

China Folk Arts Series



CHINESE PAPER-CUTS

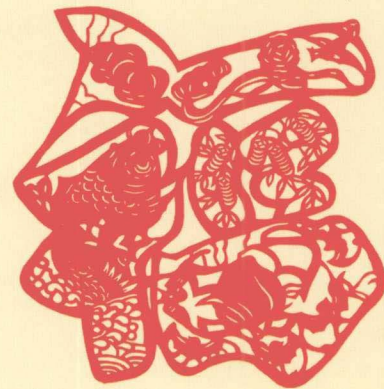
CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

J528. 1/Y1

2007.

Compiled by Sun Bingshan

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章



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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

中国剪纸: 英文 / 孙秉山编著; 严马, 王国振译. —北京: 五洲传播出版社, 2007.12
(中国民间工艺品丛书)
ISBN 978-7-5085-1212-9

I. 中… II. ①孙…②严…③王… III. 剪纸—民间工艺—中国—英文
IV. J528.1

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2007) 第 171792 号

策 划: 荆孝敏
编 者: 孙秉山
翻 译: 严 马 王国振
特约编辑: 吕 蕾
责任编辑: 王 莉
装帧设计: 缪 惟 林国霞

中国剪纸

出版发行: 五洲传播出版社
社 址: 北京市海淀区莲花池东路北小马厂 6 号华天大厦
邮政编码: 100038
电 话: 010-58891281
传 真: 010-58891281
制版单位: 北京锦绣圣艺文化发展有限公司
印 刷: 北京朗翔印刷有限公司
开 本: 889x1194 1/24
印 张: 4.5
印 数: 2000-4000 册
版 次: 2007 年 12 月第 1 版 2008 年 1 月第 2 次印刷
书 号: ISBN 978-7-5085-1212-9
定 价: 68.00 元





Preface

Chinese paper-cutting boasts a long history. As early as the period of the Emperor Wu Di of the Han Dynasty over 2,100 years ago, records show that someone made a paper-cut of the image of Li Furen, the late favourite concubine of Emperor Wu Di, so as to comfort him in his sorrow. During the Southern Dynasties (420-589) it became a custom to paste well-cut thin silk in the shape of a person on screens for festivals. In springtime, during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), people would cut coloured pieces of silk, paper or gold foil into various shapes such as swallows, flowers or butterflies, which were presented as gifts, pinned on the hair, hung on willow branches or pasted on screens. It added colour to the early spring.

Today this custom is carried on in most households, particularly during the Spring Festival, by hanging streamers on the door jambs and sticking paper cuts to the windows for decoration.

Even as a plastic art the paper-cut has its unique charm. It is extremely concise in its artistic form simply cutting some holes in different places on a piece of paper. The final image on the paper-cut comes into being from the contrast of the solid part and the empty part. This technique is one of the particularities of Chinese traditional artistic creation. This style originates from the Chinese traditional concept of the universe which is that “*Yin* and *Yang* (the two opposing principles in nature) created the world.”

In this modern era there are various types of paper-cuts for different purposes and they may basically be divided into five categories. Except for several pieces in the book, all the other paper-cuts were collected from the rural areas some 20 years ago.





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Category of Streamers

All the paper-cuts used in such activities as praying for blessings, offering sacrifices, eliminating disasters and diseases and exorcising evil spirits belong to this category. During the Spring Festival households in many areas in China like to paste colourful streamers on the doors of their courtyards, houses, rooms and even cabinets. This type of streamer is actually a symbol used for worshiping heaven, earth and ancestors so as to pray for blessings, avoid disasters and exorcise evil spirits.

There is an old tale which goes like this: after Jiang Ziya helped the King of Wu found the Western Zhou Dynasty (1100 BC-771 BC), he praised and deified the loyal officials and generals of both the Shang (1600 BC-1100 BC) and Western Zhou (1100 BC-771 BC) Dynasties who had died in the war of dynastic change. After he had finished his wife came to him and shouted at him, "How will you deify me?." He thought for a while and answered, "Poor deity because wherever you go you will bring poverty." "Your principal behaviour is to come back if you see poverty and dilapidation so as not to bring greater misfortune to the poor people there."

Therefore on festive days people paste streamers with many holes cut in them on the door so as to keep the "poor deity" away.

Here is another example. On the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, people paste paper-cuts in the shape of a "rooster" and a "mugwort-plaited tiger," which can vanquish the five poisonous creatures, on their doors and the "House-guarding Tiger" on the walls of the houses. This is a custom with a history of over 1,000 years.

More than 1,200 years ago, Du Fu, a great ancient Chinese poet, wrote "warm water washes my feet and paper-cuts evoke my spirit." This is testament to the long history of the Chinese people using paper-cuts to help them think of good things and forget evil.

This kind of paper-cut has a very short service life. That of the streamers pasted on the door-jamb during the Spring Festival and the "tiger" and the "rooster" pasted on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month is less than one month and that of the spirit-evoking streamers used for exorcising evils and getting rid of diseases is less than half an hour. Such papercuts are normally not preserved but are burned after the activity or during the course of the activity.





A Gourd

The Chinese seem to like the gourd. The immortals in myths loved it, not only for putting elixir in it, but also using it to subdue spirits and demons. Writers and scholars in society were fond of it and not only used it to hold wine, but also put it on their tables for inspiration. The ordinary people like it because they think of it as a treasure and having magical properties. Therefore, pasting a paper-cut in the shape of a gourd in the house could not only exorcise evil but also bring luck to the family.

Cutting off the Five Poisonous Creatures

The period around the fifth day of the fifth month is commonly referred to as “the evil days” because this is when poisonous insects breed and diseases can start as a result. Therefore, every family pastes paper-cut gourds on their door and walls to subdue the five poisonous creatures (referring to scorpions, snakes, centipedes, geckos and toads) and avoid plagues. A scissor shape is usually hidden in the gourd with the meaning of cutting off the five poisonous creatures.



The Sky Sweeping Woman

During the heavy summer rains a farmer's wife may hang a paper-cut of the sky-sweeping woman in the courtyard and this is said to be able to prevent rain. It is said that the sky-sweeping woman is the ancestor Nuwa. In the picture she is clearing away the rain clouds in the sky with her right hand and sweeping water away on the earth with her left hand. She reputedly has the fearless spirit of being able to patch the sky, fight floods and relieve disasters.



The Moppet Exorcising Evil

This kind of evil-exorcising moppet is also called a “money-grabbing moppet” or a “ghost-sending moppet.” There is an old saying that “ghosts come to ask for money, so they can be sent away with money, and then disasters can be eliminated and diseases gotten rid of.” Therefore people cut a “money-grabbing moppet” and burn it. In this way they “send” money to the ghosts to pray for safety.





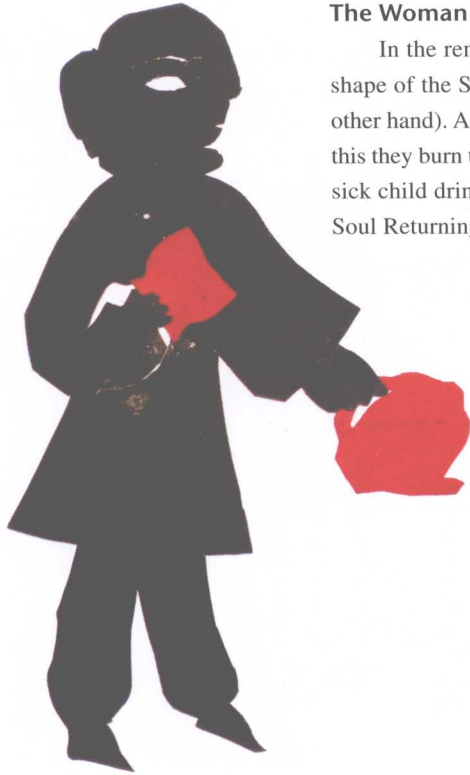
House Safety

A long time ago, in remote areas, if families and livestock were not healthy or there was something bad happening, the housewife would make a paper-cut (the women on the left and right side of the paper hold three joss sticks worshipping heaven, earth and their ancestors; the two small people on the altar in the paper symbolize all the deities). She would then walk around the house three times with the paper-cut in her hands. When she finished she burned the paper-cut and threw it in a bowl of clear water while saying "Heaven, earth and our ancestors, please show your magic powers to exorcise evil and ward off disasters in order to keep the family safe" again and again. Holding the bowl she would walk out the gate and when she came to the road, she spilled the water with the ashes and then went back saying the same words over and over on the way. After the people in the paper-cut were burned and changed into immortals they would exorcise evil and eliminate disasters to keep the family safe.



The Woman Returning a Soul

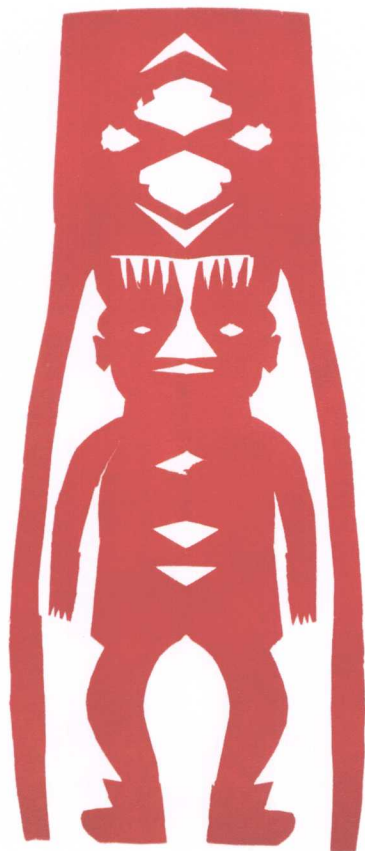
In the remote countryside, if a child is sick, someone will make a paper-cut in the shape of the Soul-Returning Woman (who holds water in one hand and medicine in the other hand). A parent holds the paper and moves it around the sick child three times. After this they burn the paper and put the ashes into a bowl of clear water and mix it up. Then the sick child drinks the water and this is said to be able to get rid of the illness because the Soul Returning Woman is the goddess Nuwa.



The Woman Calling Back a Soul

The purpose of this paper-cut is similar to that of the above one. This one is especially for the children who always cry or are lazy or hate to eat food because they are scared. For any of these symptoms the people regard the child as having "lost their soul because of fright." Therefore they make a paper-cut in the shape of the Soul-Calling-Back Woman who holds a broom in one hand and a dustpan in the other hand to waken, sweep up and call back the lost soul.



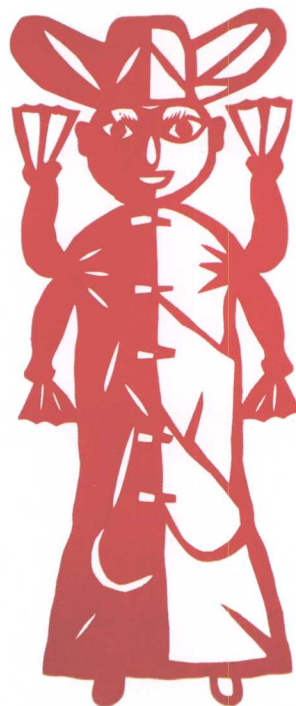


Streamer Calling Back a Soul

Methods of using paper-cuts to evoke the soul and get rid of illness are largely identical but with minor differences. Normally a family member ignites the paper-cut and moves it around the sick child while murmuring such words as “burning the paper and moving it around, all illnesses and evils run away” over and over. When the paper is burnt it is thrown into a bowl of clear water. After that the person holds the bowl and goes outside while chanting “burning the paper to display magic power which exorcises evil and gets rid of illness to keep us safe and healthy.” They spill the water at the crossing and then return all the time chanting and calling the name of the sick child. After returning they shake the bowl in the direction of the sick child and say “please go back to the body quickly, please go back to the body quickly.” They then put the bowl at the bedside of the child. After all of this they think that the illness will be cured.

Yin and Yang

This kind of paper-cut is also used to call back the soul for the very ill person, with the wish of calling the ill person back to this world from the *Yin* and *Yang* world.





A Moppet Exorcising Evil

The person in the paper-cut holds a peach in each of his hands. The peaches are believed to be able to subdue evil while a pair of male birds standing on each side of the garment of the person can also keep evil away.



An Evil Subduing Moppet

This work is similar to the above in terms of purpose, but the person is male and is stretching his legs. It is similar to the Chinese character “大,” or “天” or “夫” in shape. Moreover, there are six birds standing on each side of the person. The person, the character and the birds are all masculine so the combination is more powerful in exorcising evil.



A Moppet Calling Back a Soul

This is used for a frightened child and has a red thread tied to the top of the paper-cut so as to find the illness. Someone lifts the moppet and walks around calling the name of the sick child. They then go back, also calling the name of the sick child and say “go home.” After going back home they put the paper-cut moppet under the pillow of the sick child. In this way, they think the soul will go back to the body and the illness will be cured.



A Fierce Tiger Guarding a House

In the traditional folk concept the tiger is ingenious and able to keep evil away. Hence, making a paper-cut of a fierce tiger with red paper is considered to be able to prevent evil and can surely keep the family safe and healthy.