

FOLK CRAFT HERITAGE OF CHINA



# FOLK PAPERCUTS



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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*Compiled by Xu Zhimin*



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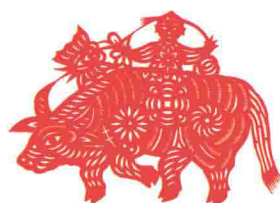
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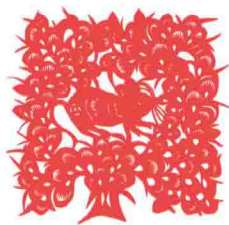


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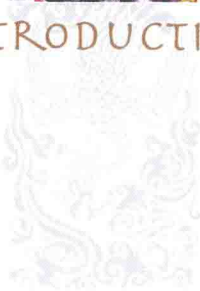
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## INTRODUCTION



The papercut is a type of art using scissors or an engraver to cut out designs from paper. It demands superb craft as well as a feel for paper and shape, focusing on shadow and contour, and has become very popular among Chinese people.

## 1. Origin and Development of Papercuts

On the seventh day of the first lunar month in ancient times, people would cut out designs on paper, gold and silver foil, or silk, to paste them on screens, to wear on the head or to give as gifts. The designs included human figures, plants and geometric designs. Papercuts originated in the Chinese rituals of ceremonial offerings to immortals or ancestors, and also from this custom of cutting out designs.

The earliest papercuts preserved are those made in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, unearthed in Xinjiang, including the "horses and posy design" and "monkeys and posy design." The technique involved folding the paper along the diagonal, twice, three or four times, and then cutting out designs along the four even sides.



Glossy ganoderma:  
Qing Dynasty, Shenyang

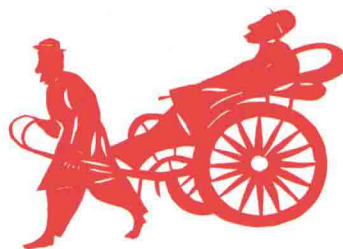


Pomegranate with a hundred seeds:  
Qing Dynasty, Shenyang





Carrying a bridal sedan-chair:  
Qing Dynasty, Beijing



Rickshaw: Qing Dynasty, Beijing

From the 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, people used papercut designs on jewelry, shoes and hats, as well as copper mirrors. Examples are the papercuts ornamenting buns, unearthed in the Turpan Basin; hollowed-out designs for decorating leather hats, unearthed in Xi'an; and engraved gold and silver foil for decorating the back of copper mirrors, unearthed in Zhengzhou.

From the 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the economy and culture thriving, papercuts were also used in making porcelain and indigo printed fabric. For example, in the Jizhou Kiln, bases were pasted with papercuts when glazed and then put into the kiln and made into porcelain; and indigo printed fabric unearthed in Shanxi had been made by applying paste on hollowed-out paper plates with designs on the fabric so as to leave the designs on it and then dyeing to make the designs appear.





From the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, papercuts were used in *jiasha* lamps and folding fans. The *jiasha* lamp had a lampshade framework, covered with two layers of spun yarn; between the yarn were papercuts with flower, plant, animal or bird designs. Reflected against the yarn, the designs seemed to be clothed in mist. The folding fan had a papercut placed between two layers of fan covers made of transparent stencil tissue paper, to be seen clearly in light. The fan covers were decorated with a swastika, beehive or cloud design.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, papercuts, which had long been popular among ordinary people, entered the imperial court to adorn the life of the imperial family. For example, the Kuninggong (Hall of Earthly Tranquility) in the Imperial Palace has dragon and phoenix papercut designs on the ceilings of the hall and walls of its corridors. It is said that people cut out designs of deer, crane and pine trees, painted and then pasted them on court robes, resembling embroidered designs.

In summary, after papercuts appeared, the art form began to spread across the country until it reached the widest range, largest quantity and most designs among all the arts. It was to be found in all types of folk activity and in the daily life of Chinese people.



Papercuts: Zhou Yu Workshop,  
Weixian County, Hebei

## II. Uses of Papercuts

Papercuts may be classified by its usage into the following four types:

**Papercuts as décor:** Traditional Chinese residential houses had an earthen and wooden structure, with wooden lattice windows pasted with a layer of white *pizhi* (tough paper made from the best fiber of mulberry trees, etc.), providing a good foundation for decoration with papercuts. *Chuanghua* (papercuts as window decoration) was most popular for room décor. In addition, people decorated any available space with papercuts. For instance, they pasted papercuts on walls around beds, chimney vents, ceilings, hung them on door lintels or beams. During festival days, colorful papercuts fluttered in the air, evoking a cheerful ambiance.

**Papercuts for celebrations:** Chinese people attach importance to the unity of content and form in terms of wedding customs and offering rituals to deities or ancestors. Ceremonies are also decorated with papercuts. For example, the flowery wedding papercuts used on utensils in Fujian and Shandong have a special design outlined with flowers and filled with leaves. The papercuts placed on offerings to deities or ancestors are usually in the shape of a pig's head with some auspicious designs filling the insides, signifying a fat pig delivering treasures, and are thus called "Pig-Head Papercuts." In addition, there are candlestick papercuts for wedding and birthday ceremonies, lantern papercuts for lanterns, as well as gift papercuts for pastries, longevity noodles and eggs, and papercuts pasted on the base of incense burners used in



offering sacrifices to deities or ancestors. Papercut decorations fully imbue these ritual occasions with an auspicious ambiance.

**Papercuts for funerals and prayer rituals:** For funeral or prayer rituals for the deceased, people use funeral streamers, prayer sheets and paper offerings. The funeral streamer is a long narrow white flag carried in a funeral procession by the eldest son of the deceased and then placed on the grave mound; for guiding the soul of the deceased. The streamer usually has a geometric or linked coin design. Prayer sheets are written by monks or Taoist priests on the day of the prayer ritual and hung on the beam of the scripture hall, identifying the name of the household and the reason for asking the deity's favor; the paper usually has an auspicious design such as a "magpie on a plum tree" or a "phoenix flying among peonies." Paper offerings, usually of ghosts, deities, human figures or beasts, are burnt when the deceased is buried. It is a custom of the Chinese people to arrange funeral and prayer rituals for a dead family member. In the tradition of burning paper offerings, papercuts played a solemn and economic role on such occasions. However, nowadays this practice is rarely seen anymore.



Sample papercut: Ren Yude Workshop,  
Weixian County, Hebei



Sample papercut: Ren Yude Workshop,  
Weixian County, Hebei

**Papercuts for embroidery design:** Since papercuts can be quickly cut, it has become feasible for women to make embroidered designs. The embroidery designs are usually cut out on white paper and used on shoes, pillows, bibs, hats and sleeves.

### III. Artistic Features of Papercuts

The artistic features of papercuts are determined by the material (paper) and tools (scissors and cutter), and are as follows:

In terms of format, the papercut is hollowed out yet linked, with the paper cut out with scissors or a cutter. Since the design is openwork, the lines cut in relief are connected while those cut in intaglio are broken; if not done this way, the papercut will form no design. This is an important feature in the art of paper-cutting.

In terms of picture composition, the papercut is a combination and compression of various designs. As papercuts can barely demonstrate relationship between proportion and perspective in a three-dimensional space based on the connected subject matter of the images, people adopted a method combining various designs, and including celestial bodies, buildings, human figures or animals in the same tableau. Thus we often see a form of "scenes layer upon layer" or that of "different scenes separated by one facet."

In terms of image, the papercut is exaggerated and compact. Limitations of tools and materials demand that the papercut displays features of its design and also has



naturally linked lines. Thus, people adopted a method of shadow composition to cut out the contours in an exaggerated or concise way, and based on this, added some structural lines and adornments inside the contours, enriching the decorative effect of papercuts.

In terms of cutting techniques, those of the papercut are reliable and clever. The papercut demands special attention to the cutting pattern and techniques. The cutting pattern includes direct cutting, which is from the inside to the outside or from the outside to the inside; symmetrical cutting, which cuts symmetrical designs on half-folded paper; and folded cutting, which cuts even and repeated designs on freely folded paper. The cutting techniques include mainly two types: "saw-tooth" and "crescent." The former type is produced naturally as a result of the movement of the paper and scissors or cutter; it displays the sense of quality and quantity as well as structure by using the changes in the saw-tooth length, density, degree of curve and flexibility, and combining features of different images, such as leaves, animal fur and bird feathers, as well as beards and moustaches. The latter type is an arc ornament also produced naturally in the process of cutting, mainly cutting in intaglio, which displays features of clothing or other images.



Tools including a wax board and cutters: Ren Yude Workshop,  
Weixian County, Hebei

## IV. Papercut Styles and Schools

In general, Chinese papercuts are divided into two types in terms of style: the simple, rough and bold northern variety; and the prettier, sprightly and exquisite southern version. However, papercuts also have distinct features in different regions.



Cutting the paper: Ren Yude Workshop,  
Weixian County, Hebei



Point dyeing: Ren Yude Workshop,  
Weixian County, Hebei

**The Yellow River Valley:** The Yellow River valley is the birthplace of Chinese civilization, as well as a treasury of Chinese folk arts. In terms of subject matter, auspicious papercut designs such as the “snake coiling around a rabbit,” the “eagle pursuing a rabbit” and the “baby with two pigtailed” have been passed down; while some recorded ancient mythology and legends, such as the “Eight Immortals,” “twelve zodiac animals symbolizing the year in which a person is born” and “the mouse marries off his daughter,” each in a distinctive style.

Shanxi papercuts follow a style in the Qin (221-206 BC) and Han (206 BC-220 AD) dynasties: the composition is simple and bold, and the lines smooth and exaggerated. The paper is usually of a single bright color, such as red, yellow, blue or green – red being the most commonly used. Papercut themes in Inner Mongolia are usually traditional representations, such as the “eagle pursuing a rabbit,” “treasure bowl,” “pomegranate with a hundred seeds” and “snake coiling around a rabbit.”





Shaanxi papercuts, simple, striking and lively, are very popular. The form maintains the vitality of the Han papercut. In Yan'an, Ansai, Qianyang and Jiaxian counties, the technique of carving in relief makes a clear distinction between black and white, while that of cutting in intaglio is more direct; both are applied mostly on single-color paper. In Wuqi and Xunyi counties, papercuts are mostly carved in hollow relief, and the paper is of various colors. In the Baoji area, Xuan paper, a high-quality rice paper made in Xuancheng or Jingxian of Anhui Province, is used for papercuts, with such bright colors such as red, green and yellow used to make the papercuts lively. This technique is also used in the towns of Lingbao and Anyang in Henan Province. Henan papercuts feature evenly applied yellow, green and rose colors.

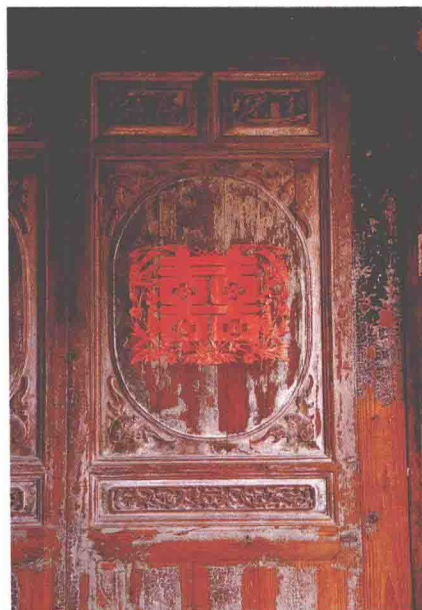
Gansu papercuts have a long history, and a rough exaggerative style. Papercuts in eastern Gansu are simple and unsophisticated, as represented by those found in Qingyang City, and most cover folk customs; those in western Gansu are simple and bright, as found in Pingliang City; while those in central Gansu have beautiful, neat lines and a splendid composition of pictures. The paper is of single color, usually red, green, white or black.

Shandong papercuts are divided into two types in terms of style. The first type is the rough and bold papercuts found in most areas of Shandong, as in the cities of Gaomi and Binzhou, and can be traced to the same origins as papercuts in the other provinces of the Yellow River valley. Pictures are done in different shades of a single color, such as black, white and brown, with a saw-tooth design; they are simple yet not lackluster, sturdy and unsophisticated. The other type covers coastal areas in Jiaodong; and the papercuts feature a combination of line and curves, mainly lines, and are gentle, delicate and meticulous.

**Hubei, Hunan and Southwest China:** Papercuts in Hubei, Hunan, and among ethnic minorities in Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan are mostly embroidery designs for clothes. The subject matter includes "butterflies playing with lotus flowers" and auspicious plants.



Door hangings: Cai family residence,  
Quanzhou, Fujian



"Double happiness" papercut: Cai family  
residence, Quanzhou, Fujian

The most representative papercuts in Hubei are produced in the Xiaogan area, while the most representative papercuts in Hunan are made in Shanjiang and Fenghuang counties. The widely adopted technique of cutting involves carving delicate, complicated and neat designs out of 10 to 20 layers of paper with a chisel.

Yunnan papercuts have a local flavor, with such designs as elephants, oxen, sheep, Buddhist pagodas, birds and flowers. With a simple shape, they are primitive and unsophisticated, yet imbued with a mysterious and religious flavor.

Guizhou papercuts are famous for decorating the sleeves, aprons and hats of the Miao people in Taijiang County, as well as those used on the braces, hats and shoes of the Dong people in Rongjiang County. Papercut designs are closely connected with ancient forms of worship as well as with Miao legends, such as dragons, fish, and "mother butterflies," and a Miao man and woman riding a dragon.

