

EXPLORATION OF PAPER CUTTINGS ART AND ITS FOLK CULTURE CONNOTATION IN RUICHANG, JIANGXI PROVINCE

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Abstract

"Ruichang Paper Cuttings", a shining treasure of traditional folk art originating from Ruichang City, Jiangxi Province, is not only an important member of Chinese traditional folk crafts, but also a shining pearl of national intangible cultural heritage. As a unique example of folk art in Poyang Lake area, it is known as the "living fossil of Paper Cuttings in Jiangxi", which ingeniously combines the soft and exquisite art of the south with the masculine and primitive simplicity of the north style, showing a unique artistic charm.

Researchers use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including literature review, field investigation, case studies, and in-depth interviews, to study the regional environment and cultural background that support their survival, analyze and summarize the unique aesthetic characteristics, image connotations, and aesthetic value of their plastic arts. This process is not only an in-depth exploration of the essence of Ruichang Paper Cuttings, an intangible cultural heritage, but also provides valuable inspiration and insights for the innovation and development of Paper Cuttings art, helping it to radiate new vitality and vitality in its inheritance.

Keywords: Ruichang Paper Cuttings, Folk culture, Folk art

Introduction

On June 7, 2008, Ruichang Paper Cuttings was approved by the State Council of the People's Republic of China to be included in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage list. Ruichang Paper Cuttings art has a profound history, bearing the unique Chinese culture, thinking and aesthetics. Paper Cuttings integrates patterns, contents and symbols to express the spiritual image intuitively. It is a unique art for people to express their living aspirations and spiritual sustenance. In recent years, the traditional Paper Cuttings craft of Ruichang is gradually lost, and the works lack the essence of the original regional traditional Paper Cuttings.

Through making a comprehensive and systematic theoretical combing of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang, the researchers focus on the regional environment and cultural background that support its survival, analyze and summarize its unique aesthetic characteristics, image connotation and aesthetic value of plastic arts, explore the essence of the local intangible cultural heritage of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang, and restore the true appearance of "Paper Cuttings art in Ruichang" as far as possible. Through the investigation and research of researchers, the potential of Paper Cuttings art in Ruichang is explored, and contributions are made to the inheritance and innovation of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang.

Research Objectives

To systematically study the historical background and folk culture of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang.

Literature Review

1. The artistic style of Ruichang Paper Cuttings

1.1 The "original nature" of Ruichang Paper Cuttings art

Personality is vitality and the gene that makes up the world of art. Only with it can there be a hundred flowers competing for beauty and diverse forms (Shao & Xi, 2006). In Xiafan Village, the "Paper Cuttings village", almost everyone knows Paper Cuttings, which is known as "Paper Cuttings without households, embroidery without women". Ruichang Paper Cuttings is mainly handed down from rural women and has been passed down from family to present, reflecting unique historical and folk art research value. Ruichang Paper Cuttings has an exaggerated shape and beautiful silhouette, which completely retains the "original flavor" of traditional Paper Cuttings art. Rural women rely solely on memory and imagination, holding paper in one hand and cutting with the other, directly cutting out patterns based on real-life themes, thus appearing simple and concise.

Ruichang Paper Cuttings is not limited by reality, time and space, and anatomy in modeling, which is "random" (Zheng & Wang, 2015). The traditional folk Paper Cuttings in Ruichang generally adopts the technique of iconology, that is, external contour representation. In addition to strictly following the traditional procedures left by the ancestors, everything else is free. Once the theme is determined, the selection and linking of patterns, the structure and layout of the image, the form of composition, and the techniques and skills of expression are all free, which can fully unleash human imagination, creativity, and intelligence. Not intentionally depicting the structural features, physiological characteristics, temporal and spatial limitations, and scientific attributes of an object, let alone being constrained by perspective and anatomy. On the screen, the artistic images depicted do not obstruct each other and unfold flat, either orderly, evenly decorated, or abstractly exaggerated, taking their form and preserving their meaning, everything is arbitrary, and can be described as 'natural inaction'.



Figure1 "Lion Rolling a Ball" Ruichang - Zhou Yulan

Source: Author (September 2023)

For thousands of years, the Ruichang mountainous area has been impoverished and backward, and the people have been working hard but unable to find enough to meet their basic needs. To celebrate festivals, worship gods, pray for happiness, remember the deceased, and express their love for life and pursuit of ideals, they ingeniously weave rich and colorful cultural symbols with their hands, scissors, paper, needles, and fabrics, conveying positive and uplifting spiritual power. Due to its wide application and profound cultural connotations, it has deeply integrated into people's daily lives and become an important element that runs through life. Therefore, Paper Cuttings artists not only have superb skills, but also enjoy a

high position in people's hearts and are deeply loved, and their influence is far beyond that of ordinary handicraftsmen.

In the customs of Ruichang, there is an unwritten custom that when choosing a daughter-in-law, two standards are popular: one is "fine work" and the other is "rough work". The so-called "fine work" refers to the ability to embroider Paper Cuttings; The so-called rough labor refers to whether one's body is healthy, whether they can have children, and whether they can do rough work. Having these two qualities, one is an excellent and qualified girl who can definitely marry into a good husband's family. Therefore, in Ruichang, Paper Cuttings and embroidery are both "compulsory courses" for unmarried girls in their parents' homes, and parents attach great importance to this matter. Therefore, on the land of Ruichang, the reason why the traditional folk Paper Cuttings flower can grow invincibly is due to such a strong social background (Feng & Feng, 2009).

1.2 Cultural connotation of Ruichang Paper Cuttings

With its unique regional customs, Ruichang Paper Cuttings delicately depicts the colorful features of rural life, from natural things to agricultural civilization, from simple folk customs to historical culture, from the beauty of clothing to the new look of the times, all of which reveal its rich connotation. In creation, Ruichang Paper Cuttings breaks through the traditional constraints, freely crosses the boundary between reality and imagination, integrates natural inspiration and the vitality of the times, and shows extraordinary creativity.

Technically, Ruichang Paper Cuttings skillfully combines yin and yang cutting methods, and uses scissors as pen to outline a concise and beautiful artistic image with balanced composition and flexible shape. Its style is neither the rugged and heroic Paper Cuttings in the north nor the delicate and exquisite Paper Cuttings in the south, but it skillfully combines the essence of Paper Cuttings in the north and south, which not only reflects the magnificent and sunny beauty of Paper Cuttings in the north, but also reflects the exquisite and feminine beauty of Paper Cuttings in the south. The combination of hardness and softness, the interplay of yin and yang, and the fusion of reality and virtuality, showcases a unique artistic charm. What is particularly special is the "non hollow" technique, which adds a subtle and profound beauty to the work, allowing people to enjoy both visual and spiritual pleasure.

This diversity of styles makes Ruichang Paper Cuttings more widely used in decoration. Whether it is the boudoir decoration of unmarried girls, or the festive decorations of newly married young women, or the decorative paper binding, children's clothing, we can find a matching Paper Cuttings artistic style, showing its profound cultural heritage and extensive application value.

2. Folk culture of Ruichang Paper Cuttings art

Paper Cuttings Paper Cuttings has a long history. After more than a thousand years of historical evolution, the inheritance and blending of countless artists has formed a unique personality and style, which is inseparable from the support of various folk customs and social support and admiration of Ruichang (Min, 2014). The vitality of Ruichang traditional folk Paper Cuttings depends on various folk customs and a large number of folk activities. Ruichang has always had the reputation of "three miles, one village style, five miles, one person". Although there are some minor differences in many folk customs, they are generally similar. There are many customs closely related to the art of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang. Feng Longmei and Feng Yabing's "Paper Cuttings in Ruichang" (2009) elaborate on the customs of festivals, religious customs, marriage leave, birthday and funeral, superstition, witchcraft, farming, etc.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed research method of qualitative and quantitative analysis, aiming to ensure that the research results are both comprehensive and scientifically rigorous. The specific methodological framework includes the following key steps:

1. Data collection

Literature review: A systematic review of the origin and development, regional cultural background, folk culture and other documents of Paper Cuttings paper cutting, discusses the relationship between "Ruichang Paper Cuttings", as an ancient traditional folk art and the artistic style of the national intangible cultural heritage project, and folk culture in the cultural environment of northern Jiangxi, which provides theoretical support for the innovative design of Paper Cuttings paper cutting.

Field survey: researchers made field visits to Jiangxi Intangible Cultural Heritage Research and Protection Center, Zhu Puguang's Paper Cuttings studio, Ruichang Paper Cuttings Museum, Tongyuan Silhouette Cultural Park Scenic Spot, Xiafan Town Comprehensive Cultural Station and other places.

Case study: study the representative works of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang, summarize the artistic features of Paper Cuttings of various inheritors, and summarize the diversified styles and features of Paper Cuttings art in the form of expression and style.

In depth interview: semi-structured interview with inheritors and artists of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang. The topic of the interview is predetermined based on the research.

2. Data analysis

Literature analysis: Using content analysis method to classify and summarize key concepts, including theories of origin and development, regional cultural background, folk culture, etc.

Field data analysis: The researchers interviewed the inheritors and Paper Cuttings masters on the spot, deeply comprehending the traditional handicrafts and obtaining creative resources and inspiration. Share with the interviewees to understand the historical and cultural spirit of Ruichang Paper Cuttings intangible cultural heritage and feel their "ingenuity".

Case study analysis: through case studies, explore the diversified and innovative forms of Paper Cuttings art in Ruichang, and provide evidence-based reference value and sustainable development feasible programs for the development of intangible cultural heritage of "Paper Cuttings art in Ruichang".

Interview data analysis: qualitative content analysis is used to summarize interview records, collect and analyze valuable information about the development process, artistic characteristics, and its position and role in folk culture of Ruichang Paper Cuttings.

Research Results

1. The origin and development of Ruichang Paper Cuttings

1.1 The origin stage of Ruichang Paper Cuttings (Han and Jin Dynasties)

As an ancient folk art treasure, the origin of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang was controversial until the Western Jin Dynasty tomb was excavated in Ruichang. Many decorative patterns on ancient tomb bricks and funerary pottery in the Western Jin Dynasty are almost the same as those commonly used in folk Paper Cuttings, and their techniques and styles are also the same. This provides strong evidence for inferring the origin of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang. It is speculated that the origin of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang can be at least pushed between the Han and Jin dynasties in China (Wang, 2019).

In 1972 and 2000, many tombs of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the Western Han Dynasty and the Six Dynasties were excavated in Pier Town, Ruichang. The pottery and patterned bricks unearthed have one thing in common with the bronze wares from the ancient copper mine sites of the Shang Dynasty, that is, the decorative patterns resemble the continuous lines used by Paper Cuttings in Ruichang, indicating the early form of Paper Cuttings art. In particular, the brick decoration of the Western Han Dynasty tomb in 1972 clearly shows the rudiments of Ruichang Paper Cuttings. Before the emergence of paper, the art of cutting had already existed, with various materials such as silk and metal foil. When paper appeared in Ruichang, Ruichang folk Paper Cuttings rose along with it, with a history of about 1900 years and a profound heritage (Wang, 2018).



Figure 2 Rain-Seeking Brain Unearthed in Gaofeng Town, Ruichang City (Western Zhou Period)

Source: Feng Longmei, et al., “Ruichang Paper” (August, 2009)

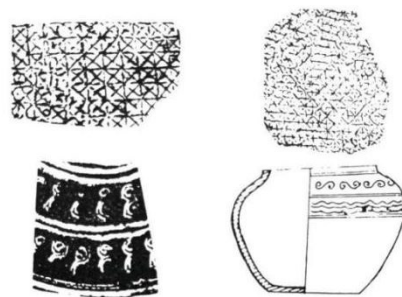


Figure 3 Copper Mine Site Unearthed in Tongling, Ruichang City (Spring and Autumn Period)

Source: Feng Longmei, et al., “Ruichang Paper” (August, 2009)

1.2 Founding Stage (Tang and Song Dynasties)

By the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty, Ruichang Paper Cuttings had taken root and flourished, and was widely popularized among the people and gradually became prosperous.

In the Song Dynasty, the paper making industry was mature and there were many kinds of paper products, which provided conditions for the popularization of Paper Cuttings. If it becomes a "gift flower" in folk culture, a "window flower" pasted on windows, or used for decoration of lanterns and tea cups. The use of folk Paper Cuttings in Song Dynasty gradually expanded. The Paper Cuttings kiln in Jizhou, Jiangxi, used it as a pattern of ceramics, and made the ceramics more exquisite through glazing and firing. People also use Paper Cuttings to carve skin of donkey, ox, horse, sheep and other animals into the figures of leather shadow play. The stencil making made by the blue printed calico process is carved with oilboard, and the stencil pattern of scraping printing is made by using the Paper Cuttings technique, which can be divided into yin and yang engraving, and the long lines should be cut to distinguish the real from the false.

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Paper Cuttings handicrafts became mature and reached its peak. Paper Cuttings handicrafts are more widely used. Ruichang Paper Cuttings has become a widely used decorative pattern in Jiangxi. In addition to embroidery and lanterns, it is also commonly used as festival door notes, gift giving notes, wedding flowers,

funeral flowers and witchcraft symbols. In addition, Ruichang Paper Cuttings, as an ornament for decorating the home, is used daily to beautify the home environment, such as door stack, cabinet flower, Xihua, ceiling flower, etc.

1.3 Development Stage (1978-2007)

Since the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CPC, Ruichang folk Paper Cuttings has received the attention of cultural departments at all levels, and the development of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang has entered its heyday.

In the late 1980s, many authoritative scholars in Jiangxi folk literature and art circles conducted in-depth research on Paper Cuttings in Ruichang, and held a seminar in Ruichang in 1991 to confirm its unique personality, which is neither comparable to northern nor southern Paper Cuttings. In 1990, Ruichang Paper Cuttings made its debut in the National Paper Cuttings Exhibition, attracting many folk art authorities to appreciate its original style and exquisite skills. The next year, at the National Folk Art Theory Seminar, the Central Academy of Fine Arts and other experts spoke highly of the uniqueness and originality of Ruichang Paper Cuttings, believing that it is both rough and delicate, and full of folk art "original flavor" despite its "rustic", which is amazing.

Since 1978, Ruichang Paper Cuttings has ushered in its heyday, establishing the first Paper Cuttings association and more than 100 township level Paper Cuttings organizations (Zhao, 2010). In order to protect this art, Ruichang set up the "Research and Protection Office" and the journal Paper Cuttings Scenery. In 1986, Ruichang Paper Cuttings appeared in the "Summer of Lushan" Expo and the 7th Canton Fair; In 1988, he was selected into Snow Flower Paper Cuttings Collection, and some of his works were exhibited and collected in the United States; In 1989, the artwork participated in the National Children's Art Exhibition; In 1991, the Central News Film Studio made it into a film for nationwide screening; In 2004, in order to welcome the Olympic Games, Ruichang and Chinese Paper Cuttings artists jointly created "Colorful for the Olympic Games" to show the art of Paper Cuttings in national sports competition, and the cultural heritage of Jiangxi and Poyang was deeply explored. (Qian, 2008).

During this period, the Paper Cuttings art of Ruichang enjoyed a high reputation, and its works were also exhibited overseas, winning international recognition. Nearly 800 works have been exhibited at or above the provincial level, including over 210 national level works and more than 580 awards. Ruichang was awarded the title of "Hometown of Chinese Folk Art" by the Ministry of Culture in 1993.

1.4 Intangible Cultural Heritage Stage (2008 present)

Ruichang Paper Cuttings, with its unique "non hollowed out" technique, has evolved over thousands of years, and its practical function has gradually faded, becoming a kind of artwork that can be appreciated independently. On June 7, 2008, Ruichang Paper Cuttings was approved by the State Council of the People's Republic of China to be included in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage list, project number: VII -16.

As a national intangible cultural heritage, Ruichang Paper Cuttings has made three overseas exchanges and made its debut in the Olympic World Expo, enjoying international reputation. In recent years, his artistic achievements have been remarkable. He has published a collection of Olympic Paper Cuttings, and 10 Paper Cuttings works, such as "Spring Ploughing" and "Leisure Farming Season", were exhibited at the first Farmers' Art Festival. Zhu Puguang's Paper Cuttings works "Grains and Grains" and "Everything Happens at Home" from the Cultural Station of Xiafan Town, Ruichang City, represented Jiangxi Provincial Department of Agriculture in the National Leisure Agriculture Creative Competition, in which "Grains and Grains" won the silver medal.

In 2011, it was awarded the honor of "Hometown of Paper Cuttings in China" by the Ministry of Culture again. In 2018, Ruichang Paper Cuttings was included in the first batch of

national traditional craft revitalization catalogue. In April 2019, Ruichang Paper Cuttings Museum opened in Xiafan. In November 2019, the General Office of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2019) announced the List of National Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Project Protection Units, and Ruichang Cultural Center was awarded the qualification of "Paper Cuttings (Paper Cuttings in Ruichang)" project protection unit.

Ruichang Paper Cuttings is no longer the self-entertainment of ordinary people. The exquisite Paper Cuttings has been continuously exhibited and awarded prizes at home and abroad, and has been sought after and loved by the market. In the rhythm of the times, Ruichang Paper Cuttings is playing a new chapter, continuing the brilliant chapter of art and beauty.

2. Regional cultural background of Ruichang Paper Cuttings

2.1 Geographical Environment of Ruichang Region

Ruichang City is located on the south bank of the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River in northern Jiangxi Province, with an extremely advantageous geographical location. To the east is Jiujiang, to the west is Yangxin in Hubei, to the south is Jiujiang County, and to the north is Wuxue in Hubei. Since ancient times, it has been the throat of north-south transportation, deeply influenced by the Yangtze River culture. Its regional characteristics endow Ruichang with strong cultural compatibility, enabling it to skillfully absorb the essence of foreign culture, blend into local culture, and form a unique cultural style. The geographical location of Ruichang is like a bridge. Rough and heroic northern Paper Cuttings and exquisite southern Paper Cuttings collided in Ruichang, shaping the unique charm of Paper Cuttings paper-cut.



Figure 4 Xiafan Town, Ruichang City

Source: Jiujiang News Network (October 2019)

2.2 Cultural Landscape

Ruichang is located at a strategic transportation hub and was a battleground for military strategists in ancient times. It was formerly known as Wu Tou Chu Wei and was influenced by the Jiangsu Zhejiang Wu Yue culture, as well as being closely related to the ancient Chu culture. Therefore, Ruichang has a profound cultural heritage and a wide range of people's knowledge (Zhao, 2008). Traveling from south to north with convenient transportation, this objective and inevitable exchange has formed the cultural background of Ruichang.

Xiafan Town, Ruichang City, is located 20 kilometers northeast of Ruichang City, close to the junction of Jiangxi and Hubei. It is known as the "hometown of bronze and hometown of Paper Cuttings". Ruichang City, symbolizing auspiciousness and prosperity, has a rich cultural heritage, including ancient buildings, temples, stone inscriptions, and former residences of famous people. Famous cultural attractions include Mount Lu, Bailudong Academy, and Mount Lu Conference Memorial Hall. Ruichang has two national intangible cultural heritage projects, namely, Ruichang Paper Cuttings and Ruichang bamboo weaving,

and three provincial intangible cultural heritage projects, namely, Ruichang tea picking opera, Ruichang rice seedling, and Ruichang Fanzhen Hedeng Festival.

2.2.1 Tongling Copper Mine

Xiafan Town in Ruichang City is the source of Chinese bronze and the gateway for the Yangtze River to enter Jiangxi. Xiafan Town, Ruichang City, is famous for two national intangible cultural heritages, Tongling Mining and Metallurgy Site and Ruichang Paper Cuttings, and is known as "the hometown of bronze and the hometown of Paper Cuttings". The Tongling Ancient Copper Mine Site, discovered in October 1987, has undergone archaeological excavations and is located in the northeast corner of Mufu Mountain in Xiafan Town, Ruichang City. It covers a total area of approximately 3.5 square kilometers and is divided into mining area, beneficiation area, smelting area, living area, and modern industrial heritage area. A large number of production and living cultural relics have been unearthed, and it is known as the source of Chinese bronze smelting and one of the symbols of Chinese bronze civilization. The Tongling Copper Mine Site is a part of China's cultural heritage and an important resource for studying ancient copper smelting and cultural development.

The Xia Zhen Bronze Civilization originated in the mid Shang and Zhou dynasties 3300 years ago, and has gone through the Western Zhou, Spring and Autumn, and early Warring States periods. It is the oldest, most well preserved, largest, and richest large-scale copper mine remains discovered in China so far. In 2021, it was selected as the fourth batch of national industrial heritage. Successfully applied for the national level major heritage site protection area and national mining park.

Many ancient bronze wares unearthed here are the rudiments of traditional Ruichang folk Paper Cuttings in their decorative patterns and hollowing techniques. This discovery further proves that the origin and formation of Paper Cuttings technology is closely related to bamboo pieces, animal skin, copper ware and silver foil, and further proves that the growth and inheritance of Paper Cuttings in Ruichang is deeply rooted in the fertile soil with a long and profound historical and cultural heritage, which should be one of the sources of the germination of Paper Cuttings art. Therefore, Ruichang Paper Cuttings artists have created many works of art with the theme of "Tongling Copper Mine Site".



Figure 5 "Tongling Ancient Copper Mine" - Anonymous
Source: Photographed by author (October 2022)

2.2.2 Lushan Culture

As a famous cultural mountain for thousands of years, Lushan Mountain was approved as one of the first "cultural landscape" heritages by UNESCO in 1996 and listed in the The World Heritage List. For thousands of years, it has been highly favored by Chinese literati and has become a source of inspiration for poetry, calligraphy, and painting creation. Lushan was also a political and cultural center in Chinese history, and one of the historical meeting places of the CPC. It has important political and historical value in modern Chinese history. Ruichang City, located on the south bank of the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, is adjacent to Mount Lu and enjoys a superior geographical location at the

intersection of north and south. It is deeply influenced by the red culture and natural scenery of Mount Lu. In this context, Ruichang Paper Cuttings art is unique, innovatively integrating Mao Zedong's poems, revolutionary stories, Lushan scenery and other elements, creating unique works that other Paper Cuttings factions do not have, showing the profound local cultural heritage and artistic innovation.

2.2.3 Ruichang Tea Picking Opera

Ruichang Tea Picking Opera, commonly known as "Ruichang Tea Picking Opera" or "Tea Opera" among the people, is an ancient traditional Chinese opera and the most representative tea picking opera in the northern Jiangxi region. The singing style is lyrical and beautiful, with melodious melodies and rich local characteristics. Over the years, the tour has toured more than 100 counties and cities in the four provinces of Jiangxi, Hubei, Anhui, and Hunan, leaving behind a soft and sticky tea picking tone that has been well received and loved by audiences. The Ruichang tea picking opera has a short and exquisite form, with a rich variety of singing styles. It not only has a complete original singing style, but also nearly a hundred minor tunes, most of which reflect the stories passed down by the local folk. They have their own characteristics in terms of style, structure, mode, and melody: some singing styles are beautiful, smooth, gentle, and have strong rendering power; Some singing styles have ups and downs, strong and powerful, full of vitality. Many vocal styles are familiar to rural people, with one line sung on stage and the next line taken off stage. The opera's voice and popularity blend together, forming a popular folk opera art performance form that has been loved by the masses for nearly two hundred years (Mao & Yu, 2012).



Figure 6 Ruichang Tea Picking Opera Performance

Source: Ruichang Cultural Center (June 2022)

As a national intangible cultural heritage list, Paper Cuttings and tea picking opera in Ruichang reflect the living habits, values and aesthetic tastes of local people. They jointly carry rich local culture and historical information, and are an indispensable part of Ruichang culture. At the same time, both art forms are deeply influenced by the natural environment, social history, and cultural traditions of the Ruichang region, showcasing the unique local characteristics and distinct regional style of Ruichang (Mao, 2008).

In the long-term development process, Paper Cuttings and tea picking opera in Ruichang have a close relationship, drawing on, enlightening and influencing each other, forming a certain artistic exchange and cultural integration. For example, Paper Cuttings works may borrow the characters or stories in tea picking operas, and the stage scenery and costume design of tea picking operas are affected by Paper Cuttings art.



Figure 7 Paper-cut work "Ruichang Tea Picking Opera"
Source: Provided by Ruichang Cultural Center (June 2022)



Figure 8 Ruichang Tea Picking Opera Performance
Source: Ruichang Cultural Center (June 2022)

2.2.4 Ruichang Bamboo Weaving

Ruichang bamboo weaving is a traditional folk handicraft in Ruichang, Jiangxi, with a history of over 3300 years. In 1988, a large number of bamboo baskets, baskets, and baskets used for transporting ore were unearthed from the Shang Zhou ancient copper mining and metallurgical site excavated in Ruichang. According to research, all the items were made by local people during the Spring and Autumn period, which shows the long history. Since the establishment of the county in the Sui and Tang dynasties, the settlement of our ancestors has become increasingly concentrated, and the bamboo weaving technique has been passed down from generation to generation, becoming a skill for local mountainous farmers to become prosperous. In 2008, it was listed as the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage expansion projects (Traditional art).

In Ruichang, bamboo weaving skills are closely related to people's lives. For thousands of years, the bamboo weaving craft of Ruichang has been passed down and developed by countless generations of artists, forming its own unique style. Silk baskets and bamboo hats are carefully selected and finely crafted; The style of the dustpan and rice sieve is standardized, and the lock mouth is tightly sealed; The basket and bamboo chestnut are small, exquisite, and durable. Among them, the bamboo hat, silk basket, and rice sieve are the most famous, known as the "Three Treasures of Ruichang Bamboo Ware".



Figure 9 Three treasures of Ruichang bamboo ware
Source: WeChat public account "Folklore Forum" (January 2022)

In a word, Paper Cuttings in Ruichang is influenced by multiple cultures, including the infiltration of the Central Plains civilization, the convergence of northern minority cultures, and the influence of a variety of homologous handicrafts. They integrate with each other, learn from each other's strengths, and are radiating new light in the process of tempering history.

3. Folk culture of Ruichang Paper Cuttings art

Paper Cuttings Paper Cuttings has a long history. After more than a thousand years of historical evolution, the inheritance and blending of countless artists has formed a unique personality and style, which is inseparable from the support of various folk customs and social support and admiration of Ruichang (Min, 2014).

3.1 Festival Customs

3.1.1 Chinese New Year Customs

The Spring Festival has always been the most important traditional festival among the people, and it is also the festival of the transition between old and new in agricultural festivals, the most leisurely season for agricultural work. It is also a great opportunity for people to pray for good luck, favorable weather, peace throughout the year, and all the best. A large number of festivals and festive activities have also brought a large number of applications of folk Paper Cuttings. Therefore, it is also the most active time for various folk artists. Generally speaking, activities related to Paper Cuttings include the following:

1) The custom of festive ribbon tying: During the Chinese New Year, every household should stick couplets, hang door curtains, and paint door paintings on all their doors, and put a door god on the front door. Hanging door curtains are usually affixed as soon as they are seen, including toilet doors, pigsty doors, cowshed doors, etc., without any leakage. A little more particular people also need to tie colored doors and hang palace lanterns. The hall needs Paper Cuttings flowers and small mascots and small colored flags. In addition to couplets, door gods and New Year pictures, other decorations are Paper Cuttings.

2) Festival costume customs: Wearing new clothes during the Chinese New Year is a scenic spot. On New Year's Eve, except for children, both men and women, adults wear worn-out clothes. Because New Year's Eve is the time for creditors to collect debts, and extremely poor people have to go out to hide their debts, people dare not show off their wealth. However, on the morning of the first day of the Lunar New Year, regardless of gender or age, they are basically rejuvenated. Because according to the local customs of Ruichang, debt collection is strictly prohibited in January. If someone dares to violate this local custom, they will be condemned by everyone. It is not surprising to wear new clothes for the New Year. What is worth mentioning here is mainly the flowered clothes of women and children, which are generally handmade handicrafts with ingenious splicing or fine embroidery, and the bottom flower of these beautiful handicrafts is Paper Cuttings. Therefore, every New Year, when Paper Cuttings masters in rural areas are most popular, the more people beg for flowers, the more proud the artists are, because it can be proved that their craftsmanship is superb, which is an invisible reward.

3) Festival group entertainment customs: From the first day of the first lunar month to the 15th day of the first lunar month, the Yuanxiao (Filled round balls made of glutinous rice-flour for Lantern Festival) Festival is the busiest time for various literary and artistic entertainment and folk sports activities. In Ruichang, in addition to singing the tea picking opera, the most popular folk activities are dragon dance, lion dance, lotus picking boat, clam shell lamp, lotus spear, etc. These activities are mainly for young adults to play with, with the goal of visiting villages and clans; Almost all male villagers have paper lanterns of various shapes in their hands, which are mainly used for lighting during group outings, visits to relatives and friends, and evening gatherings. The main entertainment activities for children

are homemade auspicious animal lights made of paper, such as chickens, rabbits, pigs, sheep, dogs, fish, turtles, tigers, etc.



Figure 10 "Celebrating the Lantern Festival" Ruichang - Liu Shiyang
Source: Provided by Ruichang Cultural Center (July 2022)

4) Customs of Festival Entertainment Activities for Gods

Clan God is a deity of a surname family. Common gods are generally not limited to one surname or clan. In Ruichang, some of these gods are called "Taigong" (i.e. clan gods). Some are called "Fuzhu" (i.e. non clan gods). Non clan gods are generally famous people who have done many good deeds locally and are revered as "Fuzhu" by the common people after death. It is believed that if the wind and rain are smooth throughout the year, without causing disasters, epidemics, and the death of six livestock, it must be the secret blessing of various gods, which is the credit of "Taigong" and "Fuzhu". Therefore, during festivals and holidays, people must respectfully take turns inviting these "Taigong" and "Fuzhu" to their own homes to "sit on the table" and let them sit down. To welcome good fortune and ward off evil spirits, and bring blessings and disasters to one's own home. People also carry Bodhisattvas to "go on a spring outing", allowing the "Patriarch" and "Blessed Lord" to take advantage of the opportunity to inspect whether the people of the same surname and different villages with the same lineage are prosperous, whether the growth rate of male population is fast, whether the crops are growing well, and so on. This activity is almost a festival within a festival, and on such occasions, only the sound of gongs and drums, blowing and playing, and colorful lanterns are heard, forming a very beautiful rural scenery.

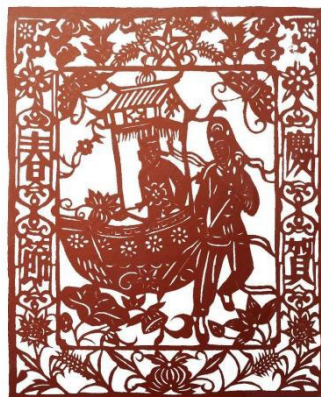


Figure 11 "Spring Festival" – Anonymous
Source: Photographed by author (October 2022)

Therefore, throughout the festival, it is undoubtedly a great display of skills for various folk artists, especially Paper Cuttings artists.

3.1.2 Customs of Qingming Festival

Qingming Festival is not only a holiday for people to remember their ancestors, visit and sweep the graves of their deceased loved ones, but also a time for clan reunion and emotional connection. In Ruichang, even wanderers who are far away from home will return to their hometown at this time to pay tribute to their ancestors and honor their loved ones. During the Qingming Festival, men would take all the boys to sweep the tombs. When paying tribute to their ancestors, people would offer colorful paper flowers of different sizes to them. During the Qingming Festival, the mountains are filled with colorful paper flowers, creating a special "Flower Mountain" scenery. When sweeping graves, children must wear new floral clothes to avoid making their ancestors look too shabby. In addition, there is a custom of flying kites in the Ruichang Plain and lakeside areas. These new clothes, hats, paper flowers and kites were all created by Paper Cuttings artists and ingenious mothers.

3.1.3 Customs of Loong Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival

In Ruichang, the custom of Loong Boat Festival, which is popular throughout the city and still popular today, is to give food to relatives and friends. In rural areas, Zongzi and Haiba (i.e. Mantou with hair) are generally given to each other. The women of Loong Boat Festival take their children with them, put on their festive costumes, and carry "hair cake and Zongzi to return to their parents' home and walk with their relatives and friends. It is as pleasing to the eyes as butterflies flying on the winding road in the field. Therefore, this is another great opportunity to show their Paper Cuttings embroidery talents to relatives, friends, neighbors, and the opposite sex. The Mid-Autumn Festival is also a festival focusing on food delivery. Similar to the Loong Boat Festival, the food is moon cakes.

3.2 Religious Customs

Ruichang mainly believes in Buddhism and Taoism, with many temples, monasteries, and monasteries. Monks often have intricate and close relationships with local villagers. Usually, when people seek help from men and women, they often turn to Bodhisattvas for minor illnesses and even small things that don't go their way, not to mention important matters. Once the bodhisattva is enlightened and responds to every request, the people also voluntarily burn incense in the temple to fulfill their vows and donate goods. If there are many activities such as Bodhisattva Yanchen, temple ceremonies and so on, people in the neighborhood will actively participate in them like the New Year, including performing arts to Bodhisattva, making hanging tents and other sacrificial necessities for the temple. These activities are often inseparable from Paper Cuttings embroidery.

3.3 Marriage customs

Getting married and getting married is a very important event in life, which is related to the reproduction of offspring, the prosperity and development of the family, and the happiness of both men and women's lives. There is an unwritten custom in rural marriage in Ruichang, that is, men choose their spouses to watch the women's Paper Cuttings embroidery skills, which is regarded as the standard for assessing the IQ of young women. In the old marriage custom of Ruichang, the matchmaker would find an opportunity to let the woman show her talent in Paper Cuttings embroidery to the man before the proposal. After falling in love, the woman will voluntarily give the man a pair of handmade embroidered socks or cloth sandals as a token of love. The commonly used Paper Cuttings embroidery in marriage includes patterns such as "butterflies playing with golden melons, magpies picking plums, dragons and phoenixes presenting good fortune, mandarin ducks playing with water, and pomegranates opening hundreds of children".

In the process of marriage, the most important part is the welcoming ceremony and the bridal candles, which create a festive atmosphere that is no less than the Chinese New Year. At my mother-in-law's house, both inside and outside the courtyard, from the hall to the bridal chamber, lights and decorations were set up in a lively, colorful, and vibrant manner,

giving it a completely new look. Most of the things in the new house come from the dowry of the bride's family. The bride's clothing and accessories, including shoes, headwear, bedding such as blankets, pillows, curtains, etc., are usually embroidered by her own hands. In addition, all the articles for the dowry of the mother's family should be covered with "Xihua" (Paper cutting flowers). Even today, regardless of urban or rural areas, this custom remains unchanged.

3.4 Birthday and Funeral Customs

In Ruichang, the traditional custom of celebrating birthdays is deeply rooted, especially highly valued by people from affluent families. From the moment a baby is born, a series of celebration activities unfold: birth celebration, full moon celebration, one year celebration, and even the ten year old coming of age ceremony. After entering adulthood, the grand birthday celebration starting from the age of thirty is held every ten years. Especially from the age of sixty, these celebrations often become grand events for families and even the whole village to celebrate together, lively and filled with a strong festive atmosphere.

In the birthday celebration, the art of Paper Cuttings plays an indispensable role. It is ingeniously applied to the clothes, headwear, shoes and shoes of the "birthday star", as well as the decoration of the birthday hall and birthday tent, creating a unique and peaceful festive scene. Paper Cuttings patterns are mostly based on traditional elements that symbolize auspiciousness. For example, the unicorn sends a child to symbolize the continuity of descendants, while the pine and crane share the same spring, and the pine and crane extend their life to pray for longevity and health. Longevity compared with Nanshan, longevity, wealth, and happiness and longevity directly express people's good wishes for the birthday star. These Paper Cuttings works not only add a festive color to the celebration, but also deeply reflect the people's love and inheritance of traditional culture in Ruichang.

The death of an elderly person is considered a "white celebration" in the customs of Ruichang. Holding such a celebration not only involves the entire village and clan, but also often shocks the relatives and many close friends during their lifetime. Regarding the layout of the funeral hall, the production of the spirit house, cranes, deceased person hats, and various symbolic burial objects, such as roosters and beloved items before the deceased's death. Roosters are indispensable. It is said that roosters are meant to awaken the deceased in a timely manner upon hearing their crowing, in order to prevent them from falling asleep on their way to the underworld and missing the opportunity to disembark and be reborn. All the above activities contributed to the extensive application of Paper Cuttings works.

3.5 Superstition and Customs

Worshiping ghosts and gods is a common custom left over from primitive society. In Ruichang, people have believed in gods such as clan gods, common gods, door gods, stove gods, Tianhua Niangniang, Linggong, tree gods, mountain gods, land gods, wealth gods, and plague gods. In addition, there are some indescribable gods, such as castles, societies, altars, etc. With many beliefs, it inevitably brings about many related folk activities. For example, when there is a major outbreak of diseases such as smallpox, cholera, and various epidemics in the local area, the clan leader will mobilize the whole village or connect several villages to jointly hold disaster worship activities. If there is a pest infestation, carry the "Bodhisattva" (Tiger God) who specializes in insect management to collect the insects, and the vast crowd will shout and cheer for the Bodhisattva on the field path. If there is no rain for a long time, people will carry the "Tai Gong" or "Fu Zhu" to pray for rain.

3.6 Witchcraft customs

Ruichang in history was once a place where witchcraft was prevalent, which lasted until the mid-1950s after the founding of New China. The witchcraft activities are basically aimed at various diseases. In addition, there are activities such as "walking on the yin" and "collecting the soul". All kinds of witchcraft activities are generally related to Paper Cuttings.

3.7 Agricultural Customs

In the farming activities in Ruichang, the art of Paper Cuttings also plays a role, especially in picking new tea and transplanting seedlings. During the tea picking season after the Qingming Festival, the tea ladies dressed up in homemade Paper Cuttings embroidery costumes and headscarves, laughed with men during their work and sang one after another. There is a saying in Ruichang that goes, 'Adults look at the fields for planting, children look at the Chinese New Year,' which shows the importance of planting in the hearts of farmers. In the old days, there was a custom in Ruichang to open the seedling gate. People used to plant several bundles of paper flowers at the edge of the field where they were preparing to plant seedlings to celebrate. This is another extensive application of Paper Cuttings works in farming.

To sum up, Paper Cuttings, a "universal" handicraft, is not only an indispensable medium for cultural expression and artistic creation, but also a bright pearl in the cultural context of Ruichang. The reason why Ruichang Paper Cuttings has been able to go through vicissitudes of life and have been passed down to the present day, showing vitality, is the result of multiple factors intertwined. Most importantly, it is deeply rooted in the rich and colorful folk activities, which like fertile soil, nourish the continuous growth and prosperity of Paper Cuttings art.

Therefore, we can assert that various folk activities are the solid foundation for the inheritance and development of Ruichang folk Paper Cuttings art, and there is a closely connected and interdependent symbiotic relationship between them. Folk custom is not only the cultural soil for the survival of traditional folk Paper Cuttings, but also the source of its vitality. Each cut of Ruichang traditional folk Paper Cuttings contains a profound understanding and inheritance of folk culture, and the continuous development of folk activities provides unlimited creative inspiration and exhibition space for Paper Cuttings art. In this interactive process, Ruichang Paper Cuttings not only records the changes of folk customs, but also becomes a beautiful landscape in folk culture, and jointly writes a brilliant chapter of local culture.

Conclusions and Discussion

The reason why Ruichang Paper Cuttings has survived and passed down to this day is due to the interweaving of multiple factors. Its core lies in its close connection with rich folk activities, which inject inexhaustible vitality into it. After thousands of years, Ruichang Paper Cuttings has not only demonstrated the aesthetic pursuit and creativity of the Chinese nation, but also created a unique artistic style and exquisite skills.

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Recommendations

As an important carrier of folk culture, Ruichang Paper Cuttings is widely used in various life scenes. It conveys people's yearning and wishes for a better life through exquisite patterns, and deeply reflects the unique understanding of local people on life, nature, happiness and ideals. In the rapid change of modern society, the protection and inheritance of Ruichang Paper Cuttings is facing many challenges. Taking effective measures to strengthen its protection and inheritance is not only the respect and inheritance of traditional culture, but also the key to ensure that this precious folk art can live and develop. At the same time, we will promote international exchanges, promote Ruichang Paper Cuttings to the world, show its unique charm and cultural value through international exhibitions and cultural exchange activities, enhance international popularity and influence, and open up a broader space for the prosperity and development of Paper Cuttings art in Ruichang.

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