VME organizes different programs or promotional days for learning, researching, and exchanging experiences about

conservation and development of folk toys from all over the world. Vietnam Cultural Month and Vietnam Cultural Week held abroad enables us to combine the performances of traditional toys such as the paste powder toy (*Tò he*) and making bamboo dragonflies, with toys that have been performed in Japan, America and Korea. These performances were done by artisans from Xuan La and Thach Xa villages, leaving an unforgettable impression of the rich culture of Vietnam with our international friends.

Innovate, Improve Quality, Expand Markets

Preservation and development of folk toys requires a combination of traditional elements and modern elements, chosen selectively in order to show how they absorb the quintessence of human culture. Using modern techniques it could be possible to have toys such as the rabbit lamp, star lantern, and animal toys be able to move. In the past these lantern toys were usually lit with peanut oil or by burning pomelo seeds or candles. It could also be possible to have these toys emit a rhyme or folk melody which echoes the folk music and poetry of the Red River Delta with incorporation of modern technology. Maintaining tradition and at the same time incorporating new ideas will insert the vitality of traditional culture into modern culture. In this way the traditional value of culture will never get old and will have an important position in contemporary living (Vu, 2013).

Each type of toy should have leaflets to provide basic information about materials, origins, significance, and guidance on how to play with it as an individual or in a group. It meets educational needs and is convenient for children using it in their present life. This requires close collaboration between researchers and producers of toys. They have to make products which retain the elements of folklore and traditional culture, while still integrating the new features of a modern toy in the nation and foreign countries.

Besides innovation and development of production we need to expand the toy market through specific activities such as encouraging the development of toy markets in rural, mountainous, and island areas; creating conditions for the producers of toys to have abundant raw materials; stable places to sell in the play areas, entertainment areas or on festive occasions. Promoting the sale of folk toys by organizing toy fairs in provinces and cities throughout the country in the summer holidays so that children have the opportunity to see, know, and get acquainted with folk toys is a way to help create those stable places for artisans to sell. Another way is by using the school system to provide instructions on a regular basis on how to play with all kinds of toys and folk games, from kindergartens to general education schools.

Communication and Extensive Introduction to Folk Toys

Conservation and development of folk toys is the common responsibility of all of society. In order to raise public awareness it is necessary to promote toys through media and other forms of communication such as newspapers, online newspapers, radio shows, books, and other publications to introduce the roles and value of folk toys.

As a way to communicate through television we should have a program for children about making folk toys which tells stories to reflect the intellectual development of children in the way they think and create toys. One possible story to tell is the story of the elephant that was made of clay, a butterfly, a crab and a worm, so that elephant could walk, wave two ears, have a nose that contracts and stretches like a real elephant.

Strengthening communication works to change the perception of folk toys held by managers, authorities, the people's community, businesses, teachers, parents, the public and also generations of youth. Folk toys are not just objects or tools to play with but also involve mathematical and physical knowledge. For example, when tin ships run on the water, by water moving through tubes heated by an oil flame, hot copper makes a sound when it hits the inside of the boat. Also the mobile lantern could move the troops through the principle of convection gas, and animal toys go around through the force of elasticity created by rubber and clay rollers (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9: The tin ship demonstrates toy-related knowledge of physics, and is a children's favorite.

It is important to introduce information about folk toys for the people to understand the value of them for the education of children of ethnic minorities on high mountains (Vu, 2011). We have information about folk toys now but it is not enough, so many Vietnamese children, and even adults do not understand the mechanics of the five star lantern, the paper doctor's toy, how to make the troops moving in the mobile lantern, or how tin ships can run.

In addition to voluntary communication, the state should have a legal corridor to mobilize the mass media to

propagate and introduce Vietnamese folk toys as well as inform the public about the harm of toys and violent games that are offensive. The media needs to be calling for the preservation and development of folk toys.

3.4. Promulgate and Enforce Policies to Support Artisans and Craft Villages

The state and local authorities should have policies to support artisans and their enterprises that allow for the borrowing of capital, renting of land, and tax-free production of folk toys. In addition, priority should be given to them for the application of science and technology in order to create production materials for toy making that are convenient, durable, beautiful, and a low cost. At the same time, they should be taught to arrange reasonable production processes, improve their design skills, and improve the quality of their products and sales to many businesses and individuals. It is necessary to have preferential policies for long-standing craft villages to make toys from clay, powder, paper, buffalo skin. Some of these villages include: Dong Khe village in Bac Ninh province with clay toys; Xuan La village in Hanoi with powder toys; Bao Dap village in Nam Dinh province with paper toys; and Ong Hao village, Yen My, Hung Yen with buffalo skin toys.

Craft villages specializing in producing folk toys are seasonal; they only make their crafts for a short period of several months or weeks. Some of these seasonal crafts include: star lanterns in Bao Dap, Nam Dinh and buffalo skin toys in Ong Hao, Hung Yen. At other times in the year the craftsmen do not have the chance to produce toys, or craft villages are not able to live up to their title and produce toys year-round. Production stops and people must wait for the right season of the next year to make more toys. Therefore it is necessary to have policies to reward and encourage artisan families and craft villages to research, create, and diversify more products to meet the consumers' tastes, keep up with market expansion, and produce goods all year round.

Authorities at all levels need to promulgate specific policies and strategies for the preservation and development of traditional handicraft villages such as the establishment of regulations with craftsmen and the implementation of preferential policies for artisans and craft villages (Bui, 1998). Every year there should be a ceremony to honor craftsmen, granting certificates of merit to artisans who have outstanding achievements in production, craft transmission, and the training of new artisans. There is a policy of supporting industry development and enterprises using safe materials for the production of children's toys in the country in general and toy locals in particular. Coordination and linkage is needed between scientists, authorities, and manufacturers to organize fairs to introduce products, and awards for makers' products that are preferred by customers.

Policies should be put in place to encourage and promote craft village tourism which will promote economic growth as well as preserve and promote cultural values. Promotion of the building of clubs for artisans and craftsmen so that they can exchange experiences, develop careers, and train young generations is another important idea to consider. In fact, there are clubs existing already and it would be more successful if the young people could participate in them. The clubs should continue to attract enthusiasts and artisans who have been active members in organizing the competition to honor traditional local trades in the village festival, from which to select the unique product types to promote visitors to trade villages.

Finally, organizers should strive to make festivals as enjoyable and effective as possible. Most of the festivals spend too much of their energy and resources on the "ceremony", while the "festival" is not paid much attention as far as investment is concerned. This leads to a lack of attractive content, especially a lack of toys and folk games, such as animal paper mask dancing, tug-of-war, and swinging games, to draw the attention of local and visiting children. It is necessary to encourage forms of activities for introducing and popularizing toys and folk games in the form of daily exercise. The Cultural Agency should launch and organize folk toy creation contests and fun activities - folk games between communities for the festivals. Only such synchronized solutions will help to educate, preserve, and promote the cultural heritage of future generations. The Agency should also propagate and promote the consumption of products on a regular basis and develop the profession of making folk toys.



Fig. 10. The link between folk toys and games with society and cultural heritage completes a full circle.

Conclusion

The people, reflecting the culture and history of peoples, regions, and countries, have created folk toys.

Folk toys play an important role in educating and shaping children's personalities as they grow.

Artisans, parents, and grandparents make folk toys to help children have fun, be healthy, and express their desires for their children with the hope the children will be smart, healthy, and successful in life.

Folk toys also contribute to the improvement of the economic and cultural lives of artisans as well as other people living in craft villages.

Creating folk toys to meet the needs of children's entertainment and education about the culture and history of the nation is necessary and very meaningful work.

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