

Contrast and Fusion: The Role of Regional Culture in Shaping Jiangsu Paper-Cut Art

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Abstract: The Chinese paper-cut art, first recorded in the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties (220 AD–589 AD), has witnessed the changes of times, yet it still retains its artistic vitality. Chinese papercuts can be divided into two schools: the northern and the southern. Jiangsu, located in the region of the Yellow River and Huai River, is the geographical dividing line between those two schools. Therefore, in Jiangsu Province, not only the rough northern art form (such as in Xuzhou papercut) but also the graceful southern art form (such as in Jintan papercut) is evident. In addition, the unique combined paper-cut style (such as in Yangzhou and Nanjing papercuts) can be appreciated here. Although several scholars have analyzed the artistic characteristics of Jiangsu papercut based on cultural background, very few have discussed the differences between the northern and the southern in terms of content, connotation, and style. Through literature review and collected works made by local craftsmen and inheritors of this tradition, this article aims to show readers the contrast and integration of papercuts in these four places under the influence of different cultural and economic backgrounds in order to better understand the role of regional factors in shaping the art form of papercuts in Jiangsu Province. Nowadays, with the change in people's lifestyles, the living space of traditional papercuts has shrunk drastically, and its practicability in the past has faded. Instead, people are searching for and creating cultural and artistic value in museums, tourist attractions, and commodity transactions. Among them, some works have deviated from the cultural background of traditional paper-cut art. Therefore, this paper provides a basis for the current development of this art form in Jiangsu.

Keywords: Chinese papercuts; Jiangsu papercut; Regional cultural background; Comparison; Integration

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1. Introduction

Chinese papercuts, in their true sense, matured with the remarkable development of the paper-making industry in the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties (220 AD–589 AD). The quality and quantity of paper improved during these dynasties compared with that of the Han Dynasty when it was first created [1].

Paper-cut art is not only economical and easy to learn, but also infused with the spiritual appeal of its maker. It is also well-known for its unique regional characteristics. Chinese papercuts can be divided into two schools: the northern and the southern. Northern papercuts, represented by Shandong and Shanxi Province, possess a bold and generous style, while southern papercuts, represented by Guangdong and Fujian Province, have a delicate style. A large number of paper-cut works and documents provide a basis for the theoretical research of this art form with different regional characteristics. Jiangsu Province, located in the middle region between the north and the south, has different cultural characteristics from the north, the south, and central areas. These differences affect the development of paper-cut art in the province.

Xuzhou (in the northern part of Jiangsu) papercut reflects the northern spirit, and its main production tools are scissors; Jintan (in the southern part of Jiangsu) paper carving reflects the intricacy of southern craftsmanship, and its production tools are knives with hollow details. However, Yangzhou and Nanjing (in the central areas of Jiangsu) papercuts exhibit the unique feature of the coexistence of simplicity and intricacy. They demonstrate the decisive significance of local cultural factors in shaping the art form. This influence continues in the current development of Jiangsu papercut and also in its derivatives and integration with contemporary design.

2. Northern and southern schools and styles

The appeal of Chinese papercuts lies in their striking simplicity, where no paint or brush is needed; only a scissor or knife and a piece of paper are required. Papercutting is an art form that has been commemorated in China for more than 1,500 years. Among the numerous folk arts in China, the influence of papercutting on other art forms and the diversity of its own styles reflect the depth of its roots in popular culture ^[2].

The earliest papercuts had to do with ancient traditions and beliefs. From the Wei (220 AD–265 AD) and Jin Dynasties (265 AD–420 AD), papercuts were symbolized as money burned during funerals. The popularity of folk papercut began in the Sui (518 AD–618 AD) and Tang Dynasties (619 AD–907 AD) ^[3]. Since then, regional characteristics have constantly developed and evolved under different regional cultural backgrounds related to different geographical locations, thereby forming the northern and southern papercut styles. Although Chinese papercuts share similarities in certain aspects, such as auspicious images, legends, folk tales, characters, production tools, and steps in making, there are differences in cultural connotation and expressive techniques under the influence of different cultural backgrounds.

A typical example of the southern paper-cut style comes from Yueqing, a county in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province (in the northern area). Yueqing is located on the southeast coast of China. Since the Southern Song Dynasty (1127 AD–1279 AD), foreign trade and overseas exchanges have been frequent, and the handicraft industry and commerce have developed. The worship custom of the dragon god and sea god has long existed. Yueqing paper carving is the witness of the fusion of OuYue folk custom, marine culture, commercial civilization, and auspiciousness. It is the most important part of the local intangible cultural heritage decorated dragon lanterns, which are displayed during the lantern festival to pray for a safe and smooth-sailing year. Therefore, Yueqing paper carving is also called “Longchuanhua” (decorations on the dragon lantern). Since Yueqing is surrounded by mountains and sea, its people not only appreciate the gifts brought by the sea in the process of understanding, utilizing, and protecting the sea but also fear its power. They hope to express their gratitude through a certain medium to dispel dread and pray for protection from the sea god. Therefore, some of the contents in Yueqing paper carving are related to coastal life, such as fish scales, fishing activities, and symmetric fish patterns ^[4]. Under the influence of the fishery culture “Jing Shi Zhi Yong” (Applying to the World), craftsmen have defined Yueqing paper carving as “Seiko,” owing to the extreme detail of the paper carving. Yueqing paper carving is equated with micro-carving in the Chinese paper-cut circle. Its craftsmen can carve 52 lines in an area of one square inch, and it takes more than 10 days to carve an area the size of an ordinary bowl (**Figure 1**) ^[5]. Yueqing paper carving is one of the most brilliant representatives of Chinese northern papercuts with extreme intricacy.

As for the northern style, Shaanxi papercut is the most representative. Shaanxi, the cultural birthplace of the Chinese nation, has thousands of years of cultural precipitation, with thirteen dynasties founded here. Shaanxi traditional papercut holds the reputation of national parental art and living relic. Although it is divided according to the three regions northern Shaanxi, Guanzhong plain, and southern Shaanxi, where different individual works have emerged, its thick and rough characteristics are unique compared with other places in China. Two main factors contribute to its characteristics. First, its papercut is influenced by ancient totem worship culture. Shaanxi is the birthplace of Yangshao culture, whose ancestors migrated along the

Yellow River. At that time, the rich regional environment nurtured the Huaxia tribes, accumulating the Xia, Shang, Zhou, and Qin cultures. Totemic cultural and related graphic connotations have been handed down to this day. For example, fish and frogs represent a strong ability to reproduce in totemic culture. In traditional Shaanxi papercut, other than individual fish and frog shapes, many works combine a human's face with a fish or a frog. In addition to expressing admiration and worship, these works reflect people's desire for this power to come upon them and bless their families. They are, in fact, manifestations of totemic personifications [6].



Figure 1. Eight-cornered fish, designed by Kezhengming and made by Chenzhaofen in 1956, measuring 12.5 cm (width) × 12.5 cm (length). The outer part is engraved with patterns of shoe flowers, squirrels, and grapes; the middle part is engraved with a fine pattern of dragon boat flowers; while the inner part is engraved with a figure of two fishes.

In many Shaanxi paper-cut works, anthropomorphic fish and frogs appeared on other carriers, such as women's skirts and children's belly bands (**Figure 2**). Another example is "zhuajiwawa" (a doll with a pigtail). These dolls are believed to be omnipotent, and in papercuts, they are seen wearing a double bun or carrying chickens on top of their heads. In old times, "zhuajiwawa" can be seen in various witchcraft activities, which are believed to play a role in exorcising evil spirits and reviving the dead. On the other hand, the Han Dynasty culture and its stone relief have shaped the distinctive artistic characteristics of Shaanxi traditional papercut. Although they are created at different times, through different media, and with different forms of expression, there is consistency among them. The stone relief of the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD) is the forerunner in the evolution process of Shaanxi papercut. Four hundred years of civilization have shaped the brilliance and stability of their design. The stone relief is derived from the custom of Han burial. The Han Dynasty tombs attempt to create a universe with human vicissitudes. Its constituting elements include picture bricks, stone reliefs, and frescos, which not only complete the decorative function but also reflect the humanistic style under the influence of the Han culture. It is also the source of characteristics of Shaanxi papercut featuring a style that is primitive, generous, and rough [7]. For example, "GenNiuTu" (Tilling a Cow) by Baifenglan (1920–1990) of Ansai, Shaanxi Province, shows a farmer driving an ox with a whip and plowing a field. Above it, there are two phoenixes on peony branches. Its shape is similar to that of the Han stone relief "NiuGenTu" (Cow Cultivated Land) unearthed in Suide, northern Shaanxi (**Figure 3**). Therefore, whether it is the influence of the original totem worship or the infiltration of strong Han culture, it plays an important role in shaping Shaanxi papercut with the cultural characteristic of the central plain.



Figure 2. From left to right: salamander, fish head, fish mermaid. Pictures are taken from *Exploration and Research on the Traditional Folk Paper-Cut of Shaanxi Province*.



Figure 3. From left to right: “GenNiuTu” (Tilling a Cow) by Baifenglan (1920–1990) of Ansai; “NiuGenTu” (Cow Cultivated Land) unearthed in Suide, northern Shaanxi (1962). Pictures are taken from *Exploration and Research on the Traditional Folk Paper-Cut of Shaanxi Province*.

3. Cultural background of Jiangsu folk papercut

Through an analysis of the cultural background of the north and south, we can clearly tease out the different characteristics of Chinese traditional paper-cut art influenced by regional culture. This is more prominent in Jiangsu, owing to the cultural background of different regions in the process of historical development. The obvious cultural difference, which is caused by the special historical and geographical administrative planning, forms the unique cultural characteristic of Jiangsu Province. While linking the north and the south geographically, it also connects the northern and southern cultures that are vividly reflected in the art form of Jiangsu papercut. Located in the Huaihe River basin on the north and influenced by the Chu and Han cultures with the same origin as Shaanxi, Xuzhou papercut excels at using the combination of thick and thin lines^[8]. Jianghuai papercut, represented by Yangzhou and Nanjing in the middle region of Jiangsu, boasts vivid shape, neat composition, picturesque literature character, and rich decoration, integrating the features of northern and southern papercuts. While Jintan paper carving is similar to Yueqing paper carving in terms of technique, it is known for its water-township style^[9]. From the north to the south, the changes in Jiangsu paper-cut style can be summarized as the coexistence of a strong contrast and a mild merge. We can explore their characteristics, mutual influence, and differences from the specific paper-cut works in Jiangsu.

4. Xuzhou papercut and rough culture

Although geographically distant from Shaanxi, Xuzhou is also influenced by the Han culture. Xuzhou is the hometown of Liubang, Emperor Gaozu of the Han Dynasty. After the establishment of the Chu Empire that took Xuzhou as the center, there were thirteen generations of kings. Most of the nobles and high officials lived here. They enjoyed supreme power and wealth during their lifetime and hoped to continue this lifestyle after death. As a result, the burial culture was valued as much important as that of Shaanxi,

and the forms of stone bricks, stone reliefs, and wall paintings were also similar. Xuzhou papercut has rough and primitive yet artistic characteristics inspired by the Han stone relief. Although the materials used are different, there are certain similarities between Xuzhou papercut and local Han stone relief in terms of content, composition, and shape.

Xuzhou Han stone relief mainly revolves around traveling by car and horse, cooking and drinking, as well as textile life ^[10]. Xuzhou papercut, on the other hand, mainly revolves around life scenes, including chickens, ducks, cattle, sheep, and horses, farming, and textile production. A local Han stone relief and papercut are shown below, both of which reflect the scene of production and labor. The left diagram depicts a scene of people fishing and hunting. The people in it were with a hooked net, cormorant fishing in the water. The right diagram shows a work by Wangguiying (1940–present), the inheritor of Xuzhou paper-cut art tradition. It depicts a labor scene of a farmer leading two cows. Although the subject contents of labor are different, these two works are related to production and life in a similar naive and generalized form (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The left picture shows a Han Dynasty rubbing of fishing and hunting (160 cm in length and 39 cm in height), from the Han Dynasty Portrait Gallery, Yi Shin Zhai. The right picture is taken from *Wangguiying Paper-Cut*.

In terms of composition, Xuzhou papercut is often symmetrical. The production of works focuses on symmetry and the center of the axis to realize the mutual symmetry of all sides, up and down, and left and right. In this way, the works are neat yet generous and simple yet beautiful, with rigorous composition. Meanwhile, it pays attention to the separation of the picture and more comprehensive display ^[11]. The Han Dynasty stone relief of Xuzhou is full of images with complete composition, layered narration, and scattered perspective ^[12]. Both of them have the characteristics of being “complete,” and the objects and images in the works fully reflect the changes in time and space. In the following works, the Han stone relief on the left carries the theme of cooking for a banquet. The work is divided into three layers. At the top, seven guests are kneeling in line, as if talking with each other, while on the right side, attendants are holding fan-shaped objects. In the middle layer, a singing and dancing scene can be seen, where drums are placed in the middle, with dancers dancing around it; two with sticks and mallets are playing drums, while four are performing around the drum, holding a harp and doing somersaults. At the bottom, a scene of cooking in the kitchen can be seen. The whole work organizes the contents of different spaces together and presents the composition of layering and symmetry. The paper-cut work on the right was made by Dingyunlan (1949–present), who was born in Huaibei. Huaibei, a city north of Xuzhou, is historically influenced by the Chu and Han cultures. Dingyunlan once mentioned that the stone relief provided inspiration for her paper-cut works, which often depicted scenes of farmers working. Her work can be divided into five parts from up to down. The figures on top are similar to the figures in the upper layer of the stone relief. The second part shows people chatting, the third and fourth parts are production scenes, and the fifth part shows trees and people standing by it. The whole work uses symmetrical composition, as well as space and time isomorphism; it is full and has rich patterns. Therefore, the similarity in composition between the two cannot be denied ^[13] (Figure 5).



Figure 5. On the left is a Xuzhou Han Dynasty stone relief. The picture is taken from *Through Han Stone Relief to Experience the Society and Life of Xuzhou*. On the right is a papercut by Dingyunlan (1949–present). The picture is taken from *Research on the Connotation of Folk Art*.

In terms of form, Xuzhou papercut disregards the proportion relation between big and small objects and is not restricted by space, time, and place. Similar to Han stone relief, which is presented as a complete block relief with clear outlines, the lines in Xuzhou papercut are fine, and the block surface is thick and clear. All of the aforementioned aspects demonstrate that Xuzhou papercut is closely related to the art of Han stone relief in terms of content, composition, and form. The Han culture explains the regional characteristics and cultural roots of Xuzhou papercut.

5. Jintan paper carving and exquisite culture

Jintan paper carving incisively and vividly reflects Jiangnan (the northern part of the Yangtze River) styles. Jintan, known traditionally as Jiansha, Jianshan, or Liangshan, is affiliated with Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province. In terms of geographical location, Jintan is in the south of Jiangsu Province, surrounded by hills and mountains to the west and Taihu Plain to the east. The abundant water and soil and mild climate offer unique natural conditions for local agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and aquaculture. The people of Jintan have long lived self-sufficient life. The rich material life triggered the introduction of paper carving in Jintan, one of the transportation hubs in the central area of the Yangtze River delta. The convenient land and water transportation has driven economic prosperity and cultural exchanges in Jintan and promoted the development of Jintan paper carving^[14]. The cultural background of Jintan paper carvings is more diverse and complex than that of Yueqing's, although they are both paper carvings. First of all, Maoshan Academy in the Northern Song Dynasty (960 AD–1127 AD), Yuanyang Temple in the Dezong period of the Tang Dynasty (618 AD–907 AD), Jintan Test Court of the Qing Dynasty (1636 AD–1912 AD), Gulongshan Pagoda, and so on are of various periods with different styles and cultural connotations. Ancient buildings, especially ancient dwellings, not only provide a living space, as indoor and outdoor adornment for Jintan paper carving, but also reflects three kinds of culture and fusion, namely Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Secondly, popular local folk activities, such as the dragon dance in Ju Village of Zhixi Town, the fish-jumping lantern of Zhiqian Town, and the lantern festival in You Mountain, not only provide materials for the theme and content of paper carving in Jintan, but they also are ornamental carriers^[15]. Thirdly, the Jintan lifting pavilion, which was established in the Ming Dynasty (1368 AD–1644 AD), has become a local folk activity with unique characteristics and an important carrier for paper carving. The pavilion is a large dynamic art form integrating acrobatics and traditional comedy. It is usually held at temple fairs when

performing activities with a grand scene. The pavilion is a wooden skeleton supported by a six-foot-long and five-foot-wide square base, on which the actors can stand to perform. In order to enhance it aesthetically, Jintan paper carving is used as decoration ^[16]. In addition, the tradition of dragon dancing is evident in Jintan. The dragon is made of bamboo stripes and decorated with leather cloth and paper carving. The theme is mainly auspicious patterns, imploring good weather to prevent disasters. The local people prefer to decorate their door frames with paper carving. This is called “Menjian” (paper-cut or paper-carving works used to adorn the upper door frame). With delicate and meticulous style, the theme is the same: dragon dancing decoration to pray for good fortune, ward off evil spirits, and prevent disasters (Figure 6) ^[17].



Figure 6. On the left is a Menjian with an auspicious theme of lasting joy and luck (40 cm in width, 60 cm in height). On the right is Menjian with the theme of dispelling evils to bring happiness (50 cm in width, 103 cm in height). Pictures are taken from *Research on Paper-Carving in Jintan from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

Jintan paper carving is in fact a transformation from papercutting. Owing to the need to participate in local folk activities and the management wits of the Jintan people, the demand for paper decoration keeps increasing. From the Qing Dynasty to the earlier Minguo period, not only there were many workshops but also apprentices in Jintan. Compared with scissors, carving knives can superimpose more than 20 pieces of work at a time. In order to increase the output and meet the increasing demand, the proportion of using carving knives naturally increased, creating more details in the process of making Jintan paper with a more delicate look.

It is not difficult to find similarities between Jintan paper carving and Yueqing paper carving which comes from southern China. However, the size of the Jintan paper carving is larger, and the content focuses not only on traditional tales but also on the development of the times. In terms of composition, the Jintan paper carving frame is unlike Yueqing paper carving which is based on the symmetrical three-circle composition. The setting content of the border is variable, such as the shape of the lantern, the outline of the homeowner, the shape of the wall clock, and the shape of the Chinese traditional screen (Figures 7–8) ^[18].

Compared with the decline of papercutting in northern Jiangsu, the contemporary promotion and acceptance of Jintan paper carving increased. It carries the southern delicate and beautiful characteristics and is quite different from the ancient and mellow Xuzhou papercut that is deeply influenced by Han culture. This fully demonstrates the differences in style and temperament of folk paper-cut art under the background of cultural differences between the north and the south of Jiangsu.



Figure 7. On the left is a Jintan paper carving with the theme of the medical scientist Wangkentang of the Ming Dynasty (45 cm in width, 74 cm in height), with no frame, based on the portrait composition. On the right is a Jintan paper carving with the theme of Master Puxue Duanyuzai of the Qing Dynasty (45 cm in width, 71 cm in height). Its border is decorated with a mirror contour. Pictures are taken from *Research on Paper-Carving in Jintan from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

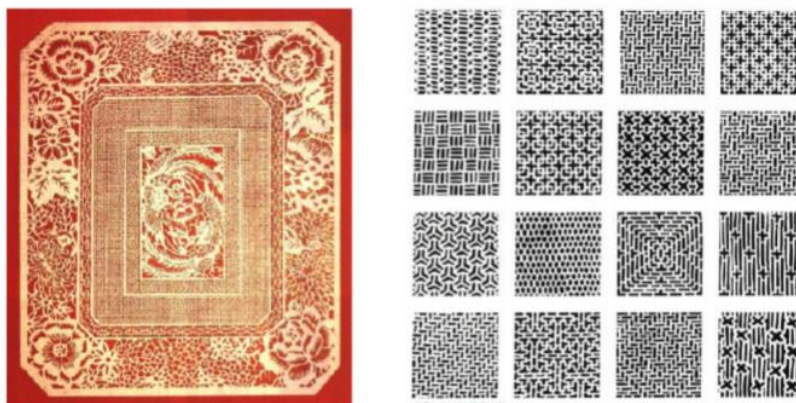


Figure 8. On the left is a Yueqing fine-grain engraved paper. Three-circle composition, the outer circle is a natural decorative pattern, the middle circle is a geometric pattern, and the inner circle shows two phoenixes playing on the lotus. The composition is influenced by the construction structure of the Yueqing dragon boat. On the right is the Dragon boat flower traditional pattern. Pictures are taken from *Research on Paper-Carving in Jintan from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

6. Yangzhou and Nanjing papercuts and the integration of the northern and southern cultures

Yangzhou and Nanjing are located in the central areas of Jiangsu Province. Most of their paper-cut works are based on cutting skills, taking carving skills as a supplement. The style is unlike the rough style of Xuzhou and the fine carving of Jintan. Its degree of technicality is between the northern coarse cutting and the southern fine engraving. Since the two cities are adjacent to each other, they have inevitably influenced each other economically and culturally since ancient times. From the cultural origin and background of papercut, Yangzhou papercut developed earlier than Nanjing papercut. Although there are similarities in terms of shape and details, each has its own characteristics. Both are delicate, but the presented contents are different, owing to the cultural development of the two areas.

6.1. Yangzhou papercut

During the Tang Dynasty (618 AD–907 AD), Yangzhou was the transportation center for grain, grass,

money, and iron between the south and the north, as well as an important port for exchanges domestically and internationally. Its agricultural, commerce, and handicraft industry were relatively developed. As a result, a large number of handicraft industry workshops sprang up, making Yangzhou one of the largest metropolises in China at that time. These triggered the development of palace art, humanistic art, and folk art, as well as laid a foundation for the germination of its paper-cut art. In the Song Dynasty (960 AD–1279 AD), Yangzhou Gong paper (one of the traditional Chinese papers, yellowish, and used for literati painting) was produced in large quantities. The popularity of paper spread the paper-cut art to people in Yangzhou^[19]. Especially in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127 AD–1279 AD), the custom of hollowing out metal for decorative use became the prototype of Yangzhou paper-cut art modeling. During the Ming (1368 AD–1644 AD) and Qing Dynasties (1636 AD–1912 AD), the practical use of paper-cut art expanded, especially in the application of colored lanterns and embroidery, accompanied by the emergence of many professional craftsmen^[20]. In the Qing Dynasty, the development of the salt industry and grain transportation promoted the prosperity of commerce in Yangzhou. People began paying attention to their dressing and daily life, granting embroidery an appeal as decoration for costumes. In embroidery, the pattern must be drawn and cut first before gluing to the fabric. This is also the factor that drives the development of Yangzhou paper-cut modeling and skill^[21] (**Figure 9**).



Figure 9. Some of the images of Yangzhou papercut are from embroidery patterns. On the left is an embroidery pattern, named Riverside Fishing Alone. On the right is a pattern by Zhangxiufang (1943–present), who is the 6th generation inheritor of Yangzhou paper cut, titled Shanshui (Landscape); it is 48 cm in width and 48 cm in height and was created in 2008. Pictures are taken from *A Study Imitating Painting Phenomenon of Contemporary Yangzhou Paper-Cut*.

The development of various crafts promoted by economic prosperity has contributed to the development of Yangzhou papercut. However, the literati painting of the Qing Dynasty, especially the painting style in and around the Yangzhou area, has the greatest influence on shaping the characteristics of Yangzhou papercut. Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, some literati have participated in paper-cut creation. With higher cultural attainment, they prefer elegant literati poetry and painting themes, thereby constantly transforming local papercuts from simple, practical folk forms to ornamental forms. A large number of works with images of literati paintings such as flowers, birds, fish, insects, plums, orchids, bamboos, and chrysanthemums are present in the preserved Yangzhou papercut during that time^[22]. For example, Baojun (fl.), a well-known Yangzhou painter in the Qing Dynasty, combined papercuts and literati painting with historic records and textual evidence^[23]. He used scissors to shape flowers, birds, plants, fish, and insects and then utilized coloring and dyeing, which reflected his talent in Gongbi (traditional Chinese realistic painting skill)^[24]. Baojun’s work, “Colored Birds and Insects” is exhibited in Zhenjiang Museum and combines cutting and painting, as well as cutting and calligraphy (**Figure 10**).



Figure 10. Works by Baojun. On the left is a cut-and-paste work titled “Iris and Dragonfly”; it is 27 cm in width and 31 cm in height. On the right is a cut-and-paste work titled “Blue Chrysanthemum and Katydid”; it is 27 cm in width and 31 cm in height. Pictures are taken from *A Study Imitating Painting Phenomenon of Contemporary Yangzhou Paper-Cut*.

This kind of cultural custom embodied in papercut has been inherited and carried forward in the modern Yangzhou Zhang’s family paper-cut inheritance. Zhangyongshou (1907–1989), the 5th generation inheritor of Zhang’s papercut, often visited Yangzhou Museum to appreciate the works of “Yangzhou Eight Oddities” (Yangzhou Ba Guai), which represents a group of painters and calligraphers with similar styles who were active in Yangzhou from the mid-Kangxi period to the late Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty (1690 AD–1795 AD), also known as Yangzhou Painting School in Chinese art history. It had a great influence on modern Chinese flower-and-bird painting and promoted the comprehensive development of many crafts including papercutting ^[25].

For example, the work “Fuqing” (Play the Zither) by Zhangmuli (1960–present), the 6th generation inheritor of Zhang’s papercut, is based on the work “Tingqintu” (Listening to Qin) by Zhaojie (1082 AD–1135 AD) of the Song Dynasty. In part of Zhangmuli’s work, we can see the image of a pine tree and ganyemede similar to those in Zhaojie’s painting (Figure 11).



Figure 11. On the left is the work “Tingqintu” (Listening to Qin) by Zhaojie (1082 AD–1135 AD) in the Song Dynasty; it is 51.3 cm in width and 147.2 cm in height. On the right is the work “Fuqing” (Play the Zither) by Zhangmuli (1960–present). Pictures are taken from *The Story of Chinese Traditional Painting*.

6.2. Nanjing papercut

Nanjing is also a region where the cultures of the north and south of Jiangsu converge. It is known as the ancient capital of six dynasties. As it is adjacent to Yangzhou, its paper-cut style is influenced by Yangzhou, focusing on individual expression of soft beauty and intricacy in the overall shape. However, the shaping of the block surface is emphasized in the overall sketch, and the content of the papercut reflects folk customs and people's livelihood, similar to Xuzhou papercut. Therefore, it possesses some characteristics of the northern style. Being used exclusively by the royal family in the early Ming Dynasty, the popularity of Nanjing papercut was later than Yangzhou's [26]. Until the Qing Dynasty, Nanjing papercut gradually transitioned from royalty to ordinary people with a strong folk flavor. The book *Baixiasuoyan (Stories in Nanjing)* was written by Ganxi (1798 AD–1853 AD, a literati, goldsmith, and book collector in the late Qing Dynasty) during the rule of Daoguang Emperor of the Qing Dynasty (1821 AD–1850 AD) recorded that on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, the bustling streets are filled with brightly colored lanterns and trees, resulting from paper-cut decoration [27]. Based on folk cultural activities, the themes of Nanjing papercut include praying for good and dispelling evil. The content comprises folklore, fables, operas, auspicious patterns, and flowers. Its basic connotation is loving life, conveying emotions through the shape of patterns, and explaining meaning through the illustration of combined patterns [28]. However, this kind of folk feature is different from Xuzhou papercut, which takes the form of the Han Dynasty stone relief and reflects the busy life of farming. Under the influence of Yangzhou's literati culture, flowers, birds, fruits, and animals are generally taken and combined as one complete image. Reflecting on the pronunciation of traditional auspicious Chinese words expressed by the image, Nanjing papercut expresses good wishes for life with a plump and large surface, round shape, and exquisite details [29]. For example, the paper-cut work "Yuanyangxihe" (Mandarin Ducks Play Round the Lotus) had a shape of a large lotus leaf, with a pair of similar large mandarin ducks in the middle, accompanied by small lotus flowers and loose leaves. This kind of paper-cut shaped with small filling embodies the characteristics of Nanjing papercut with folk culture as the connotation of a set of multiple meanings in one, and the exquisite craft and complete block surface manifest the absorption of southern and northern Jiangsu paper-cut features (**Figure 12**).



Figure 12. Nanjing paper-cut work "Yuanyangxihe" (Mandarin Ducks Play Round the Lotus) by Zhangfanglin (1949–present), the 4th generation inheritor of "Jinlin Shengjian Zhang." Pictures from *Zhangfanglin's Declaration of National Intangible Culture Heritage*.

In general, Yangzhou and Nanjing papercuts show strong literati traits. Yangzhou papercut cleverly draws on the characteristics of Ming and Qing literati paintings, with a beautiful, clever, natural, and smooth image. Nanjing papercut relies on cultural accumulation and folk activities, with auspicious meaning as the theme. It is mellow and full, with smooth details and a distinct block surface. Both Yangzhou and Nanjing

papercuts reflect the merging of the northern and southern cultures in the rough and delicate collision process, as well as a summary and complex portrayal of northern and southern paper-cut art.

7. Conclusion

Different from the way of analyzing artistic characteristics in previous studies by taking each region as the research object, this article takes the northern and southern regions of Jiangsu as an example. Within the scope of Jiangsu Province, Xuzhou papercut has an obvious northern paper-cut style, with features expressing the theme of people's life and work, although the context of inheritance is unclear. The development history of Jintan paper carving is relatively late, but its birth and development have a strong economic and artistic pertinence; moreover, the commercial operation is relatively mature. Yangzhou paper-cut skills boast a comparatively long and mature history, with a clear inheritance pedigree and historical record, as well as an outstanding artistic style of literati painting. Yangzhou papercut has its own cultural characteristics, which differ from Xuzhou papercut in terms of generalization and roughness and Jintan paper carving in terms of grandeur and intricacy. It initially reflects the integration of the north and the south, similar to Nanjing papercut, which reflects the merging of the north and the south with a moderate style. Nanjing papercut is both coarse and fine. It not only shows lively folk taste but also forms its own unique composition and decoration style, granting it a vein of inheritance^[30]. In this article, the cultural analysis of Jiangsu paper-cut art in four regions fully explains the role of regional culture in shaping art. In the process of informatization and urbanization, the development of Jiangsu paper-cut art is faced with huge challenges. Although there are paper-cut craftsmen and inheritors across the country who are striving to preserve this craft and culture, the changes in people's lifestyles have significantly weakened the utility of papercuts in practical and decorative aspects. For example, Xuzhou paper-cut works are mostly displayed in museums, while Yangzhou and Nanjing papercuts are finding ways to survive by combining the activities of local tourism with local culture promotion. Jintan paper carving is still on a path that explores industrialization. The way people are chasing a comfortable modern life inevitably causes a change in the content and form of traditional folk crafts, including folk papercut. However, papercut is not only a simple copy by tracing and using shapes and patterns; rather, it carries profound cultural connotations. Folk papercut is not just the papercut itself, but also the meaning contained with national cultural characteristics and emotions behind its image. In order to explore and broaden the style of paper-cut art and the direction of use, contemporary artists need to pay close attention to this aspect. Only in this way can we truly dig and reflect folk customs, so that the development of paper-cut art across China today will not be drowned in the flood of repetition and featurelessness.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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