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Scissors, paper, poetry: The interaction between Chinese folk art and contemporary art practice

Keywords

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between folk art in China and contemporary art practice. The main focus is on paper cutting and the work of Lu Shengzhong, a renowned Chinese artist and head of the Experimental Art Department of the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA), and how his work is rooted in the folk-art tradition of China.

The article starts with a short overview of the tradition of paper cutting in China. It then discusses the work of Lu Shengzhong. Lu has taken the traditional Chinese process of paper cutting to a new level, transforming it into large-scale monumental work. There is a brief examination of the practice of collecting folk art from the countryside in CAFA; and the folk-art study unit at the Experimental Art Department in which Lu's students learn about traditional Chinese crafts from extensive field research. Melanie Miller, senior lecturer in the Department of Design at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and co-author of this article, attended a paper-cutting workshop given by Lu Shengzhong at MMU in 2010; the final section of

the article discusses the body of work made by Miller in response to the workshop. Through Lu and Miller's work we see how the ancient art of paper cutting becomes transformed.

History of paper cutting in China

China, along with many other countries, has a long tradition of paper cutting. 'The Chinese, who first invented paper as we know it, started cutting more than a thousand years before most Europeans had even seen a piece of paper' (Avella 2011: 9).

In 1959, five paper cuts were discovered in an archaeology site in Xinjiang province, they are the oldest paper cuts known to exist and date back to the Northern dynasties (386 AD–581 AD). Art historian Wang Bomin (2006) considers them as the starting point for studying the origins of paper cutting.

'Paper cuttings were originally buried with the dead or burned at funeral ceremonies [...] As early as the [twelfth century] there is evidence of professional paper-cutting craftsmen' (Mao 2004: 9). According to popular myth the first paper cut was created in the time of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–24 AD):

Legend goes that when Emperor Wu's beloved Concubine Li died, he was in deep sorrow. An alchemy lover named Shao Weng [...] from the Kingdom of Qi [...] used witchcraft to evoke Li's spirit by cutting her silhouette on hemp paper, which was believed to be the inception of the art of paper cutting.

(Duan 2010: 5)

Paper cutting became ubiquitous throughout China, used for the decoration of houses and as part of celebrations, religious rituals and festivals all year round. Over the centuries different styles developed in different areas. In some places there is a tendency towards patterns, in others the paper cuts are figurative. There are two methods of making paper cuts: by the use of a knife; and by using scissors. Paper may be folded before cutting, to make symmetrical decorations. Colour used may be multichromatic, as exemplified by Ku Shulan, discussed below, or monochromatic. Red is a particularly popular colour, denoting good luck.

A visual language has developed in different regions, with particular motifs and symbols conveying specific meanings. For example, in the north-west of the Shaanxi Province: 'it is said that people in the Shang dynasty have birds as their ancestors. In these works children hold birds or chickens in their hands, and some even grow birds or chickens from their hair, clothes and even feet' (Duan 2010: 11). Paper cuts may include symbols to bestow luck or exorcise disaster, scenes commenting on life or describing events. Creating paper cuts is seen as part of a system of renewal, paper cuts are remade year after year for festivals and celebrations, marking the passage of time.

Paper cutting in China evolved alongside other folk crafts, such as shadow puppets and Chinese opera costumes, sharing comparable aesthetics and images. Many examples of this can be seen in the journal *Echo*, a publication specializing in Chinese folk art. People who practised paper cutting were largely peasants, especially women, as paper cutting was an integral part of creating embroidery patterns, another handcraft practised by women in particular. Patterns are drawn and then cut out, and then applied to cloth, either by appliqué or by embroidery.

At the seminal Yan'an Forum in 1942 Mao Zedong, the leader of the Communist Party, gave talks on what the role of literature and art within society should be (Mao 1967). Two of the main points were that art should reflect the lives of the masses, and that art should serve the advancement of socialism. This led to an encouragement of peasant-focused art and literature. After the Communist takeover in 1949 there was increased recognition of the importance of all types of folk art in China: wood cuts, paper cuts, dough figurines, shadow puppets, and so on.

Chinese folk art has been defined as

A visual art created by ordinary people to meet ordinary social needs. The definition of folk art is relative to the definition of the art of the Imperial Palace, the art of aristocrats, and the art of scholars and of the literati, or professional artists. Firstly it is a communal art created by millions in the working class, not the work of a few career artists. It is the art of the labourers, not the professionals; it is amateur, not specialized. Secondly, its social function makes it an art of necessity, used in everyday life, production, rites and ceremonies, and beliefs and taboos. It was not intended as a commercial commodity, nor to serve political needs.

(Cultural China 2007)

Research into paper cutting

Scholarly research into Chinese paper cutting began during the first half of the twentieth century, when scholars and artists trained in the West started to investigate Chinese folk art whilst establishing research institutes on folklore, ethnology and anthropology (Xu 2000). During the 1930s and 1940s researchers from the Academia Sinica and the National Central Museum undertook field studies and built collections of folk artefacts containing examples of fine folk arts from several regions in China. Today the collection can be seen in the online digital archive of the Museum of the Institute of Ethnology, the Academia Sinica. The museum is currently showcasing some of these artefacts in the Archival Exhibition of China's Southern Frontiers in the 1930s in Taipei (Museum of Institute of Ethnology 2013). Although it was a period of turmoil, as China was then embroiled in the war against the Japanese invasion, those initial research activities on folk artefacts facilitated further interest in folk-art studies.

During the Second World War many scholars, writers and artists fled the Japanese occupation to join the resistance led by the Communist forces in the northern Shaanxi area, where they created literature and art to assist the resistance efforts, and they also started to collect local folk music, songs, New Year prints and paper cuts (Da Luyi 2012; Xu 2000). Mao's talks at the Yan'an Forum encouraged people such as the poet Ai Qing and the artist Jiang Feng, who went on to edit the first book of paper cuts, *Folk Paper Cuts*, in 1946. The book was later re-edited and published in Shanghai in 1949 entitled *Paper Cuts Collection of the North-West* (Wu 2008). In the foreword of the book, Ai Qing described their exciting journey of appreciation of this 'ultra-refreshing and ultra-pure' art of folk paper cuts (Chen 2008).

After the People's Republic of China was established in mainland China by the Communist Party in 1949, the policy on literature and art continued to follow the guidance of the Yan'an Forum. To some extent this was beneficial for the study of folk art. The government set up small institutional organizations known as 'Cultural Stations' in towns and villages, so local folk art practices could be monitored and encouraged (Wang 2006). Meanwhile academics within literature and art were encouraged to make their work relevant to the masses. Lecturers and students from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing were sent to the countryside for field studies each year. This practice has become a tradition that still continues. Although instigated in order to serve socialist ideology, those trips to the countryside kept the connection between grassroots folk art and art education in the universities alive.

In 1980, promoted by Jiang Feng, by then the head of CAFA, Yang Xianrang founded the Department of New Year Prints and Picture-Story Book Studies. In 1984 it was renamed the Department of Folk Art. Yang then formed a research team with MA students and his colleagues, including Feng Zhen and Jin Zhilin. Between 1984 and 1989 there were fourteen field trips to investigate folk art in the Yellow River basin area (Yang 2003). For the first time in China folk art was officially the subject of study in a higher education art institute. Thus folk art became a legitimate subject of serious study. Lu Shengzhong was one of the MA students of the Folk Art Department and joined Yang's research visits on six occasions (Yang 2003).

The paper-cutting artists

The Yellow River Basin area is the cradle of Chinese civilization, and the home of a rich variety of folk art. Yang Xianrang (2003) pointed out in his book, 'The mother of the Folk Arts is (*sic*) basically women using everyday residual materials to produce amateur artistic creations. They make good use of waste materials, such as scraps of cloth and paper.' Paper cutting is one of the typical folk arts that are mainly practised by women. In northern Shaanxi, a popular folk lyric states: 'When men [are] sad they kick-dance, when women [are] sad they pick up scissors' (Song 1998). A survey conducted by the local cultural station showed that nearly every woman in the Yan'an region knew how to make paper cuts; however, for the most part they copied the motifs made by their seniors; few knew how to create new

images themselves. According to Song Ruxin (1998), a worker in the cultural station, there were forty or so women who could be described as paper-cutting artists living in the Yan'an area from 1978 to 1996.

These paper-cutting artists demonstrate the true meaning of folk paper cutting. Since the 1950s some of these distinguished paper-cutting artists have been discovered by officials and workers of the cultural stations and brought to prominence by the researchers from the higher art institutes. They are known as 'grannies' – a generic name given in China to elderly women. Ku Shulan (1920–2004) embellished her home, a one-room cave dwelling, with decorative, colourful paper cuts all over the walls. In an interview recorded before her death, Ku Shulan said, 'I've been paper cutting all my life. I often see a female celestial being decorated all over with flowers coming up to me in a garden. It is I, the paper-cutting goddess' (Ku Shulan 2010). Ku Shulan was invited to exhibit at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing in 1995 as part of a world conference on women. She gained international fame when the title 'Master of Chinese folk paper cutting' was bestowed on her by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 1996. Zhang Linzhao (1912–?) is another well-known paper-cutting goddess. She described the sad story of her life to visitors whilst cutting out images. Married three times – twice widowed – she lost all of her six children. Her work often depicted heroines from ancient tales, as if those heroines could give her the strength to overcome her wretched existence (Song 1998).

These 'paper-cutting goddesses' were often illiterate, and rarely left their villages. However, scissors and paper were the perfect way to voice their cultural heritage and tell stories of joy and sorrow in their lives; the paper cuts were the beautiful poems of their generation. When the lecturers and students of CAFA came to know these grannies and their paper cuts, they were not only deeply moved by the contrast between the harsh living conditions and the tenacious vitality of these people, but were most impressed by the free spirit presented in their paper cuts. That is the charm of folk art that awed contemporary artists, including Lu Shengzhong (Lu 2010).

Lu Shengzhong

Born in rural China in 1952, Professor Lu Shengzhong had a deep admiration for the paper cutting of his mother and the peasant women that surrounded him in his childhood.

My mother had a very skilled pair of hands. She made paper cuts, embroidered, drew floral decorations, decorated wedding rooms, cooked mantou [dough] when visiting relatives and did many other things. These are all beautiful details of everyday life. I was fascinated by it and would participate. I lived in this kind of cultural environment. It is hard to separate folk art from the daily lives of ordinary people.

(Lu 2007: 97)



Figure 1: Jian Hua Niangzi/The Paper-Cutting Goddess, by Ku Shulan. Photo courtesy of Lu Shengzhong.

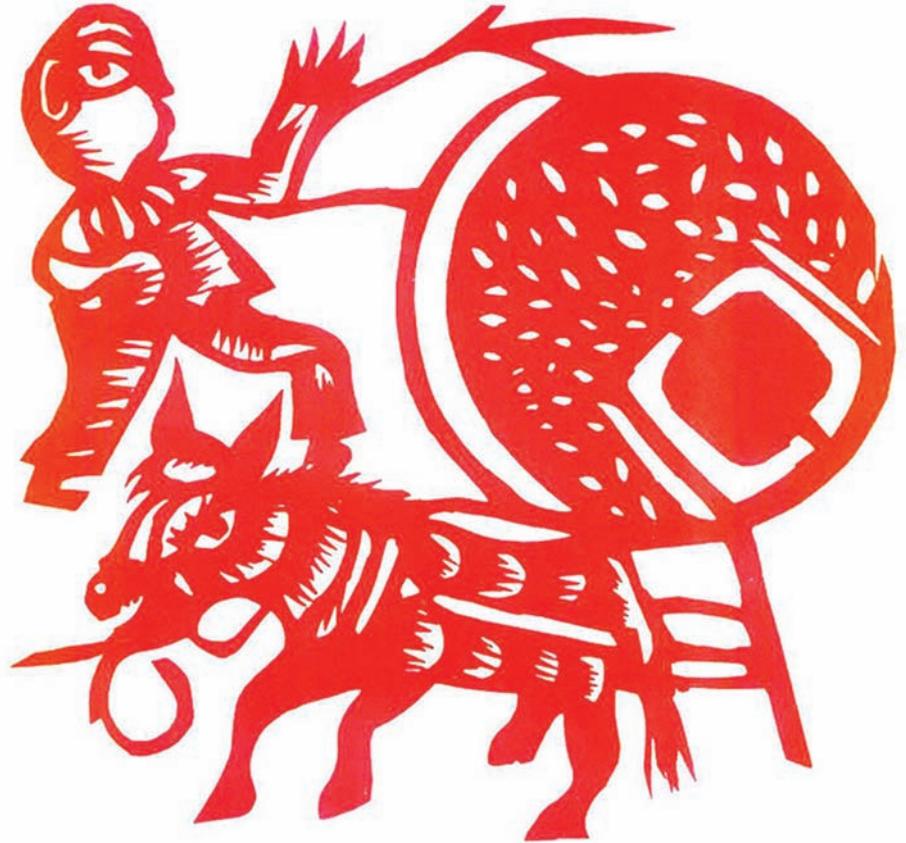


Figure 2: Nian Gu/Milling Grain, a window decoration by Zhang Linzhao. Photo courtesy of Lu Shengzhong.



Figure 3: Lu Shengzhong learns from the paper-cutting artist Ma Shenglan in Ansai County in 1989. Photo courtesy of Lu Shengzhong.

Lu studied art at Shangdong Normal University, graduating in 1978. He completed his Master's degree from the Department of Folk Art at CAFA in 1987. The inheritance of paper cutting from his mother and his study of folk art can be clearly seen in his early work. He had a joint exhibition in China's National Art Gallery with artist Xu Bing in 1988; his paper-cut installation *Chi Chu/Walk Slowly* was exhibited alongside Xu Bing's *Tian Shu/A Book from the Sky*. Consisting of

[...] hundreds of hand-made energetic red-coloured figurines based on Chinese paper-cut style of the North-western countryside. The work expressed a wild energy of life belonging to Chinese folk art, which had been left out of official art for a long time.

(Shao 2011)

Wu Hung, professor of Art History at the University of Chicago described the show as a 'grand spectacle' and 'a temple filled with totemlike images, footprints suspended in midair, and silhouette patterns accompanied by illegible writing' (Olesen 2001: 78).

Lu's extensive field research into folk art gave him a distinctive language of artistic expression. He was able to distil this knowledge and understanding into his art.

Traditional Chinese folk art is not like today's contemporary art because you are not supposed to hang it up and look at it. You are supposed to use it in your daily life, to feel it and to wear it. Today we talk about contemporary art as having a more spiritual function, but I think in comparison the foundations of folk art are much stronger, they are related to daily life, and the important things like life, birth, marriage [...].

(Lu 2007: 97)

Since 1990, Lu Shengzhong has settled with a unique image 'Xiao Hong Ren'/'the little red figure', which he extracted from traditional cultural symbols and motifs of folk paper cutting. 'I did not invent it [...] similar forms can be found in early civilizations from many parts of the world' (Lu 2000: 6). Lu has used this basic element in many different configurations and formats. Often the work is monumental in scale, belying the humble nature of the material used.

In Lu Shengzhong's hands this silhouette has come to stand for many things. Ranging in size from miniscule to monumental, it has come to stand for Lu Shengzhong himself. He is the artist of the little red figure and it has become, as it were, his representative. At the same time, it stands for something much broader in scope and deeper in meaning.

(Mao 2004: 12)



Figure 4: Lu Shengzhong, Chi Chu/Walk Slowly, paper cut installation, China National Art Museum, 1988. Photo courtesy of Lu Shengzhong.

Three key elements can be identified in Lu Shengzhong's work. Firstly, the importance of the use of both the positive and the negative forms created by cutting: within the body of work entitled *Cutting Paper, Calling Soul* he 'was making a statement against the separation of body and soul in contemporary thought' (Mao 2004: 12). The ideas of yin and yang are embedded within Lu's work; each positive paper figure has its matching negative silhouette, the two are complementary and the one cannot be created without the other.

In the process of making works in preparation for my exhibition of paper-cuttings at the China Art Gallery, irregular pieces of paper would often fall as I cut, and within a few days, these filled the floor. I needed to clean up the room, and I should have taken these scraps as garbage and thrown them out. But I didn't have the heart to do so, because on these wasted scraps of paper was visible the same spirit and emotion as in the 'formal designs' I had cut out; I was unable to say for sure which was 'better-looking', which was the subject and which the object [...].
(Lu 2004: 29)

The second element is the use of handcraft skills. The thousands of images are all painstakingly cut from paper by hand, either by scissors or with a knife. Up to ten layers are cut at a time. For Lu the actual process of cutting is an important part of the work. Because the work is hand cut, each image might look the same, but is not. For Lu this means the work has more humanity, and each piece is unique. Also, if the work were to be laser cut an important concept within the work, the use of the negative and the positive, would no longer be an integral part of the work: '[...] with laser cutting part of the paper is burnt away, so you don't end up with the negative and positive shapes. I would find this wasteful, having to lose one or the other' (Lu 2007: 98).

The third element is the scale of the work. The creation of the large installations becomes a major logistical operation: Lu works with a team of helpers, and the whole process of creating and installing the work is meticulously planned. The work *The Book of Humanity: The Empty Book* exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum's 'Out of the Ordinary: Spectacular Craft' in 2007, demonstrates his remarkable skill. 'Lu Shengzhong creates stunning installations made up of a multitude of painstakingly hand produced individual pieces using the traditional technique of papercutting. His work re-interprets the imagery and craftsmanship of Chinese folk art on an unprecedented scale' (Britton Newell 2007:11).

Lu can be quite dismissive of the idea of 'art for art's sake' that does not serve a function. He sees contemporary art as striving to have a spiritual dimension, but sees more spirituality in folk art (Lu 2007: 97).

I selected paper as my medium because the art is very delicate and not easy to keep. But for me what's more important is the spiritual connection, the process, than it being kept forever.



Figure 5: Lu Shengzhong, Jianzhi Zhaohun/Cutting Paper, Calling Soul, paper cut installation, Beijing Contemporary Art Museum, 1991. Photo courtesy of Lu Shengzhong.

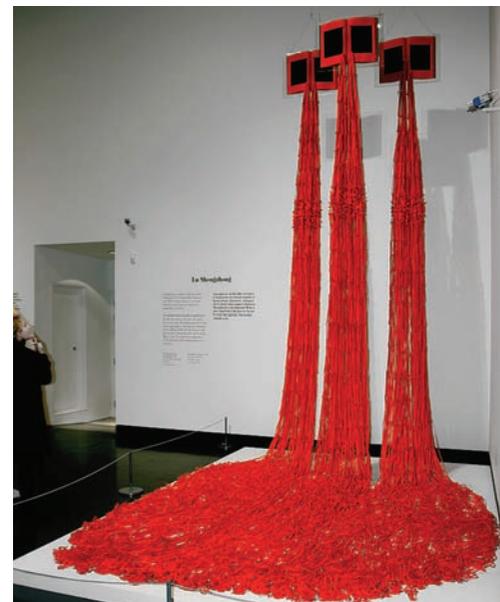


Figure 6: Lu Shengzhong, The Book of Humanity: Empty Book, paper cut installation, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2007. Photo courtesy of Lu Shengzhong.

I use this paper to cut this little red figure to demonstrate the delicate fragility of human beings. Ephemeral. A human's life is shorter than a paper's thickness [...] the paper is thin and fragile, using scissors I can cut four or five at one time, if I use a knife as much as twenty or thirty. When you fold it symmetrically, there is always a negative and a positive imprint. The precision. You can trust this format because it is exact. That's why I use paper, because it has an honesty and cannot lie.

(Lu 2007: 98)

With the opening up of China there is much interest in the art currently emerging from that country, and in the relationship between art and the state (The Saatchi Gallery 2008; Gladston et al 2012). Lu Shengzhong studied at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing in the 1980s. For many of Lu's contemporaries it was important to embrace the formats and themes of art in the West; for Lu Shengzhong rescuing the cultural heritage of China was more important. He did not share the views of his contemporaries that 'the moon in the West is brighter than the moon in China' (Lu 2009).

Being an artist and author (he has documented his research into wood cuts and paper cutting in a series of books) are not the only roles for Lu Shengzhong; he is also an educator, having taught in CAFA since he graduated. He is now the director and professor of the Experimental Art Department in CAFA. He positioned his department as 'under the background of mutual-constraining and multi-polarized modern and contemporary art frame, rooting the teaching and learning deeply in the rich soil of traditional Chinese culture' (CAFA 2013: online). His atelier for MA study in 2013 is about the 'Art of Paper'. He wants his students to be able to integrate the language, format and experience of the art of paper in the past and the present, in China and other countries, and to find a language of lasting expression in order to undertake the historical cultural mission of the country that invented paper (Lu 2012: online). He said in his talk at MMU in 2010 that his mission is, as it always will be, to hand down the research of folk art to his students and the generations beyond.

The folk art study unit

As discussed above, field studies have long been an important component of academic study at CAFA, and Lu Shengzhong has designed this study unit for his students to focus on learning about indigenous Chinese folk art. Co-authors of this article Miller and Zhou had the opportunity to observe the learning outcomes of the unit when they visited CAFA in May 2010. An exhibition of the field study undertaken by the second-year students was on show at the CAFA gallery. Two field trips had taken place, one investigating indigo dyeing, the other the making of bamboo and paper lion heads in Fenghuang County, Hunan Province. The work on display demonstrated the meticulous documentation and thorough study that is done by the students. The exhibition provided a



Figure 7: Lu Shengzhong, Zha xi de le/Good Luck, art performance, Yamdrok Lake, Tibet, 2007. Photo courtesy of Lu Shengzhong.



Figure 8: CAFA students' research, Folk Study Unit, 2010. Photo courtesy of Melanie Miller.

comprehensive account as to how the research is carried out: there were more than 2000 photographs documenting the process of making the lion heads, also a documentary film, and detailed notes and drawings to record the process of making, covering everything from materials used to tools utilized. The research culminated in the construction of a lion head with the local makers. The field trips generally consist of two-week visits, living and working in a village to get an in-depth understanding of a specific process.

By undertaking this detailed research Lu Shengzhong's students are then able to incorporate folk-art elements into their own artistic practice. Miller and Zhou saw works by Lu's former MA student Wu Jianan in the meeting room of the department. These were large-scale, fastidiously made paper cuts on the theme of ancient Chinese myths. Other works by Wu made from metal foil were clearly informed by his study of paper cutting.

Lu Shengzhong's mission of promoting folk art has gone beyond CAFA. His work has been exhibited around the world, including in America, Japan, Korea, Germany, Italy, Russia and the United Kingdom, and thus Lu has become an advocate of the humble art of paper cutting, and he has brought his teaching into educational establishments outside China.

Paper-cutting workshop at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)

In 2010 Lu Shengzhong travelled to Manchester Metropolitan University to give a series of lectures about his work, about art education in China, and about CAFA. These lectures were accompanied by paper-cutting workshops. Having seen Lu's work in the 'Out of the Ordinary' exhibition Miller was keen to meet the man who had created these extraordinary artworks and learn more about the ideas behind them, how they were created and the context for the work. Lu was very patient in teaching his new pupils – a diverse group of staff and students from a range of different courses at MMU. First, a series of simple exercises were taught. Once a certain familiarity with the handling of scissors and paper had been achieved the students were instructed to carefully copy Lu's dextrous cutting. Strange figures emerged from a folded sheet of paper, sprouting chickens and flowers from their hair and clothes. The students' paper cuts were not as fluid as Lu's, but the basic principles had been established. The importance of the 'continuous line': apart from a few small details, such as facial features, the entire figure is cut out in one continuous line. The significance of the positive and the negative: the need to keep every cut-out scrap of paper, no matter how small, so as to create an exact opposite.

After attending Lu's workshop, Miller found herself creating her own work with this newly mastered skill with ease and it has interacted with her old work very well. Miller's usual medium is embroidery; a recent body of work created on the pantograph schiffli embroidery machine had necessitated working with a continuous line (Miller 2007: 48–49), so it was an interesting shift to transpose this methodology into a different medium. As a counterpoint to globalization, and the



Figure 9: Wu Jianan, Shou Jiao/Hands and Feet, copper plate laser cut, Chambers Fine Art Beijing, 2008. Photo courtesy of Wu Jianan.



Figure 10: Lu Shengzhong's paper-cutting workshop, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2010. Photo courtesy of Lu Shengzhong.



Figure 11: Lu Shengzhong's figure and Melanie Miller's copy, workshop at Manchester Metropolitan University, 2010. Photo courtesy of Melanie Miller.



Figure 12: Melanie Miller, Costume Translations detail, 2010. Photo courtesy of Melanie Miller.

loss of indigenous skills and locally made clothing, Miller has taken national costume as the theme for her recent work, lamenting the homogenization of clothing worldwide, and drawing attention to the loss of handcraft skills. Paper cutting seemed an appropriate vehicle to explore this theme further: folk costume seemed an appropriate subject matter for a folk art.

There are some analogies between embroidery and paper cutting: both are laborious and painstaking, requiring attention to detail; and both can be a meditative, mesmerizing process. However, one of the appeals of paper cutting, as opposed to embroidery, is that results are swift, compared with embroidery. The motifs that surround the figures in Miller's work are symbols associated with the particular country depicted. Within many countries a particular flower, or animal, is used as part of the representation of a specific country's history and culture. There is insufficient space in this article to discuss the concerns around nationalism, authenticity and the commodification of craft arising from a study of folk costume.

Conclusion

This short study of the history of Chinese paper cutting demonstrates that despite its widespread use, this humble grassroots art was ignored by mainstream culture until the middle of the twentieth century. However, thanks to the work of researchers and artists, its place in art history and art education in China has now been recognized.

The discovery of the distinguished female paper-cutting artists from the countryside has also added a new dimension to Chinese art history. The pure spirit and the simple but powerful artistic expression of their work provide a recognizable face to this art form. It is generally acknowledged that folk art belongs to one generation. When these women die, their knowledge and skills die with them and their work will be left as the art of their time. But the spirit of paper cutting will not die, it will live on, and that is what Lu Shengzhong and his teachers have been trying to promote. Inheriting the art of paper cutting is to not just master the skills, but also to understand the spirit of this art.

Lu Shengzhong's background, upbringing and education have given him an exclusive insight into this art form and its craftsmanship. He uses scissors to create his artwork just like his mother, and the other female paper-cutting artists before him. He incorporates the cutting tools and the skill so well that a pair of scissors are like his extended hands, thus he can set his mind free to focus on what he intends to explore within contemporary culture. His unique language of expression bestows his artwork with distinctive characteristics, which have been appreciated by global audiences. Today Lu Shengzhong is the voice of the art of folk paper cutting. His sense of responsibility and historical mission comes from his deep love of this art.

It is not so many years since poor villagers would return to their homes after a hard day's work in the fields in China, to be greeted by the comforting red paper cuts on rice-paper covered windows;

images of flowers, animals and characters from loved stories. Lu is determined to keep that meaning of art alive. Seeing the work by his students and disciples it seems that his efforts have paid off. Chinese folk paper cutting has travelled beyond Chinese villages, been transported across different generations and cultural boundaries; it has been reincarnated.

There has been a resurgence of interest in utilizing hand-made processes within western art over the past ten or so years. 'New Labour' at the Saatchi Gallery in London in 2001 suggested that a prevailing emphasis on handcrafted work could be detected in contemporary art practice, concomitant with a reaction against conceptual, technological and digital art. Shu and Magliaro (2007) documented this trend in their book *By Hand: The Use of Craft in Contemporary Art*. The Museum of Arts and Design in New York presented a series of three exhibitions exploring 'traditional, unusual and overlooked materials and techniques through the lens of contemporary art and design' (McFadden 2009: 6). The first of these was 'Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting: Process + Materials 1' in 2007; the second was 'Pricked: Extreme Embroidery: Process + Materials 2' in 2008, and the third was 'Slash: Paper Under The Knife' in 2009. In 2012 Manchester City Art Gallery exhibited 'The First Cut: Paper at the Cutting Edge', an exhibition of works made from paper by 31 artists from around the world. It appears that the art of paper cutting has also become embedded in western art. As Lu's student, Miller's work, incorporating western cultural references, can be seen to celebrate the simple joy of paper cutting as advocated by Lu, and thus bridges art across different cultures.

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Dr Melanie Miller and Dr Tongyu Zhou started their collaborative research on Chinese folk paper cutting in 2010. Zhou studied Chinese folk art when she was a BA student at the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA), Beijing, China. Her paper-based artwork has always contained folk-art elements. In January 2010, Zhou organized a series of paper-cutting workshops at Manchester Metropolitan University led by Professor Lu Shengzhong. Miller attended this workshop and started her paper-cutting practice. This resulted in the creation of a body of work that brings together Miller's interest in handcraft skills and the theme of the loss of indigenous costume, subsumed by the rise of global brands. Her work *Costume Translations* utilized paper cutting to interpret indigenous costume, and was selected by Zhou (curator) for 'The Power of Copying' Exhibition (May–July 2010) in Xuzhou, China. In May 2010 Zhou and Miller visited Professor Lu Shengzhong in Beijing and studied his collection of Chinese folk paper cuttings, costume and embroideries.

Miller's work was also selected to be shown in the exhibition that ran alongside the third International Illustration Research Symposium: 'Function of Folk: Illustration, Narrative, Society' organized by illustrationresearch.com in conjunction with the Ethnographic Museum in Krakow, Poland, 8–9 November 2012.

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