

THE ART OF RUICHANG PAPER CUT: TECHNIQUES, THEMES, AND COMPOSITIONAL FORMS

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Abstract

This research delves into the intricate visual characteristics and cultural implications of Ruichang papercut, guided by two primary objectives: (1) to explore and comprehend the visual features and cultural connotations of Ruichang papercut by examining its themes, techniques, and compositional forms; and (2) to conduct a thorough analysis of these elements to provide design recommendations for the creation of culturally creative products inspired by Ruichang papercut. The research methodology primarily encompasses observation, literature review, and interviews to collate comprehensive information on the themes, techniques, and compositional forms of Ruichang papercut. This is followed by a qualitative analysis to decipher the visual characteristics and cultural implications of Ruichang papercut. The findings underscore that designers, while crafting culturally creative products inspired by Ruichang papercut, should uphold its cultural attributes and core techniques. Concurrently, they should strive for visual diversity in their products, aligning them with contemporary aesthetic predilections and lifestyle requirements. This balanced approach is pivotal for bolstering the preservation and inheritance of the rich tradition of Ruichang papercut.

Keywords: The Art of Ruichang, Papercut, Creative Product Design

Introduction

Paper cut art in China, a folk art form deeply intertwined with the everyday lives and customs of the Chinese populace, holds substantial practical and aesthetic value. The diversity of papercut styles in China is vast, generally categorized into two primary types: northern and southern papercut. The northern style is recognized for its robust and solid aesthetics, while the southern style is known for its refined and delicate elegance.

This study focuses on Ruichang papercut, a style that, due to its unique geographical location at the intersection of the north and the south, has assimilated characteristics from both northern and southern papercut styles. This amalgamation has given rise to its distinctive individual characteristics and artistic style. Ruichang papercut holds significant influence in the art of papercut in China and was included in the first batch of China's national intangible cultural heritage list in 2008. Furthermore, Ruichang has been honored with the title of "Hometown of Chinese Folk Cultural Art" by the Ministry of Culture of China.

With a history that scholars agree originated during the Han Dynasty, Ruichang papercut has, over nearly two millennia of inheritance and development, become an integral part of various folk activities. It serves as offerings, personal and environmental decorations, and gifts for interpersonal exchanges, permeating various aspects of the lives of the people in Ruichang. However, with the passage of time and the shift to modern lifestyles, traditional Ruichang papercut art, which thrived on an agrarian culture, is facing a survival crisis.

This research paper is conducted in response to this situation, with the aim of integrating Ruichang papercut with cultural creative product design. It intends to provide suggestions for designers, enabling them to develop new products that maintain the cultural characteristics and core techniques of Ruichang papercut while also meeting the

aesthetic and lifestyle demands of the public. By creating cultural products with higher added value, the research aims to satisfy the growing cultural consumption needs and expand the survival space of Ruichang papercut, thereby achieving better preservation and development.

Research objectives

1. To explore and understand the visual features and cultural connotations of Ruichang papercut
2. To analyze the themes, techniques, and compositional forms of Ruichang papercut

Literature Review

Ruichang papercut, with its extensive history and rich array of samples, holds considerable artistic and cultural value. However, due to the predominantly rural and less formally educated demographic of papercut artisans, coupled with a limited number of researchers in the field, there is a dearth of literature available for reference. The existing literature primarily adopts an ethnographic perspective, exploring the origin, historical development, and inheritance methods of Ruichang papercut. It delves into the role and function of Ruichang papercut in local folk activities and introduces notable artisans of Ruichang papercut (Jiao Furong & Yan Zhilong, 2008; Cai Xun, 2011; Wang Yigui, 2010).

While some studies touch upon the techniques and themes of Ruichang papercut, they mainly focus on introducing the process of papercut, encompassing the use of tools, sketching, carving techniques, and artwork framing (Feng Longmei & Feng Yabing, 2009). Some studies provide a general overview or a listing display of the themes, techniques, and patterns of Ruichang papercut (Wang Xu, 2012; Wang Hongfeng, 2013; Wang Ziwen, 2019), but in-depth research is scarce. Literature resources that provide substantial content linking the visual features and cultural connotations of Ruichang papercut to cultural creative products are particularly rare.

In recent years, the Ruichang government has proposed a development strategy that intertwines the preservation and inheritance of folk arts with the development of the local cultural industry. The objective is to generate economic benefits from folk arts, particularly through the development of tourism souvenirs. This approach is intended to stimulate the development of related industries, and as a result, Ruichang papercut has been identified as a key focus for development. However, during the development process of Ruichang papercut related products, the pursuit of market interests without careful consideration has resulted in serious shortcomings in cultural connotations and blurred regional characteristics of the developed products. There have even been instances of distorted aesthetics and cultural variations. This phenomenon is a common challenge faced by many folk arts in China during their industrial development, which greatly harms the intrinsic value of folk arts themselves (Zhao Binran, 2022).

Faced with this situation, the researcher posits that Ruichang papercut needs to transition from a focus on “material benefits” and utility value to a focus on “cultural identity” and spiritual value. In the process of product design and development, it is crucial to not only consider the current aesthetic tastes and lifestyle demands of people but also emphasize the preservation of Ruichang papercut’s cultural connotations, core techniques, and regional characteristics.

Methodology

This study primarily employs a qualitative research methodology. The researcher conducted an observational study of Ruichang papercuts housed in the Ruichang Paper Cut Museum. This observational method allowed for a detailed examination of the papercuts, providing first-hand data on their themes, techniques, and compositional forms.

In addition to observational research, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken. This involved the collection, organization, and synthesis of primary source materials related to Ruichang papercut. The literature review served to contextualize the observational data within the broader field of study, providing a theoretical framework for the analysis.

Furthermore, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with artisans engaged in the creation of Ruichang papercuts. These interviews provided valuable insights into the practical aspects of papercut creation, including the artisans' techniques and the cultural significance of their work.

The data collected through these methods were then subjected to qualitative analysis. This involved identifying patterns and themes within the data, interpreting these findings in light of the existing literature, and drawing conclusions about the cultural and visual features of Ruichang papercut.

By combining observational research, literature review, and in-depth interviews, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of Ruichang papercut. This multi-faceted approach ensures a robust understanding of the subject, providing a solid foundation for the design recommendations proposed in this research.

Research results

Chinese folk arts, as tangible manifestations of local customs and aesthetic ideals, are imbued with rich cultural connotations and unique visual characteristics. Consequently, this study posits that an examination of the themes, techniques, and compositional forms of Ruichang papercut is essential. By dissecting and understanding the cultural connotations and visual features inherent in these elements, they can be effectively utilized as design elements in the creation of cultural creative products. This approach ensures that the intrinsic cultural value is aptly represented in these products.

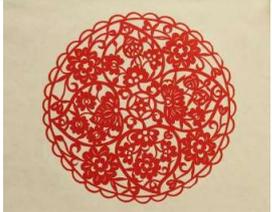
1. Themes of Ruichang Papercut

The thematic content of Ruichang papercut is characterized by its extensive diversity. Following a meticulous examination and categorization process, this study identifies that the majority of Ruichang papercut themes can be grouped into three primary categories.

The first category encapsulates desires for a joyous and satisfying love life, fertility, and longevity. The second category embodies aspirations for wealth, career success, and elevated social status. The third category expresses hopes for bountiful harvests, societal stability, and national prosperity.

Artisans of Ruichang papercut frequently employ techniques such as homophonic symbols, symbolism, and metaphors to visually articulate these connotations. This thematic exploration provides a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of Ruichang papercut, thereby informing the design of culturally resonant creative products.

Table 1 The main themes of Ruichang papercut

Connotation	Examples of Ruichang papercut	Explanations of Pattern Connotation
<p>Aspirations for a Fulfilling Love Life, Fertility, and Longevity</p>	 	<p>In the realm of Ruichang papercut, certain symbols are employed to represent specific cultural connotations. For instance, magpies are emblematic of good fortune, while plum blossoms are symbolic of the advent of spring. The amalgamation of these two symbols in a papercut design signifies the anticipation of joyous events, which explains their prevalent use in the decoration of wedding houses.</p> <p>Similarly, mandarin ducks are frequently utilized as metaphors for a harmonious marital union. This is often coupled with the use of lotus flowers and carp, which are symbols of marital harmony. During wedding ceremonies, papercut artworks that incorporate these symbols are commonly used to convey blessings for the newlyweds.</p>
	 	<p>Pomegranates, known for their abundance of seeds, serve as a symbol of prosperity and a thriving family. This is due to the phonetic similarity between the Chinese words for "seeds" and "children". As such, patterns that combine pomegranates and children are often used to symbolize a prosperous lineage.</p> <p>In Chinese mythology, the qilin is regarded as a benevolent creature. It is a widespread belief in Chinese folklore that venerating the qilin can bestow couples with intelligent offspring. Consequently, this symbol is frequently incorporated into papercut designs.</p>
	 	<p>In the cultural context of Ruichang, certain symbols carry specific connotations related to longevity, health, and happiness. For instance, the peach is a potent symbol of longevity, as well as health and happiness. During longevity celebrations in Ruichang, papercut patterns featuring peaches are frequently used to adorn the attire, headwear, and footwear of the individual celebrating their birthday, signifying a wish for their long life and well-being.</p> <p>Similarly, Magu, a female deity in Chinese Taoism, is emblematic of eternal youth and immortality. In the tradition</p>



Connotation	Examples of Ruichang papercut	Explanations of Pattern Connotation
		<p>of Ruichang, papercuts featuring Magu are often gifted to women on their birthdays, extending wishes of longevity and perpetual youth.</p>
<p>Aspirations for Wealth, Successful Careers, and High Social Status</p>		<p>In the cultural lexicon of China, and by extension, Ruichang papercut, certain symbols carry specific connotations related to wealth, career success, and social status. For instance, the lion, a symbol of power and dignity, when combined with the pattern of Chinese coins, represents a prestigious status and abundant wealth.</p> <p>Similarly, the spotted deer is emblematic of wealth and a prosperous official career. This is further reinforced by the phonetic similarity between the Chinese words for "deer" and "official position". Consequently, papercut artworks featuring the spotted deer are commonly used to convey blessings for a prosperous and successful career path.</p> <p>The horse, a symbol of excellence and success, is often depicted in papercut designs. A portrayal of a person riding a horse represents aspirations for success in the imperial examinations and a promising future, signifying wishes for a flourishing career.</p>
<p>Aspirations for Abundant Harvests, Social Stability, and National Prosperity</p>		<p>In the cultural context of Ruichang, certain symbols and scenes carry specific connotations related to abundant harvests, social stability, and national prosperity. For instance, spring ploughing, an important folk custom in Ruichang, symbolizes new beginnings, hope, and harvest. Papercut patterns depicting scenes of spring ploughing express the people's love for life and their aspirations for a bountiful harvest of crops.</p> <p>Similarly, the phoenix, a legendary bird in Chinese mythology, is associated with times of great peace and prosperity. Ancient Chinese believed that the phoenix would appear during such times, bringing light and warmth like the sun. Therefore, in Ruichang papercut, the pattern of a phoenix flying around the sun symbolizes social tranquility, harmony, and prosperity.</p>

Connotation	Examples of Ruichang papercut	Explanations of Pattern Connotation
		The rooster, which shares the same pronunciation as the Chinese word for "auspicious", is another common motif. The crowing of a rooster signifies the rising of the sun and, therefore, in Ruichang papercut, the pattern of a rooster crowing symbolizes societal prosperity and vitality.

Source: Photograph taken by the researcher at the Ruichang Paper Cut Museum.

It is evident that auspicious patterns form the core of creative themes in Ruichang papercut. These patterns, whether they are figures, animal motifs, or plant designs, are imbued with auspicious connotations. They serve as a visual expression of people's desires, pursuits, and spiritual aspirations for a life filled with happiness and fulfillment.

Given this understanding, it is suggested that designers can extract these auspicious patterns from Ruichang papercut, while maintaining a deep respect for the cultural beliefs associated with auspiciousness. By employing contemporary design techniques, these extracted patterns can be integrated into the design of cultural creative products.

This approach ensures that the resulting products not only align with the visual preferences and aesthetic tastes of contemporary individuals, but also cater to their emotional needs for blessings and good fortune. This balance between modern aesthetics and traditional cultural values is key to the successful design of cultural creative products based on Ruichang papercut.

2. Techniques Employed in Ruichang Papercut

The artistry of Ruichang papercut predominantly relies on the use of scissors and carving knives as the primary tools. The techniques that are chiefly employed, known as the "Yin Cut" and "Yang Cut", are instrumental in creating a distinctive hollowed-out visual effect in the patterns. These techniques are not only a testament to the skill and precision of the artisans but also contribute significantly to the unique aesthetic appeal of Ruichang papercut.

Table 2 The primary techniques of Ruichang Papercut

Techniques	Examples of Ruichang papercut	Technique Descriptions
Application of the "Yang Cut" Technique		The "Yang Cut" technique involves the careful preservation of the design's outline while meticulously trimming away the superfluous areas outside this outline. This process results in the creation of distinct and prominent lines that effectively define the pattern, thereby enhancing the visual clarity and impact of the design.

Techniques	Examples of Ruichang papercut	Technique Descriptions
<p>Implementati on of the "Yin Cut" Technique</p>		<p>The "Yin Cut" technique involves the precise removal of the design's outline while retaining the portions outside the outline. This method results in a distinctive block-like aesthetic in the pattern, contributing to the unique visual identity of the design.</p>
<p>Integration of "Yang Cut" and "Yin Cut" Techniques"</p>		<p>Technique Descriptions: This approach involves the concurrent application of both "Yang Cut" and "Yin Cut" techniques within a single papercut artwork. This combination allows for a complex interplay of positive and negative space, enhancing the visual depth and intricacy of the design.</p>

Source: Photograph taken by the researcher at the Ruichang Paper Cut Museum.

The techniques employed in Ruichang papercut artistry echo the ancient Chinese philosophical concept of Yin and Yang. The "Yang Cut" technique, with its preserved lines, represents "solid forms", while the hollowed-out areas denote "void forms". Conversely, the "Yin Cut" technique creates "void forms" through hollowed-out lines, while the preserved areas symbolize "solid forms". The interplay of "solid forms" and "void forms" results in a complete artwork that exhibits a striking visual contrast. This juxtaposition of "void and solid" encapsulates the philosophical concept of "harmony between Yin and Yang" and the principle of "mutual generation of Yin and Yang". This philosophical tenet, a cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture, has significantly influenced the value orientation, thought processes, social psychology, and aesthetic preferences of the Chinese people. Consequently, the researcher posits that designers can integrate the "Yang Cut" and "Yin Cut" techniques of Ruichang papercut into the design of cultural creative products. This integration allows the designed products to mirror the visual characteristics of Ruichang papercut while simultaneously conveying the philosophical concepts inherent in traditional Chinese culture. This approach enhances the cultural value of the products, catering to people's spiritual desire to appreciate traditional culture.

3. The Composition Forms of Ruichang Papercut

Ruichang papercut patterns are characterized by a two-dimensional compositional style. The artisans do not prioritize the realistic portrayal of objects, nor do they utilize perspective techniques or aim to create a sense of three-dimensionality and spatial depth. They do not strictly adhere to the laws of nature. Instead, they harness their creative imagination to construct patterns that amalgamate objects from diverse perspectives, spaces, and temporal contexts onto a singular two-dimensional plane. This approach results in a unique artistic expression that transcends the

constraints of realism and perspective, reflecting the rich cultural and aesthetic values of the Ruichang papercut tradition.

Table 3 The Composition Forms of Ruichang papercut

Examples of Ruichang papercut	Composition Description
	<p>Ruichang papercut frequently exhibits a tendency to diminish the sense of spatial depth. In the two works under consideration, the first does not delineate the relative positions of the dragon boat in terms of foreground and background or distance. Similarly, the second work does not depict the spatial relationships or proximities between the figures and trees. Each object is rendered independently and distinctly, without any overlapping or occlusion, thereby creating a unique aesthetic that challenges conventional perspectives of spatial representation.</p>
	<p>Ruichang papercut artworks often exhibit a unique characteristic where multiple seasonal sceneries are depicted concurrently. In the two works under scrutiny, one can observe scenes where lotus flowers, lotus pods, and lotus roots coexist, suggesting a simultaneous representation of different growth stages. Similarly, a peach tree is depicted not only with blossoms but also with ripe peaches, thereby transcending the temporal boundaries of natural growth cycles. This artistic approach imbues the works with a sense of timelessness and continuity, reflecting the cyclical nature of life and seasons.</p>
	<p>The creation of patterns in Ruichang papercut art does not adhere strictly to the conventional rules of perspective. This is evident in three distinct works. The first work presents an intriguing inversion of perspective, where figures closer to the viewer appear smaller than those in the distance. The second work amalgamates eye-level and overhead perspectives, creating a unique multi-dimensional viewing experience. The third work innovatively allows an interior view of a sedan chair through its windows, breaking the conventional boundary between interior and exterior spaces. This creative freedom in perspective manipulation contributes to the unique aesthetic appeal of Ruichang papercut art.</p>

Source: Photograph taken by the researcher at the Ruichang Paper Cut Museum.

Conclusions

Developing cultural creative products, transforming folk art resources into commodities, and promoting the protection and inheritance of folk art in conjunction with local cultural and economic development can foster a symbiotic relationship. This approach serves as a pivotal strategy for revitalizing and promoting the sustainable development of folk art. In this process, the role of designers is paramount. However, this does not suggest that designers can incorporate folk art into modern product carriers through mere technique improvements, material substitutions, and visual form design. There are two primary reasons for this:

1. Designers need to acknowledge that the audience and consumers of folk art have undergone significant changes. Their cultural identities, aesthetic tastes, lifestyle habits, and consumer demands directly or indirectly influence product design. Therefore, designers need to reevaluate the relationship between folk art and contemporary life.

2. Folk art possesses distinctive cultural characteristics and core techniques. However, with the continuous advancement of internet technology, cultural exchanges and integration among different regions have become more extensive and frequent. Folk art, as a living heritage, is inevitably influenced by this trend. Driven by market interests, the relatively stable and clear regional and cultural features of folk art in traditional society are to some extent blurred and decomposed. Therefore, while designers can selectively incorporate external multicultural factors, they should avoid engaging in design solely for the pursuit of economic value or to cater to commercial development, as this may lead to aesthetic distortion, blurred uniqueness, and cultural deviation.

Therefore, when designing cultural creative products for Ruichang papercut, designers need to conduct thorough research on their target consumers and audience to ensure that the developed products are favored and chosen by people. Simultaneously, designers should also conduct comprehensive research on Ruichang papercut, preserving its core techniques, regional characteristics, and cultural features. Only by doing so can they truly satisfy people's cultural consumption psychology and achieve productive protection and sustainable inheritance of Ruichang papercut."

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