Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies
ISSN: 3080-986X (Print), ISSN: 3080-9878 (Online) | Vol. 1, No. 1, 2026

A Study on Chinese Folk Paper-cut Patterns

Lei Song

Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar 80281665, Mongolia

Abstract: Through the research on Chinese folk paper-cut art, this paper points out the connection between the characteristics of Chinese folk paper-cut patterns and modern aesthetic concepts. It also analyzes that the regional characteristics of folk paper-cut patterns are influenced by geographical location, climate and other factors. Paper-cut art has high artistic value, reflecting different ideological values and artistic levels, and more importantly, the common national cultural ideology.

Keywords: Chinese folk paper-cut art; Zhaoji Doll; Northeast Chinese folk paper-cut patterns.

1. Chinese Folk Traditional Art

Chinese folk traditional art is a unique cultural material form that has been widely spread and inherited among the people for thousands of years, gradually forming relatively stable and distinct national characteristics that are deeply rooted in the soul of the nation. It is not only a carrier of people's daily emotions and life customs but also a vivid reflection of the Chinese nation's values, aesthetic tastes and cultural traditions. The national folk traditional culture and art of any country in the world have their own unique artistic features and cultural connotations, which are shaped by their respective historical backgrounds, geographical environments and ethnic customs. Among these brilliant folk art forms around the world, Chinese folk traditional art is like a shining gem, dazzling with its profound cultural heritage, diverse forms and unique artistic charm, and has become an indispensable part of the world's cultural treasure house.

The Chinese nation has a long and splendid history of 5,000 years, with a long and continuous cultural context that has been passed down from generation to generation. This profound cultural accumulation has nurtured the extensive and profound Chinese folk traditional art, endowing it with extremely high cultural and historical value, and making it a precious cultural heritage left by our ancestors. At the same time, Chinese folk traditional art has a wide variety of types, covering almost all aspects of people's life, such as the time-honored folk operas that have been sung for centuries, the vivid and expressive folk art forms that record people's joys and sorrows, the exquisite and delicate crafts (including paper-cut, embroidery, clay pottery, wood carving, jade carving, etc.) that embody the wisdom of craftsmen, as well as the folk fine arts and colored drawings that decorate people's living environment. With the changes of the times and the progress of society, Chinese folk traditional art is not standing still; instead, it is constantly evolving and developing in response to the changes of the times. On the one hand, folk traditional art should firmly retain its own true features and cultural essence, which is the root of its survival and development; on the other hand, it should actively integrate into this modern society, adapt to the aesthetic needs and living habits of modern people, and find a new way of development in the collision and integration with modern culture. It is worth noting that modern culture cannot do without folk traditional art with profound historical value, just as a big tree cannot grow healthily without deep roots, let alone bear fruitful results—folk traditional art is the root of modern culture, providing an inexhaustible source of inspiration and power for its development.

2. Overview of Chinese Folk Paper-cut

2.1. History and Concept of Chinese Folk Paper-cut

The main material of paper-cut art is paper, a great invention that the Chinese nation is proud of and one of the four great inventions that have had a profound impact on the world's civilization and progress. The combination of paper, this practical and easy-to-process material, and the folk art of cutting and carving has produced a wonderful "chemical" reaction, giving birth to the unique art form of paper-cut. In the early stage of its development, paper-cut was closely related to Taoist sacrificial activities, soul-summoning rituals and mourning for the spirits of the dead, serving as an important medium for people to communicate with the spiritual world. The great poet Du Fu of the Tang Dynasty once wrote in his poem: "Warm water washes my feet, paper-cut summons my soul", which vividly records the application of paper-cut in soul-summoning rituals in ancient times. Of course, with the development of society and the change of people's living needs, more paper-cut works carry the meaning of joy and auspiciousness, embodying the people's sincere expectation for a happy life, and becoming an important way for people to pray for blessings, ward off evils and pursue good fortune in daily life. In general, paper-cut art is full of symbolic significance, and its themes cover a wide range, including daily life, natural scenery, folk customs, myths and legends, etc., which is the crystallization of the wisdom and creativity of the working people. It is better to say that the real life of the working people has enriched the connotation and form of paper-cut art than that paper-cut art has enriched people's life, because the working people are the creators and inheritors of paper-cut art, and their life experiences and emotional sustenance are the true soul of paper-cut art.

2.2. Regional Characteristics of Chinese Folk Paper-cut

Due to the thin and fragile material of paper, paper-cut art mostly adopts the planar composition method characterized by full layout, symmetry and interconnection, which not only ensures the stability and beauty of the work but also makes full use of the limited paper space. The images in paper-cut works are mostly decorative, and artists often avoid large

black and white blocks that may make the picture dull, instead decorating the main figures with exquisite and delicate patterns. After careful polishing and improvement by artists of all dynasties, these patterns become more delicate and refined, showing a unique artistic charm. The technique of planar overlapping and reasonable layout in paper-cut not only creates a strong national flavor that is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people but also effectively expands the capacity of the picture, enriches the layers of the work, and greatly improves the expressive force of paper-cut art. A typical example is the paper-cut art in Heilongjiang: in the period of "Breakthrough to the Northeast", a large number of inland people, mainly from Shandong, moved to Heilongjiang, bringing with them the window paper-cut patterns and creation techniques from their hometowns. In the early days, their works still adhered to the traditional paper-cut methods and aesthetic tastes of the Han nationality in different regions inside the Shanhai Pass. These works not only had a profound impact on the original local paper-cut style but also infiltrated the cultural symbols and artistic characteristics of inland paper-cut patterns into the local works, thus giving birth to a hybrid of exotic cultures—the Heilongjiang paper-cut, which is characterized by the combination of yin and yang, and the integration of hardness and softness, showing a unique artistic style that combines the advantages of both inland and local cultures.

3. Folk Paper-cut Patterns of Different Types in Different Regions

3.1. Northeast Chinese Folk Paper-cut Patterns

The differences in folk customs, climatic factors and cultural backgrounds in different regions have led to the diversity and uniqueness of paper-cut art. For example, before paper became popular and widely used in the Northeast, the Mongolian, Manchu, Solon and Han people living in Heilongjiang had already mastered the hollow cutting technique, and cut various exquisite patterns and vivid images on thin metal, silk, fish and animal skins, birch bark and other available materials, which can be regarded as the primitive form of Northeast paper-cut. For many years, the mutual integration and infiltration of various ethnic cultures in the Northeast have gradually formed the distinct characteristics of traditional paper-cut patterns in Heilongjiang. Most of these paper-cut works adopt the method of "silhouette flower cutting" (i.e., intaglio) to cut out vivid images. After cutting, the works are smoked black with pine smoke to make the outline more distinct, and then the hollow parts of the picture are lined with colorful paper pieces. This unique production method makes the works show a bright, bold and straightforward style, which is typical of the snow-covered land of the Northeast with the White Mountains and Black Water. This form of paper-cut is very suitable for pasting on walls to decorate the living environment. However, in the northeast region, due to the extremely cold climate in winter, the window paper is often covered with snow and frost, which makes it inconvenient to paste delicate window paper-cuts. In addition, in order to ensure that the patterns can be clearly seen in the cold and harsh environment, the lines of such paper-cuts are thick and powerful, and the dividing lines between patterns are relatively integral, which can effectively suppress the interference of colorful hues on the overall shape of the works, and the patterns themselves play a crucial role in highlighting the theme. The bold and powerful lines are arranged in an orderly and interlaced manner, forming a unique visual effect. Among them, Manchu paper-cut patterns are full of strong rural flavors, reflecting the life and production customs of the Manchu people. From the ancient Manchu paper-cut works that have been handed down, we can clearly see the scenes of the Manchu people hunting in the forests of the Changbai Mountains, fishing in the Black Water, herding on the grasslands, etc., and their life and production scenes are vividly depicted on a piece of paper. Although Manchu paper-cut was once on the verge of being lost due to the changes of the times and the impact of modern culture, fortunately, in recent years, many Manchu people who love Manchu paper-cut art have been actively exploring and developing this traditional art form. They have continuously improved the level of paper-cut creation, innovated the pattern forms, endowed Manchu paper-cut with many contents in line with the times, and added new cultural connotations and artistic charm to it, making this precious folk art regain vitality.

The visual design of Northeast paper-cut should embody more "truth", "kindness" and "beauty", which are the core connotations of this folk art. "Truth" means returning to nature, abandoning cumbersome and artificial decorations, and presenting a fresh and natural artistic style, which can bring people a sense of freedom and relaxation, making people feel the simplicity and purity of life. "Kindness" means that the works should contain more love and warmth, with artists viewing the world with a sincere heart and creating works with genuine feelings, so as to convey positive energy and touch the hearts of the audience. "Beauty" refers to the inherent charm of the works themselves and the unique expressive ways that can attract the audience's attention, including the beauty of shape, the beauty of color and the beauty of connotation. A paper-cut work is also a reflection of the author's own quality and cultural accomplishment. Just like the works created by the bold and unconstrained ethnic groups living between the White Mountains and Black Water, they are extremely pure and natural, showing a positive, optimistic and upward attitude towards life. Their pattern forms are novel and elegant, while retaining the unique national characteristics of the Northeast ethnic groups, just like the totems in the hearts of ancient ethnic people, so beautiful and sacred. Therefore, almost all Northeast paper-cut works are permeated with the people's deep love for nature, eulogizing the beauty of the snow-covered land and the simplicity of life.

3.2. Northwest Chinese Folk Paper-cut Patterns

Northwest Chinese folk paper-cut patterns are famous for their simple and unsophisticated modeling and bold and unconstrained style, with the core characteristics of simplicity, ruggedness, conciseness and clarity. The paper-cut works created in this region are full of strong rural feelings and local customs, without the slightest affectation or artificial carving, showing the simple and sincere character of the northwest people. The northwest region of China has always been a dry area with little rainfall, especially in spring, where droughts occur nine out of ten years, which has a great impact on agricultural production and people's life. In the old days, when people suffered from a prolonged drought with no rain in sight and were powerless to change the harsh natural environment, they had to pin their hopes on the dragon, which was regarded as the god of rain in traditional culture. At that

time, women in every family would cut dragon paper-cuts with their own hands, and every household would paste these dragon patterns on the doors and windows, praying devoutly for the Dragon King to send rain to moisten the land and ensure a bumper harvest. Most of such dragon paper-cut patterns are simple and plain in modeling, focusing on exaggeration and deformation to highlight the majesty and power of the dragon, with few superfluous decorations that may affect the theme. Although the modeling is simple, the cutting technique is delicate and meticulous, and the carving is precise and accurate, showing a simple, naive and wild artistic charm that is unique to the northwest region. Among the various northwest paper-cut works, Shanxi folk paper-cut patterns have particularly distinctive features, and the most common one is "window flowers". The size and shape of these window flowers are strictly determined according to the shape and size of the window panes, making the patterns closely integrated with the window structure, and the patterns themselves have a strong sense of form, which not only plays a decorative role but also reflects the practicality of folk art.

3.3. Zhaoji Doll

When talking about Chinese folk window flowers, we have to mention the "Zhaoji Doll" which is widely spread among the people and has a profound cultural connotation. Just like the golden crow pattern in ancient Chinese folk customs, which uses the "rooster" to symbolize the sun, the Zhaoji Doll is also a symbol of yang and life in traditional culture. Perhaps this symbolic meaning originates from the natural phenomenon that the golden rooster crows to herald the dawn: when the rooster crows, the dark night when ghosts and monsters are said to run amok passes, the sun rises, all things revive, and life begins a new cycle. Therefore, people have always had a deep affection of love and awe for the rooster, an ordinary yet extraordinary animal, and have endowed it with rich cultural meanings. In the Yellow River basin, which is an important birthplace of Chinese civilization, there is a unique folk custom: when a girl gets married, she will hold a rooster in the sedan chair, which is said to symbolize her husband, implying loyalty, diligence and prosperity. Aunt Huo Jinshi from Puxian County, Shanxi Province, who is an inheritor of folk paper-cut art, once said: "Male Zhaoji Dolls hold lotus flowers, pomegranates and other things instead of roosters, while female Zhaoji Dolls hold roosters and mostly do not hold lotus flowers." This detail fully reflects the distinct gender characteristics and symbolic meanings of Zhaoji Dolls. Zhaoji Dolls are divided into male and female types, with many categories, and there are great differences in their pattern forms and connotations. The traditional folk types include "Soul-Summoning Doll", "Money-Grabbing Doll", "Evil-warding Doll" and so on, each of which undertakes different folk functions and cultural expectations. Zhaoji Dolls are widely distributed in various regions of China, especially in the Yellow River basin, and their patterns and connotations reflect the remains of primitive totems of heaven and earth worship and ancestor worship in the clan society, which is of great value for studying the primitive culture and folk beliefs of the Chinese nation.

In summary, modern paper-cut patterns have been endowed with more modern design elements on the basis of inheriting traditional characteristics, gradually stepping out of the narrow farm courtyards, entering the big world of society and integrating into people's daily life. While adapting to modern life, they still retain the essential qualities of simplicity, nature, conciseness and elegance, which are the core charm of paper-cut art. In modern design, we should incorporate more traditional cultural flavors into the design, fully reflect the unique national characteristics of Chinese culture, just as a person should not forget his roots and where he comes from. Our unique national cultural characteristics should not be overwhelmed by the new foreign cultures; instead, we should adopt a rational attitude, absorb the essence of foreign cultures, discard the dross that is not suitable for our own development, keep pace with the times, and create our own genuine designs that integrate tradition and modernity, so as to let the traditional paper-cut art shine more brilliantly in the new era.

4. Conclusion

In summary, modern paper-cut patterns have incorporated diverse modern design elements on the basis of inheriting the traditional art essence, breaking through the limitations of rural contexts and expanding into broader social and cultural domains. While actively adapting to the rhythm and needs of contemporary life, they have firmly retained their essential qualities such as simplicity, naturalness, conciseness and elegance, making this traditional folk-art form gain new vitality in the modern era. At present, paper-cut art has been widely applied in various modern design fields, including graphic design, fashion design, digital media, environmental decoration and so on, which fully demonstrates its strong adaptability and lasting artistic charm, and proves that traditional art can coexist harmoniously with modern culture and play an important role in modern society.

It is essential for modern designers to integrate traditional cultural elements into modern design while maintaining the unique national characteristics of Chinese culture. Cultural identity is the spiritual root of a nation, and it should not be overshadowed by external cultural influences. Instead, designers should adopt a critical and selective attitude—absorbing the beneficial elements and advanced experience from foreign cultures, while discarding the inappropriate dross that is not in line with our national cultural characteristics and values. Only through such a balanced and rational strategy can traditional art forms such as paper-cut achieve sustainable development, continuously innovate on the basis of inheritance, and inspire more innovative design practices in the future, so as to promote the inheritance and development of Chinese traditional culture and show the unique charm of Chinese culture to the world.

References

[1] Ran F. Paper-cut and Female Symbols[J]. Decoration, 2003(8), Total Issue 124, p.68.

[2] Ji K. Modern Chinese Paper-cut[M]. Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, August 2003.

[3] Zhao X G. Cutting out Imagery[J]. Decoration, 2002(9), Total Issue 113, p.66.

[4] Wang B. History of Chinese Folk Paper-cut[M]. Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2006.

[5] Chen J. History of Chinese Folk Custom Paper-cut[M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007.

[6] Qiao X. Paper Civilization in Villages: Research on Chinese Ethnic Minority Paper-cut Art[M]. Qingdao: Qingdao Publishing House, 2022.

[7] Chen S. Window Flowers: Folk Paper-cut Art[M]. Chengdu: Plateau Bookstore, 1946.

[8] Cai X. Inheritance and Development of Chinese Folk Paper-cut Art[C]//InterConf. 2021.

DOI:10.51582/interconf.7-8.06.2021.024.

[9] Jia W. Mediatization and Gender Narratives in Chinese Folk Paper-cutting Art[C]//IAFOR MediAsia Conference Proceedings. 2022.

[10] Zhou Y, Chen L. Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance via Technology: A Case Study of Xiaogan Carved Paper-cut[J]. Journal of Yangtze University (Social Science), 2020, 43(4): 33–37.

[11] Bao J. Paper-cut Art[M]. Jinan: Shandong Education Press, 1999.

[12] Zhang X. A Review of Academic Research on Chinese Paper-cut Art[J]. China Arts and Crafts Society Journal, 2025(1): 45–52.

[13] Huo J. Folk Paper-cut and Custom Symbols in the Yellow River Basin[J]. Folk Culture Forum, 2021(3): 89–96.