

Lucky Motifs in Chinese Folk Art: Interpreting Paper-cut from Chinese Shaanxi

Xuxiao WANG *

Abstract

Paper-cut is not simply a form of traditional Chinese folk art. Lucky motifs developed in paper-cut certainly acquired profound cultural connotations. As paper-cut is a time-honoured skill across the nation, interpreting those motifs requires cultural receptiveness and anthropological sensitivity. The author of this article analyzes examples of paper-cut from Northern Shaanxi, China, to identify the cohesive motifs and explore the auspiciousness of the specific concepts of *Fu*, *Lu*, *Shou*, *Xi*. The paper-cut of Northern Shaanxi is an ideal representative of the craft as a whole because of the relative stability of this region in history, in terms of both art and culture. Furthermore, its straightforward style provides a clear demonstration of motifs regarding folk understanding of expectations for life.

Keywords: Paper-cut, Shaanxi, lucky motifs, cultural heritage

Izveček

Izrezljanka iz papirja ni le ena izmed oblik tradicionalne kitajske ljudske umetnosti, saj določeni motivi sreče, ki so se razvili znotraj te umetnosti, zahtevajo poglobljeno razumevanje kulturnih konotacij. Ker je izrezljanka iz papirja častitljiva in stara večščina, ki se izdeluje po vsej državi, je za interpretacijo teh motivov potrebna kulturna receptivnost in antropološka senzitivnost. Avtorica pričujočega članka analizira primere izrezljank iz papirja iz severnega dela province Shaanxi na Kitajskem, da bi identificirala povezane motive ter raziskala dožemanje sreče in ugodnosti specifičnih konceptov, kot so *Fu*, *Lu*, *Shou*, *Xi*. Zaradi relativne stabilnosti severnega dela province Shaanxi v zgodovini, tako na področju umetnosti kot kulture, so izrezljanke iz papirja iz tega območja vzoren predstavnik rokodelstva kot celote. Poleg tega njihov direkten in enostaven stil pripomore k natančni demonstraciji motivov s področja ljudskega razumevanja življenjskih pričakovanj.

Ključne besede: izrezljanka iz papirja, Shaanxi, motivi sreč, kulturna dediščina

* Xuxiao WANG, PhD, Professor of Philosophy at School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China.
wangxx11@126.com

1. Introduction

Paper-cut is an important form of Chinese folk art which can be traced back to an era before paper had even been invented, where artisans patterned fastidiously intricate veins into leaves of gold or silver foil, leather or silk through engraving, embossing and cutting. The invention of paper during the Han Dynasty prompted the transposition of these skills to the new material, giving birth to modern paper-cut. Paper-cut proliferated across China and became the most popular traditional folk art because the tools and materials necessary to practice it were easy to acquire, and the learning curve was relatively fast. Moreover, paper-cut was invented, circulated and taught as a basis for satisfying the spiritual needs of the people. It existed against the profound backdrop of Chinese life, and regional paper-cut forms with their own vivid characteristics can be divided into several subgroups: for example, the “Northern group” of Shaanxi and Shandong provinces, the “Jiang-Zhe group” of Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces, and the “Southern group” of Guangdong and Fujian provinces. This article selects paper-cut in northern Shaanxi as a typical example. According to the folk-custom field research which the author has conducted several times in this region, despite the experience of great historical upheavals, the style of paper-cut in northern Shaanxi remains relatively stable, especially its characteristic simplicity and candour, which directly represent the ordinary people’s understanding and expectation towards life, and thus has great cultural attractions.

2. Paper-cut in Chinese Life

Northern Shaanxi includes the north and west of Shaanxi province, the centre of China’s Loess (*Huangtu* 黄土) Plateau. Covering an area of approximately 90,000 square kilometres, the Loess Plateau features diverse landforms such as small ridges, hills, channels and ravines which shaped larger, more peculiar geographical figures. It is easy to imagine every cave-house on the massive yellow landscape interspersing colourful paper-cut on the windows and doors, granaries and corrals. Paper-cut remains so popular in Northern Shaanxi that people still use it to decorate doors and windows, walls and lamps, ceilings and chimneys, as well as create fashionable stationary including ornamental flowers, oblations, and dowries. Furthermore, the patterns derived from paper-cut have become popular staples of embroidery so that its motifs can be found in clothing, shoes, hats, and pillows.

These motifs have even been applied to indigo printing, costuming, quilting, and practical wares such as portieres, bundles, aprons and headbands.

Northern Shaanxi paper-cut became identified with plant and animal forms, as well as compact and unpretending monochromatic displays, mindful of exaggeration and transfiguration. The auspiciousness of the lucky motifs can be summarized with the four Chinese characters of *Fu* (福), *Lu* (祿), *Shou* (壽), and *Xi* (禧). Indeed, paper-cut often combines the images of a bat, deer, pie and peach being offered as birthday gifts (Fig. 1)¹. Each of these symbols has the benefit of a positive homophone. “Bat” (蝙蝠) and “felicity” (福) share the same pronunciation in Chinese, while “deer” (鹿) and “official’s pay” (祿) are also of similar pronunciation. The word “pie” is pronounced *xi que* (喜鵲) in Chinese, the first syllable meaning “happiness”. At the same time, the peach or *shou tao* (壽桃) is offered as a birthday gift because *shou* means “longevity”. A mixture of all four *Fu-Lu-Shou-Xi* would be the best combination of all. Each lucky motif has abundant cultural connotations, and represents the charm of the paper-cut art.



Fig. 1: Felicity, official pay, longevity, happiness



Fig. 2: Holding of five blessings for a long life

¹ All paper-cut works featured in this article are the work of Ai Jianying (艾劍英), a folk paper-cut artist in Northern Shaanxi.

1.1. Fu (福)

“Fu” is first in order of auspiciousness because it can cover all of the others with its wide and deep meaning. An ancient Chinese expression refers to “five blessings at one time” (*Wufu linmen* 五福臨門), and a cutting motif representing “hold five blessings for a long life” (Fig. 2) is composed of five, five-petal flowers, bats and peaches. There is some difference between the meaning of the five blessings in written records and spoken folklore. It is documented in the volume “Hong Fan” 洪範 of *Shangshu* 尚書—a collection of historical documents from ancient China—that five blessings are *Shou* 壽 (“longevity”), *Fu* 福 (“wealth”), *Kang Ning* 康寧 (“health”), *Mei De* 美德 (“good virtues”), and *Shan Zhong* 善終 (“natural death”) (Zhu 1986, 941). Huan Tan 桓譚, a philosopher of the Han Dynasty, wrote in his book *Xin Lun* 新論 (*The New Statement*) that the five blessings were Shou and Fu, but also *Gui* (貴) (“nobility”), *An Le* 安樂 (“peace and happiness”), and *Zi Sun Zhong Duo* 子孫眾多 (“many offspring”) (Zhu 2009, 45). Later the people began to refer to “*Fu, Lu, Shou, Cai* (財) and *Xi*” as the five blessings. Whatever the combination, they were used to represent the five great goals of life. Felicity has the abundant meaning of all good things that people hope and wish for. While people pray to the god of Lu when they want luck or power in their official life, Shou for a long life, and “Bodhisattva Guanyin” for offspring, but Fu was the most encompassing. Sometimes they prayed without a specific goal, and such general worship often honoured Fu. To this day, the inverted character Fu is pasted widely during Spring Festival to attract good fortune.

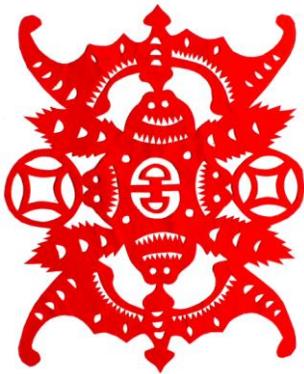


Fig. 3: Holding of five blessings for a long life



Fig. 4: Chrysanthemum for safety and longevity

Felicity also has multiple meanings in Chinese paper cut. The *Fu* motif often appears in communion with other lucky motifs like “holding five blessings for a long life” and “the possession of felicity and longevity” (Fig. 3), etc. “Possession of felicity and longevity” is comprised of the bat figure indicating *Fu*, the *Shou*-peach as well as the Chinese character *Shou* to signify long life, and the shape of ancient coin that represents richness. All of these are symbols of felicity, longevity and wealth.

The paper-cut of “Chrysanthemum for Safety and *Shou*” (Fig. 4) shows an interpretation of longevity and safety based on the mythology that gradually came to surround chrysanthemum. Indeed, chrysanthemum is one of China’s ten famous flowers, enjoyed by the people since ancient times. Ying Shao 應劭, an academic living during the Han Dynasty, mentioned in his book *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 (*Records of Custom*) that the villagers of Gangu Village in Lixian, Nanyang, Henan Province (甘谷村, 河南南陽酈縣) generally lived to achieve the age of 130. (Ying 2010, 485) This longevity was explained by the fact that their water supply flowed over clusters of chrysanthemum growing on the mountainsides. During the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, the royal family would drink chrysanthemum alcohol on Double-ninth Day, and September was celebrated as the month of chrysanthemum, for chrysanthemum blooms in September. Chrysanthemum was also found to ward off calamities and disasters in the Eastern Han dynasty. Wu Jun 吳均, a man of letters living in Liang period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, recorded a magical story about chrysanthemum in his book *Xu Qixieji* 續齊諧記 (*The Extension of Weird Stories in the Qi Period*). In it, a man named Huan Jing (桓景) was learning *Dao*—a form of ancient Chinese witchcraft—from Master Fei Changfang (費長房). One day, Master Fei predicted that a disaster would strike his house on the ninth of September, and that it could only be avoided by taking his entire family to the top of the nearby mountain and drinking chrysanthemum alcohol while wearing dogwood branches in their hair. When Huan Jing and his family returned to the house, he found that all of their domesticated animals (including dogs, cows, and goats) were dead. Master Fei explained that the animals died so that the humans may continue to live (Wu 1986, 557). Climbing to the mountaintop to drink chrysanthemum alcohol on the ninth day of September thereafter became a folk tradition to ward off disasters. Owing to all of these tales, chrysanthemum gradually became a symbol of longevity and felicity.



Fig. 5: Full of richness and nobility



Fig. 6: Never-ending goodness

Becoming rich and noble is the traditional path to auspiciousness and, consequently, many paper-cut designs are used to express it. The most common design symbolizing both wealth and prestige incorporates the Peony flower. The paper-cut named “Full of Richness and Nobility” (Fig. 5) focuses on the peony, which is also one of China’s ten beloved flowers. Peony has gained more reputation than chrysanthemum and has been selected as the national flower. Peony planting started as early as the Northern and Southern Dynasties. During the Bei Qi period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the famous painter, Yang Zihua 楊子華, opted peony as his subject. In the Tang Dynasty, peony was regarded as the queen of flowers and planted in royal gardens. Thereafter, poets wrote a large number of verses describing the flower. For example, Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 penned the great lines: “Only peony can capture the fame of national beauty/ and move the whole capital in her bloom” (Liu 1979, 119), emphasizing the plant’s grandeur. Li Bai 李白, China’s most famous poet, mused “I will think of her silver clothing at the sight of drifting clouds and her stunning appearance at the sight of flowers/ The spring wind flows across the corridor while the peonies are set off by the glittering dews” (Li 1961, 60), depicting peony’s ethereal colour and celestial fragrance. Another legendary story celebrates peony. It occurs after Wu Zetian 武則天, the only female emperor in the history of China, ascended the throne of the Tang Dynasty. One winter day she became so drunk that she ordered that the flowers should bloom immediately. Only the peony refused her order, so Empress Wu had the entire peony population burnt away. She then demoted peony and banished it from the capital, from Changan 長安 to Luoyang 洛陽. Nonetheless, the peony rose brilliantly from the ashes during the following Spring. “Peony with burnt branch”

achieved instant fame, and the people honoured the peony flower by planting it in Luoyang city as the best plant under heaven. Its spirit, which fears no despotic power and knows no cowardice, became a symbol to the people. Peony’s elegance is regarded as so supreme and impressive that Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤, a famous academic of the Song Dynasty, praised it as the representative of the rich and the influential in his article “Discussion on Loving the Lotus” (Zhou 2006, 99). Thus, the Peony flower became the most common symbol of wealth and stature in paper-cut.

Another motif known as “Never-ending Goodness” (Fig. 6) is commonly found in paper-cut art. It is composed of the lotus and the fish. The term for lotus (*he* 荷) leaves and flowers *lian* (蓮), shares the same pronunciation as “continuing and linking” (*lian* 連). And the figure of the fish (*yu* 魚) refers to abundance (*yu* 餘), for they are both pronounced *yu* in Chinese, indicating that life is peaceful and stable with an abundance of never-ending goodness (*liannianyouyu* 連年有餘).



Fig. 7: “Kylin Delivering Boys”

Indeed, the outlines of various animals endowed with positive omens appear in paper-cut, such as the phoenix and kylin (*qilin* 麒麟), which express the pursuit of blessings and auspiciousness. The kylin—a divine animal created by our Chinese ancestors—is a common folk image of felicity with a deer’s body, cow’s tail, horse’s hooves, and fish scales. Some have one horn on their head, while others have two deer-like antlers. The adult kylin has wings and is often described as the “Dragon-Horse”. The kylin is the first among the four divine animals of ancient times: kylin, phoenix, turtle and dragon. As the original mount of the mythical Gods, it became a symbol of wisdom and auspiciousness. Chinese histories recall bumper harvests, longevity, peace and happiness whenever the kylin would appear. Figure 7 depicts “Kylin Delivering Boys”, from the story

about Confucius' birth. It is said that Confucius' mother wanted a healthy boy, and gave birth to Confucius shortly after dreaming of the kylin. After that, praying to the kylin to deliver sons became a folk-custom, and having numerous offspring is an indispensable part of felicity.

1.2. *Lu* (祿)

Lu, the second symbol of auspiciousness, originally meant good fortune and felicity. As a verb, it means to pay an official's salary. (One must be a public official to receive official pay.) Thus, *lu* indicates the privileges of officialdom and titles of nobility. Because high-ranking officials enjoy high pay, *lu* is associated with richness. The most typical animal motif related to *lu* is that of a crane standing on a reef against the background of a rolling sea, as in "Being the Highest Ranking Official" (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: "Being the Highest Ranking Official"

The design originates from Chinese conventions of dress and accessorization, which are important elements of popular culture. In China, dress and accessories had ideological meanings already at an early age. It is said that the Yellow, Shun and Yu Emperors ministered their whole empires by standardizing a rigorous system of dress and accessories, of which colour and forms accurately depicted the example of the universe¹. In Mandarin, heaven is *tian* (天), and Earth is *di* (地). Officials noted that just before dawn heaven is black and the earth is yellow and, so, an upper garment of black resembling heaven was worn above pants or dress of yellow below the waist, representing Earth. These conventions matured by the

¹ “黃帝堯舜垂衣裳而天下治，蓋取諸《乾》、《坤》” (Wang 2009, 155).

Zhou Dynasty. The books *Liji* 禮記 (*Book of Rites*), *Zhouli* 周禮 (*Rites of the Zhou*), and *Yili* 儀禮 (*Etiquette*) record this system in detail.

The main function of dress and accessories was to demonstrate morality, persuade others, confirm a status of nobility, and perform rituals. All successive dynasties had their own strict rules and regulations regarding colour, material, texture, and size of garments. During the reign of Emperor Ming of the Han Dynasty, for instance, the rules for the Emperor's Dalmatica were: (1) the upper part must be black in colour; (2) nether part must be in helvolus colour; (3) both parts must be embroidered with twelve different patterns (they are, successively, the sun, moon, stars, dragons, mountains, pheasants, tigers, aquatic plants, fire, white-rice-lines, white and black axes, black and cyan axes); (4) the wearer's sex must be embroidered on the upper garment using the special painting skill of *Hui* (繪), while the other sex must be embroidered on the nether part using the special needlework skill of *Xiu* (繡). Ceremonial dresses for dukes or princes were made and embroidered under different rules. The regulations governing these officials' clothing included: (1) that only nine *Liu* (旒), the string of je pieces on the front and back of an emperor's crown, can be used on their crowns, and (2) that only nine given patterns can appear in their garments (the twelve aforementioned symbols but without the sun, moon, and stars). For lesser-ranking officials, only seven "Liu" could be used on their crowns and only seven given patterns could be embroidered in their garments (the twelve minus the patterns for sun, moon, stars, dragons, and mountains). Nobles whose titles are above Duke should wear a red-cyan crown when they offer sacrifices to the gods or ancestors, wear a gown with deep red collars and cuffs, as well as wear dark red underpants and socks. All of these conventions were believed to show faith and loyalty to the gods (Zhou 1984, 15).

An elaborate dress system to indicate different official positions known as *Bu-Zi* (補子) was established during the Ming Dynasty. *Bu-Zi* is a square or circle design featured on the chest or back of official's robes that included ornate figures of birds and animals to signify different ranks. The crane was reserved for the highest rank, the golden pheasant for the second, and then the peacock, wild goose, silver pheasant, egret, purple mandarin duck, oriole, and quail, respectively. The *Bu-Zi* system was so successfully recognizable that it continued basically unchanged into the Qing Dynasty, the only difference being that the figure of the

quail was used for civil officials of the eighth rank and the figure of the sparrow was used for the ninth rank.

The crane occupies the second highest position among birds just below the phoenix, indicating a superlative position among officials in feudal times. Therefore, the crane was the symbol of the highest rank of civil officials. In paper-cut art, the crane figure stands on a reef with rolling tidewater under its feet. “Tide” (*chao* 潮) and “court” (*chao* 朝) share the same pronunciation in Chinese, and so the whole design indicates officials of the highest rank taking charge of court administration.

A paper-cut entitled “Immediately Having the Title of Marquis” (Fig. 9) further displays the use of homophones. The shapes of a horse, bee and monkey are displayed because “bee” (*feng* 蜂) and “be granted” (*feng* 封) are homophones, as are “monkey” (*hou* 猴) and “the title of marquis” (*hou* 侯), and “on horse” (*mashang* 馬上) and “immediately” (*mashang* 馬上). Together they express the desire for an immediate promotion. The title of marquis was second in the feudal system of five-tier nobility, a high rank inaccessible to most common people. Yet, the one in this example was designed differently. A vivacious monkey leisurely eats a large peach on the back of a horse. Although the bee is omitted, the meaning is still obvious.



Fig. 9: “Immediately Having the Title of Marquis”



Fig. 10: “Be promoted again and again”

More common figures are the rooster and cockscomb (Fig. 10). “Cockscomb” and “official” are Chinese homophones, so their repetition indicates hope of being promoted again and again in the course of one’s career.

In fact, *Qin* 琴 (traditional Chinese musical instrument), *Qi* 棋 (Chinese chess), *Shu* 書 (Chinese calligraphy) and *Hua* 畫 (Chinese painting) are all related to *lu*. In the time Chinese society believed that education was the highest virtue, one who was good in “*Qin-Qi-Shu-Hua*” would certainly be a refined scholar. These persons would serve as officials. In paper-cut art, the *qin* and *qi* figures (Fig. 11) were always accompanied by the image of a bottle of “*Ru Yi*” (如意) with chrysanthemum inside reflecting a refined and leisurely feeling (Fig. 12). If the figure of a bottle with plum blossom is chosen instead, the design indicated that the students are encouraged to pursue rank and fame by studying hard, for the Chinese have an expression stating that “bitter cold adds keen fragrance to plum blossoms”.



Fig. 11: “*Qin-Qi-Shu-Hua*”



Fig. 12: “*Ru Yi*”

1.3. *Shou* (壽)

Shou, the third auspicious element, indicates the wisdom of age and signifies longevity as the principal pursuit of life. Enjoying a long life has been a primary part of auspiciousness and is often mentioned together with *Fu* 福 or felicity in birthday congratulations, such as “may your age be as the southern mountain and your happiness as the eastern sea.” In paper-cut, longevity motifs often include *Fu*. For example, “Never-ending Felicity and Longevity” (Fig. 13), shows five bats (*fu* 蝠) surrounding the male god of longevity, who is leaning on a cane decorated with a calabash handle shaped like a dragon’s head. The five bats express five blessings, and the male god of longevity implies a long life. The calabash figure on his stick also embodies felicity and longevity, because the calabash is a kind of evergreen tree which symbolizes offspring from ancient times.



Fig. 13: “Never-ending Felicity and Longevity”



Fig. 14: “Display the Peach Form Magu”

“Display the Peach Form Magu” (Fig. 14) is another typical motif in paper-cut, featuring the “*Shou*-peach” of longevity. Magu (麻姑) is a fairy in ancient tales who can fly, and here she is depicted together with immortal cranes and auspicious clouds, taking a basket full of peaches, citrons and chrysanthemum as a gift. According to historical documents, Magu visited Cai Jing’s (蔡經) house in “Dong Yang” (東陽) during the Eastern Han Dynasty at the request of the immortal “Wang Fangping” (王方平). Wang was young and beautiful, with tiny hands of only four inches length. She claimed that she had witnessed the wild eastern ocean transform into fields three times, indicating that she had indeed lived a very long life (Li 1959, 369–70). A folk story recalls that Magu was a minority girl from the north who possessed a warm heart and was always willing to help others. One day, she met and fed a hungry grandmother named Li Shan (梨山老母) with the only peaches she had. In return, the magical Li Shan gave Magu an immortal peach seed. Magu planted it, and after the immortal peach tree bore fruit, she delivered all of the peaches to the old and poor. She later became a student of the Immortal “Grandma Li Shan” and learned the magical skills necessary to achieve immortality. Every March she would deliver her mystical peaches to the destitute, and thus commended as a fairy. Another version of Magu’s story states that Magu met and saved the Queen Mother of the Western Kingdom. The Immortal accepted Magu as a disciple and took her to Mountain Nanfang (南方). There were thirteen limpid fountains and Magu spent thirteen years learning to make alcohol from the water. Finally, she succeeded and became immortal on the birthday of the Queen Mother of the Western Kingdom. Magu delivered alcohol as

a birthday present to the Queen’s festival at Yao-Tai (瑤台), and the saying “Magu will bring longevity” came into being.

Another auspicious combination is that of the crane and the pine, as featured in the “Ages of Crane and Pine” (Fig. 15). The pine, or evergreen, is capable of achieving an age of over one-thousand years. The oldest confirmed pine in China is in Gui (貴) County, Guangxi Zhuangzu Autonomous Region (廣西壯族), China, currently three-thousand years old. People call it the “Never Old Pine”. The crane here specifically refers to the Red-crown Crane, noted for its beautiful body and elegant behaviour. It is famous for its “three-longs”, i.e., the notable length of its beak, neck and legs. It will be above one meter tall when standing and has the demeanour of a transcendent being. Chinese Immortals frequently used it as a saddle horse mount. As a result, it is called “the immortal crane” and stands for long life. The expressions “crane’s life” and “crane’s age” are thus congratulatory birthday terms. If an old man with a long life passes away, we will call his death “riding on the crane and returning to heaven”, indicating immortality. Both “age of pine” and “life of crane” imply longevity.



Fig. 15: “Ages of Crane and Pine”



Fig. 16: “Having a Long Life in Old Age”

The most interesting *shou* motif in paper-cut is that of a cat staring at a butterfly dancing among chrysanthemum clusters, named “Having a Long Life in Old Age” (Fig.16). People have applied the pronunciations in a flexible way, for “cat” (貓) is *mao* (耄) and “butterfly” (蝶) is *die* (耄). Likewise, *Mao-Die* (耄耄) is a term reserved for people who have achieved the long age of eighty or ninety. The chrysanthemum in this motif indicates longevity, as well.

1.4. Xi (禧)

Xi, the final auspiciousness symbol, originally meant good fortune and luck, but people eventually ascribed happiness as its dominant virtue. Marriage in particular is considered the happiest event in one's life. The motif of "Being Combined Together as Wished" in paper-cut (Fig. 17) expresses this blessing. Here the figure of the lotus (荷), which sounds like *He* (和)—a homophone for "combination"—and the figure of the lily, which also sounds like *He* (合)—the same as "joint". In Chinese folk culture, *He-He* (和合) is the abbreviated name for the two pleasant gods of marriage and loving relationships.



Fig. 17: "Being Combined Together as Wished"

There are numerous stories about the two gods known as *He-He*. The earliest is from the Tang Dynasty when there was only one god named Wan Hui (萬回). His elder brother was serving on a battlefield far away from his family, and his parents missed him so much that they were in constant tears. In order to comfort his parents, Wan Hui travelled ten-thousand miles to the battlefield and visited his elder brother. Miraculously, Hui started off in the morning and came back at night on the same day. He was called "Brother Wan Hui" in folk society, and became a symbol of family reunions.

People have offered sacrifices to him as the twin Gods *He-He* since the Song Dynasty. This is due to another Tang Dynasty story which recalls the ventures of two eminent monks named Han Shan (寒山) and Shi De (拾得). They treated each other as brothers and their relationship was prized by the common folk as the

model of fraternity.¹ Emperor Yong Zheng 雍正 of the Qing conferred the title of Saint *He* upon Han Shan and the title of Saint *He* upon Shi De.² From then on, the God *He-He* was adapted into two Gods with royal approbation, and they soon gained popular fame as a pair. The concept of love was divided into marriage and conjugal fidelity. In popular iterations the figures of the two gods are of two lively and lovely boys smiling broadly, with pigtailed on their heads. One holds a lotus while the other holds an orbicular box cracked open in the middle, and sometimes five bats hover around. The motif must be hung on the wall of a couple's new bedroom to ensure happy marriage and realization of the five blessings.



Fig. 18: “Couple Living in Perfect Harmony”

An auspicious marriage is one in which the husband and wife live in harmony. The paper-cut of “Couple Living in Perfect Harmony” (Fig.18) features a couple of lovebirds in a cluster of lotuses, for lovebirds are the symbol of harmonious couples in Chinese culture. People had their symbols onto mandarin duck figurines because of this special character. One male mandarin duck selects only one female mandarin duck, and they do everything together constantly, which appears to be the ideal intimate relationship. In the Jin period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, a scholar named Cui Bao 崔豹 wrote in the “Birds and Beasts” section of his book *Gu Jin Zhu* 古今注 that the mandarin duck is a type of mallard that cannot be separated from its mate. If they are separated, they become lovesick and die soon thereafter (Cui 1956, 15). Cui celebrated this intimate character as the

¹ *The Story of Wan Hui* is found in *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記, edited by Li Fang 李昉, Vol.92 (Li 1959, 606–7). *The Tale of He-He* is found in *Tongsu Bian* 通俗編, edited by Zhai Hao 翟灏, Vol. 19 (Zhai 1958, 424).

² The two *He* share the same pronunciation in Chinese, but have different characters and meanings.

ideal expression for human love. As a result, the lovebirds have been compared to human couples since ancient times. The Tang Poet Lu Zhaolin 盧照鄰 wrote in “Feeling the Ancient in Chang An” the lines, “Could not you see the lovebirds living together in happiness?/ I wish I was one of them rather than the Immortal” (Lu 1979, 38), showing the human aspiration for grand love and marriage.



Fig. 19: “Continuousness of Big and Small Melons”

It is auspicious when a husband and wife share continued love and intimacy. Bearing many offspring is also a means to felicity and happiness. Among the lucky motifs, the design of “Continuousness of Big and Small Melons” or “Continuousness of Melons and Butterflies” (Fig. 19) symbolizes life enrichment through offspring. Generally, there is a large melon and one or several small melons in the former motif, while there is a large melon and one or several butterflies in the latter motif. The words for small melon (瓠) and butterfly (蝶) sound the same in Mandarin, *die*, and is a homophone for the verb “to pile up” or “to die” (疊). In a word, the pattern of piling up many big and small melons implies unending progeny. The melon is a many-seeded plant that proliferates easily, a valid metaphor for being blessed with many children and grandchildren.

The motif of “Double Xi in Hall” (Fig. 20) is composed of two magpies and a specific type of Chinese apples (*malus spectabilis*). The ancients thought that two magpies served as the harbingers of happy events. The motif of “Happy Event is on its Way” (Fig. 21) has an ingenious design: a cat is sitting on the ground and gazing at a magpie in a persimmon tree. The magpie is tweeting to the cat, suggesting something good. The combination of these figures shows that some happy events are due to arrive. What exact form those blessings will take is

apparent in the design. The cat gazes at the magpie in the persimmon tree, and this arrangement is important. In the book *You-Yang-Za-Ji* written by Duan Chengshi of the Tang Dynasty, the writer identifies seven unique peculiarities of the persimmon: (1) long life, (2) a huge crown projects *she*, (3) that there is no birds nest in it, (4) that no worm or insect feeds on it, (5) its beautiful red leaves in autumn, (6) fine fruits, and (7) thick and heavy leaves (Duan 1981, 174).



Fig. 20: “Double Xi in Hall”



Fig. 21: “Happy Event is on its Way”

All of these have value and significance for human beings. A favourite story about the tree’s large fallen leaves was handed down through generations. Zhen Qian (鄭虔), a poor young scholar of the Tang Dynasty, had no money for buying papers to study. So, he picked up the large fallen leaves of the persimmon tree and used them as his writing paper to practice his calligraphy and record knowledge. He ultimately succeeded in the imperial examination and became a successful candidate for the highest imperial posts. People also chose the persimmon (*shi* 柿) as a lucky motif because it sounds like “thing” (*shi* 事) in Chinese and its pedicel looks like the shape of a *Ru Yi* (如意), a valuable ornament for the noble and rich of ancient China with the implied meaning that everything will be as one desires. In addition, the cat’s fur has the pattern of ancient money and “cat” (貓) or *mao* (毫) shares the same pronunciation as “the old”—an elder of at least 80 years. The meaning of auspiciousness is deeply rooted in the elegant design of paper-cut, which lead viewers to endless reiterations.

2. Conclusion

Paper-cut motifs have incorporated massively important and profound elements of Chinese history and culture for several thousand years, and became a primary source of transmitting Chinese traditional culture through generations. By studying these visual figures, people can directly comprehend the values of life, philosophy, morality and the aesthetic, as they have been summarized and treasured for thousands of years. Moreover, they represent these values unostentatiously through simple and primitive forms which the common people can copy from one generation to the next. It has direct practical significance for the continuity and innovation of Chinese traditional culture and gives additional charm to the exploration of cultural heritage. It is also the real action to improve national cultural soft power in the trend of globalization.

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