

Art and Life of Manchu Paper-Cut Artist Ni Youzhi

Lin Tong*

Northeast Normal University, Changchun 130117, Jilin Province, China

*Corresponding author: Lin Tong, 370465044@qq.com

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Abstract: The advice to “disclose the family business to no one” has remained in my mind for a long time. It influenced how I perceived the works of Ni Youzhi, a paper-cut artist, which are shrouded in mystery and marked with her family’s hue. I certainly feel proud and understand the sense of mission for this inheritance that has been passed down from generation to generation ^[2]. However, her Manchu paper-cut changed dramatically over time despite my best efforts to preserve this “heirloom” ^[3]. Looking back on her journey of creation, her trajectory of inheritance, creation, transformation, and regression was marked clearly.

Keywords: Manchu paper-cutting; Changbai Mountain; China’s intangible cultural heritage; Paper-cut art; Art

Online publication: December 27, 2022

1. Introduction

Hazy was the memory of my first time picking up a scissors in an attempt to help my grandmother, who was threading a needle on a heatable brick bed, also known as “kang” in Chinese ^[1]. “Miaomiao, how about I teach you our unique kind of paper-cutting, passed down in the family? But you have to promise that you will reveal it to no one,” she said, while picking up a piece of paper and a pair of scissors as I was trying to get my job done. “Here is how to make the feet, the gown, and the fingers of different lengths. Remember, men have square mouths, and we have small ones...,” she explained with her head lowered, while having her hands on the work. That was my first Momo, a paper-cut model of the ancestors worshiped by the Manchu people, and also my first class on paper-cutting: a man in a mandarin jacket with braids on top of his head. Apart from the image, the advice to “disclose the family business to no one” has remained in my mind for a long time. This advice also influenced how I perceived Ni Youzhi, a paper-cut artist, and her works, which are shrouded in mystery and marked with her family’s hue. I certainly feel proud and understand the sense of mission for the inheritance passed down from generation to generation ^[2]. However, her Manchu paper-cut changed dramatically over time, despite my best efforts to preserve this “heirloom” ^[3]. Looking back on her journey of creation, her trajectory of inheritance, creation, transformation, and regression is clearly marked.

2. Inheritance

Ni believes that this “hereditary treasure” is primarily based on “Momo” of all ages and both genders, “Turtle,” “Frog,” and the back-necked deer (**Figure 1–3**). The challenge has already been tackled once an individual learns to master them. Even to this day, she still turns to one of these paper-cuts for reference to clear my doubts whenever I have any ^[4]. More than the basics, they are the foundation and the footstone she built and developed from childhood. Although I have not witnessed the exact process, many times have she told the story that has now been embalmed in my mind ^[5].



Figure 1. 1982, “Momo”

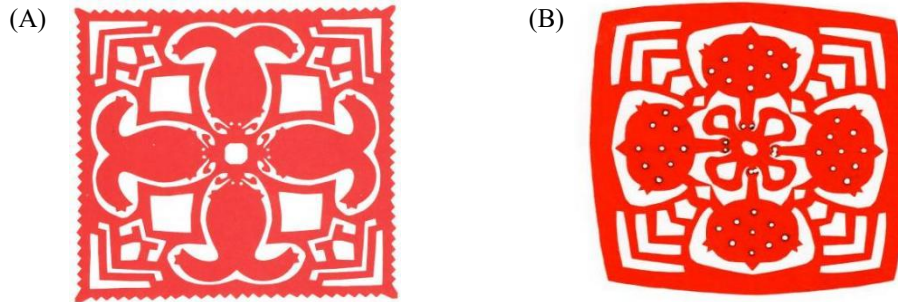


Figure 2. (A) 1982, “Frog”; (B) 1982, “Turtle”

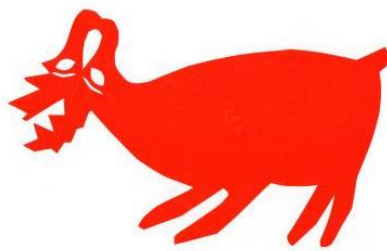


Figure 3. 1982, Back-necked deer

Paper-cutting has become a part of her life as this practice can be tracked back to her childhood, where she would cut out small figures of people, “Turtle,” “Frog,” and other animals every Chinese New Year to show and pray for good fortune in days to come in addition to those done on weekdays ^[6]. Raised and edified therefrom, the art of Manchu paper-cut that was inherited from her grandmother has been deeply rooted in her heart and completely passed down as a matter of course. Until 1955, when 15-year-old Ni attended elementary school, she temporarily bid farewell to paper-cutting. Like an ordinary woman, she got married and had children. After nearly 30 years, she picked up the craft of scissors once again ^[7]. It was an art exhibition held at Tonghua Cultural Center that intrigued her, for which she scissored out works of “Turtle,” “Frog,” and “Momo” by memory. Rough and concise were they, and also highly generalized. They, without any “trim,” were less decorated, folded in four, and cut in half. The eyes were burned out with incense. The resulting traces of smoke around the eyes shaped a simple and elegant atmosphere, exuding strong original taste. The works were appreciated by Wang Chunxin, a curator at Tonghua City Art Museum. As a result, the gap of Manchu paper-cutting in this Chinese folk art was made up for. Accordingly, Ni became the first Manchu folk paper-cut artist known by the public ^[8].

“Turtle” and “Frog” are animal gods in Manchu belief. With regard to the back-necked deer, the bold and clear lines go nicely with the plum blossom spots burned by incense ^[9]. The dauntless and exaggerated shape, to be precise, the upward lips, upside-down head, and the four legs on the same plane bending forwards gave me a thought that my grandma might have cut it wrong. However, when I asked her why the

legs of deer were bent in the opposite direction, she laughed and said, “It’s the art of paper-cutting, trying to make it as natural as though it were living, but not exactly.” Circulating sayings have it that they are always mounted on the walls of Manchu people during Chinese New Year for auspiciousness ^[10].

The unadorned “Momo” retains the original traditional taste and flavor. It takes images from typical Manchu costumes: long robes and mandarin jackets, women’s flag flower crowns, and men’s braids that stand on their heads rather than being folded down ^[11]. The way of folding it in half makes them stand in that manner. In virtue of techniques of Yin, of cutting off the pattern itself, there go round eyes, square mouth, triangular nose, drooping hands, separated fingers, and a full head. ^[12]

There is no specific point where inheritance stops. The inheritance goes far beyond the image and lies in the spirit and culture ^[13]. Hence, not a second have Ni given up on her persistence in embodying the Manchu culture and the unique national spirit of the northern region in her paper-cut works, neither in the creative period nor in the later latent stage ^[14].

3. Creation

Manchu paper-cutting in Changbai Mountain shares the limelight for works of “Turtle,” “Frog,” the back-necked deer, and “Momo,” which earned her praise and motivated her to pick up the tool and continue to create. Ceasing to advance was not an option, as repeating the tradition would not satisfy her in paper-cut creation. She pursued innovation and development ^[15]. The year of 1983 opened up the stage of creation. Relying on her memories and life experience, she created thousands of paper-cut works based on the folk customs experienced and Manchu folklore that is usually passed down orally. These outputs better reflected her creativity, and it is also during this period that made her a real Manchu paper-cut artist ^[16].

Between 1983 and 1996, Ni successively took part in the joint exhibition of new paper-cut works from 25 provinces across the country that was held in Beijing; joined the Jilin Provincial Folk Painting and Calligraphy Research Association as a director; and appeared in the first Chinese folk culture and art exhibition. Her work “Ginseng Story” (**Figure 4**) was selected to be displayed at China Folk Art Exhibition and was also sent to Malmö, Sweden for exhibition. During this period, countless works were born, including “Ginseng Story,” “Old Couple and Young Couple,” and “Fetching the Bride” ^[17].

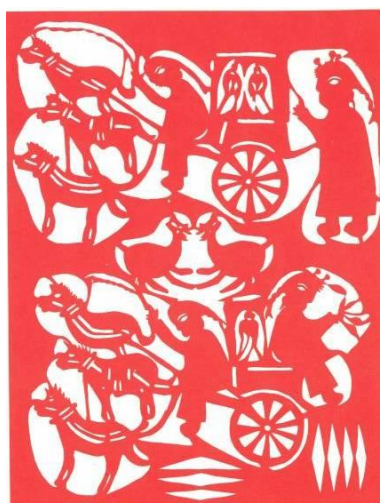


Figure 4. 1999, “Ginseng Story”

In 1996, a crucial year of her creation, her family that housed many children was in a difficult situation. Seven or eight of them crowded together in a house of over 60 square meters. At this time, there happened to be a house in the scenic area of Wanwanchuan. It was not big but enough to grow vegetables and raise poultry ^[18]. So, she and her husband moved there as they both enjoyed the beautiful scenic spot. They spent

over five years living a peaceful and secluded life. The picturesque scenery attracted many people during summer, but few in autumn and winter. Such a quiet environment made a hotbed for artistic creation. She integrated her previous paper-cut works and continued to create new ones. During that several years while living in Wanwanchuan, she created nearly 2,000 pieces [19].

In 1998, her attitude of “revealing the art to no one” changed. She was employed by Tonghua Experimental Primary School as a paper-cut instructor, and she began to teach paper-cut skills. She also became more involved in paper-cutting activities. Prior to this, she had never drafted before cutting; instead, she just visualized her craft in her mind. While teaching students, she began to draw before cutting. Her drawings were as rough and simple as her paper-cutting. In June 2003, she hosted a podium in Tonghua Normal University to teach paper-cutting to college students.

In the course of teaching, her painting consciousness gradually emerged, which is referred to as a transformation from instinctive to subjective creation. Her self-awareness in paper-cutting grew stronger. Themes of creation were no longer limited to stories from memories and traditional customs of the past, thus leaving a profound impact on her later paper-cutting works.

In addition to the Manchu folklore passed down orally and the folk customs experienced, a small number of her paper-cut works, which are not mainstream, embodied her strong self-awareness. She began to pay attention to her surroundings and modern times, as proved by her following works.

In addition to individual works such as “Momo,” “Guaqian,” a paper-cut with tassels pasted on the door and window during New Year, impressed me the most during my childhood. Before New Year, my grandma would always ride her bicycle to send us some of these paper-cuts in different colors. It looked good when pasted on the lintel with the couplets. However, she did not cut these anymore, and since then, I never saw them again. I only vaguely remember that there were many money patterns. When I was in college, I asked her about “Guaqian.” She explained that her works on the subject usually contained some auspicious patterns, such as fish (for a prosperous year to come), the word “Fu,” or the Chinese zodiac of the year, with money patterns applied as decoration on both sides or the lower end. Her fondness for Guaqian pattern is evident not only in “Guaqian,” but also in many folk scene paper-cuts, such as “Fetching the Bride” and “Old Couple and Young Couple.” Whenever she cuts the money pattern, she often says, “Money paves the ground, and there awaits good luck.” I believe this not only fits the meaning of the work itself, but also perhaps a form of expectation for a happy life. Stories about “Guaqian” have come to an end, so have the works that have not been seen by the public [20].

In terms of folklore, there are representative works, such as “Legend of the Three Fairies,” “Old Mushroom and His Goddaughter,” “Disguising Sisters,” “Story of the Calf,” “Ginseng Girl Hitching a Car,” “Legend of Nurhachi,” *etc.*

In terms of customs, there are representative works based on the local practices of the Manchu people, such as “Shaman,” “Origin of Artemisia: Artemisia on Dragon Boat Festival,” “Respecting Smoke,” “Old Couple and Young Couple,” “Fetching the Bride,” *etc.* (Figure 5).

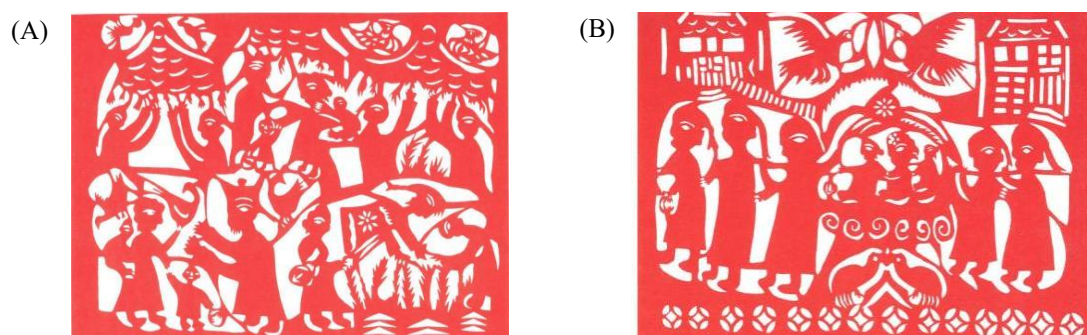


Figure 5. (A) 1990, “Origin of Artemisia: Artemisia on Dragon Boat Festival”; (B) 2002, “Fetching the Bride”

“Visiting the Parental Home,” “Traffic Post,” “Respecting the Elderly and Caring for the Young,” *etc.* depict life in the modern society. “Visiting the Parental Home” highlights the contrast between the old and the new society in the matter of such custom. The images of holding a handbag and sitting in a car form a sharp contrast, indicating the transition of times. The paper-cut work “Traffic Post” follows a real handling process of a traffic violation incident that she came across when she was waiting at a red light on her way home. “Respecting the Elderly and Caring for the Young,” on the other hand, comprises pictures revolving around “harmony” and “care.”

She later created a series of works called “Goguryeo Gods and Beasts Face Makeup” (**Figure 6**), which was presented to the world during Ni Youzhi’s 70th Anniversary Retrospective Exhibition in 2014, totaling 108 pieces.



Figure 6. 2009, “Goguryeo Gods and Beasts Face Makeup”

4. Transformation and regression

Ni’s grandma had an immeasurable influence on her, both in paper-cutting and in life. Her grandmother, a Manchu, was a Christian; thus, following her footsteps, Ni is a Christian. She became particularly devout and strong in her religious belief after she experienced severe psychological trauma. In 2005, her eldest son passed away after being bedridden for many years due to a brain injury from an accident, which left her with a heavy blow. Back then, she prayed every day and went to church every week for spiritual sustenance. She then gradually stepped out of the shadows. Since then, she began to cover religious themes and created paper-cuts focusing on Jesus by referring to the graphic version of “Bible Stories.” At this time, influenced by several religious paintings, her paper-cut style made a sharp turn.

Since 2012, her mind has been at a state of peace. Although what she had experienced influenced her life, her love for paper-cutting has remained firm. She turned to her paper-cutting world and continued to create. Hardships made her clearer about her paper-cutting path. She invested efforts to the source and carried out research and innovation on her “Momo” series. In 2013, she was honored with the “National Intangible Cultural Heritage Manchu Paper-cut Inheritor” award. One year later in 2014, she held her first personal paper-cut exhibition “Ni Youzhi’s 70th Anniversary Retrospective Exhibition of The First Person of Manchu Paper-Cut” at Changchun Ark Art Museum.

“I hope to impart my paper-cuts to more people, so that even if I die one day, my paper-cuts will still be there,” she said in a promotional video titled “Interview with the Artist – Ni Youzhi” by Changchun Ark Art Museum. Throughout her journey, she made transformed her “family business” into a “hand-down property” by the state. Those 70 years or even longer of paper-cut life made Ni Youzhi, an ordinary woman, respectable, not only because of her achievements in paper-cut art, but also her contributions to the society! In 2016, an incident of fall has put her bedridden until now. Despite an advanced age and her sufferings from many illnesses, she devotes herself to creating and spares no efforts to promote the national culture through paper-cutting.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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