
Analysis of the Folk Culture and Spiritual Beliefs of Shanxi Paper-cutting

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Abstract: As one of the traditional Chinese handicrafts, Shanxi paper-cutting carries a wealth of folk culture and spiritual beliefs. By studying Shanxi paper-cutting, this paper aims to reveal its importance in folk culture and spiritual beliefs. Firstly, this paper will discuss the application of Shanxi paper-cutting in rural funeral ceremonies and traditional festivals, and analyze its mysterious meaning in expressing mourning for the deceased and sacrificial ceremonies. Secondly, this paper will analyze the decorative application of paper-cutting as a traditional handicraft in religious temple fairs and sacrificial activities, and dig deep into its close connection with local beliefs and god worship. Finally, this paper will focus on the inheritance of paper-cutting in modern life, and analyze how it integrates new cultural elements into contemporary society to provide spiritual comfort for the public. Through the analysis of the folk culture connotation of Shanxi paper-cutting, this paper aims to present the profound heritage of this traditional craft and reveal its irreplaceable role in the inheritance of folk culture and spiritual beliefs.

Keywords: Shanxi paper-cutting; Folk culture; Spiritual beliefs; Inheritance

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1. The history and tradition of paper-cutting

Shanxi paper-cutting, as one of the traditional Chinese handicrafts, has a long history and rich cultural connotation. Its origins can be traced back to ancient times, and it has undergone a long process of development and has become a unique art form in Shanxi. In the development of Chinese paper-cutting art, Shanxi paper-cutting occupies a place. Shanxi paper-cutting is represented by Guangling paper-cutting, and its history can be traced back to the legend of King Zhou Cheng of the Zhou Dynasty ^[1]. Early Shanxi paper-cutting was often closely linked to religion and sacrificial activities. In ancient societies, people expressed their reverence for the gods and their yearning for life through paper-cutting. This tradition continues to this day and has become a treasure of Shanxi culture. During the Cultural Revolution, paper-cut works were often neglected to some extent because they often involved religious elements. However, after the reform and opening up, Shanxi paper-cutting has been re-emphasized, not only in the local respect, but also gradually moving towards the international stage, showing the unique charm of traditional Chinese culture.

Shanxi paper-cutting is widely used in local culture and is properly integrated with the local folk life of Shanxi, and its picture has a strong local flavor. In traditional festivals and religious ceremonies, people often use paper cutouts to decorate. These paper-cut works not only have a strong religious color, but also incorporate the local people's yearning

for a better life. In addition, in family life, Shanxi paper-cutting has become a culturally rich decoration, creating a unique atmosphere for the family.

2. The characteristics of folk paper-cutting

Due to its unique regional reasons, Shanxi Province has successfully preserved many traditional cultures, among which the style and characteristics of Shanxi paper-cutting are particularly prominent. Shanxi's paper-cut works feature people, animals, and plants, and the scenes often depict colorful scenes of festival celebrations or family life. Interestingly, these paper-cutting artists did not receive a Western art education, but they were able to skillfully present three-dimensional graphics on a flat surface through their thinking.

The structure of Shanxi's paper-cut works is unique and weird, but it exudes a primitive and pure sense of pattern art. This unique artistic expression shows the unique aesthetic concept and creativity of paper-cutting artists. Through their unique knife techniques and compositions, they successfully transform ordinary life scenes and traditional culture into paper-cut works of art full of vitality and profound connotation^[2]. These paper-cut works are known for their unique visual effects and distinctive Shanxi cultural characteristics. Despite the lack of influence from Western art education, paper-cutting artists incorporate their unique understanding of life, festivals, and family into their works through traditional techniques. This makes Shanxi paper-cutting unique in the entire field of paper-cutting art and has become a vivid embodiment of traditional cultural inheritance.

3. The folk cultural connotation of paper-cutting

3.1. The status of paper-cutting in traditional festivals

Shanxi paper-cutting is widely used in the decoration of places in traditional festivals. In traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, and Chung Yeung Festival, people often hang or place paper-cut works in their homes, temple fairs, markets and other places. These paper-cut works are often festive in theme, with colorful patterns to create a cheerful and peaceful atmosphere and add to the festive atmosphere. As an art form rich in cultural connotation, paper-cutting conveys people's pursuit of a better life and a better expectation for the future. In traditional festivals, people express various blessings and prayers for family happiness, career success, and good health through paper cutting. This traditional custom of expressing emotions through paper-cutting makes paper-cutting play an important role in festivals^[3,4].

3.2 The application of paper-cutting in religious sacrifice ceremonies

In religious ceremonies, Shanxi paper-cutting is often used to worship gods. As a beautiful handicraft, paper-cutting is used to decorate places of worship and dedicate beautiful patterns to the gods^[5]. These cut-outs may include symbols, motifs associated with the gods, and serve as decorations and expressions of reverence. Paper-cut works in religious ceremonies are also often used to express blessings and wishes to the gods. Paper-cut patterns often contain auspicious and peaceful meanings, and people pray to the gods for peace, happiness, health, etc. As a visual form, paper-cutting helps to deepen the devotee's understanding of the content of the prayer. The application of Shanxi paper-cutting in religious ceremonies is not only a sacrificial behavior, but also a promotion of religious culture. The patterns of paper-cut works may incorporate elements such as religious classics, myths and legends, and show the connotation of religious culture through the form of art, and provide a way for believers to participate in religious ceremonies (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Works by Shanxi Zhongyang paper-cutting artist Wang Jiru.

In rural Shanxi funeral ceremonies, white daylily paper is used to make “flags,” which are shaped and hung on the site through a paper-cutting process, a traditional ritual element that helps indicate the gender of the deceased. At the same time, yellow daylily paper is used to make paper money, which plays the role of mourning the deceased and paying tribute to ghosts and spirits during funerals.

These paper-cut “flags” and paper money not only show the profound cultural traditions of Shanxi’s rural areas, but also carry respect for the deceased and reverence for supernatural powers. The art of decoupage skillfully transforms paper into an image with a specific meaning, and through this unique expression, people convey feelings of remembrance of the deceased and prayers for the afterlife in funeral ceremonies.

The application of this traditional paper-cutting is not only unique in form, but also contains a deep understanding of life and death, and the relationship between man and God. Through “flags” and paper money made from paper cuts, the inhabitants of rural Shanxi continue this ancient and mysterious ritual and pass on cultural traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. It also reflects the reverence for life and death, as well as the belief in supernatural beings. These paper-cut works of art are not only a material expression, but also the inheritance of cultural spirit, adding a profound cultural connotation to the funeral ceremonies in rural Shanxi.

3.3. Paper-cut symbolic patterns and their beautiful meanings

As a treasure of traditional Chinese culture, Shanxi paper-cutting often contains profound meanings and symbols. Among them, the bat is given an auspicious symbol in Shanxi paper-cutting. This is because the pronunciation of “bat” (fú) is similar to “good fortune” (fú), so the bat motif often symbolizes happiness and auspiciousness^[6]. This element is often found in traditional festivals to bring blessings and good wishes. In Shanxi paper-cutting, the Fu character pattern is also the most classic and common, representing happiness, auspiciousness and good luck. As a strong symbol of wishes,

the word blessing often appears in the decoration of festivals and the Chinese New Year, creating a happy and peaceful atmosphere for people.

In wedding ceremonies, people often use dragon and phoenix motifs, because dragons and phoenixes are mythical beasts in traditional Chinese culture, representing power and auspiciousness, respectively. These patterns not only highlight the solemnity and festivity of the wedding, but also carry the best wishes for a happy marriage for the couple. Double happiness motifs, as well as pomegranate motifs that symbolize many children and grandchildren, are also commonly found in Shanxi paper-cutting, expressing good wishes for the happiness of the couple and the prosperity of the family. These patterns, rich in cultural connotation, vividly convey people's yearning and expectation for a better life through the paper-cutting process^[7].

Through its unique artistic language, Shanxi paper-cutting skillfully integrates meaning and symbolism into the pattern, which not only beautifies the environment but also inherits the profound cultural heritage and injects poetry and ritual into people's lives. It is not only an art form, but also a way of inheritance and expression of traditional culture, through which people convey deep emotions for a better life and blessings.

4. The interaction between paper-cutting and spiritual beliefs

As a traditional handicraft, paper-cutting presents a variety of mysterious and beautiful patterns with its exquisite skills, fully demonstrating the Shanxi people's respect and piety to the gods. These paper-cut patterns often contain auspicious and happy meanings, and by decorating the sacrificial places, they convey blessings to the gods and hope for auspiciousness and well-being. Paper-cutting is seen as a bridge between humans and gods, and through its expression, people convey their thoughts and reverence for the gods, deepening the ritual and sacredness of the rituals.

On religious occasions, people would use paper cuts to decorate places of worship, such as shrines, altars, etc. The choice of decoupage patterns is usually related to the attributes of the deity, the purpose of the sacrifice, to present a suitable theme. Offerings in rituals, such as flowers and fruits, are often paired with exquisite paper cuts to make the offerings more solemn and beautiful. In some religious celebrations, paper-cutting may be part of the performance. Skilled paper-cutting artists demonstrate the process of paper-cutting during the sacrificial ceremony, guiding devotees to better understand and participate in the sacrificial activities. This move not only added an artistic element to the sacrifice but also allowed believers to experience the essence of traditional culture and promote the charm of traditional Chinese culture^[8].

By expressing spiritual beliefs through paper-cutting, the people of Shanxi have inherited and demonstrated the profound connotations of traditional Chinese culture in their sacrificial activities. The artistry and sense of ritual of paper-cutting make religious ceremonies more solemn and beautiful, and also inject richer cultural connotations into beliefs.

5. The inheritance of Shanxi paper-cutting in modern life

As a treasure of traditional Chinese culture, Shanxi paper-cutting has been inherited and developed in modern life. In Datong City, Shanxi Province, during the Dragon Boat Festival, the folk still retain many traditional customs, including the habit of sticking horse talismans, scorpion talismans and ingots. These symbols, usually woven from five-colored paper, are widely used in every household to ward off evil spirits and pray for good fortune and peace. This tradition has a long history and has been passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the local people's desire to ward off evil spirits^[9].

In particular, the "double chicken picture" has become a unique symbol of the Dragon Boat Festival. In this pattern, two energetic chickens step on five poisons or mouthworms. As a masculine animal, the chicken is a symbol of auspiciousness and vitality, and is also regarded as a sacred object to ward off evil spirits and drive away ghosts in the traditional culture of the Datong area. The scene of the "two chickens" devouring the five poisons in the picture further deepens the meaning of fighting against the evil forces and places people's good wishes for a peaceful and peaceful life.

These customs reflect the local people's respect and love for traditional culture, and integrate the art of paper-cutting into daily life, making it a ritualistic and mysterious way of expression. The various symbols made through paper-cutting not only reflect the belief of Shanxi people in praying for blessings and peace, but also inherit the long-standing cultural tradition. These traditional customs have been preserved and carried forward in contemporary society, contributing to the unique charm of Shanxi's cultural inheritance and diversified development.

At the same time, Shanxi paper-cutting has been widely publicized in contemporary society through a variety of media. Traditional paper-cut works are displayed to the audience through museums, exhibitions, and cultural festivals, so that more people can understand and appreciate this art form. At the same time, with the help of the Internet platform, Shanxi paper-cutting artists share their works with global audiences, enhancing the international dissemination of traditional culture^[10].

In the field of design, Shanxi paper-cutting has found new applications. The patterns and shapes of paper-cutting are often used in modern product design, packaging design and other fields, injecting new fashion elements into traditional culture and giving products a deeper cultural connotation. This kind of fusion and innovation not only inherits the tradition, but also makes the art of paper-cutting closer to modern life.

In addition, Shanxi paper-cutting has emerged in the cultural and creative industries. More and more paper-cutting artists combine traditional skills with modern cultural elements to create works that have both a strong Shanxi style and the characteristics of the times. These novel paper-cut works have injected fresh vitality into the cultural and creative market, promoted the development of Shanxi's paper-cutting industry, and also promoted the development of Shanxi's tourism industry, so that more and more people know Shanxi's traditional culture and ancient architecture.

In general, Shanxi paper-cutting has been inherited in modern life, injecting traditional culture into modern society through a variety of ways and means, showing its vitality and charm in contemporary times.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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