

# A Case Study of Ningxia Paper Cuts Culture

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## ABSTRACT

The Yellow River, known as the Mother River in China, is ranked as the root of Chinese traditional culture. The Yellow River runs through Ningxia province and has great influence on its culture. Culture in Ningxia is only one little part in the grand Yellow River culture. The Yellow River provides not only living materials for the localities, but also nurtures the local culture, and influences many special cultures along the river. Paper-cutting is one of the local intangible heritage cultures, which is famous and popular for patterns cut by the common people and some inheritors. Theme of each pattern shows the Yellow River culture in its unique artistic language. This paper aims to illustrate cultural values of the papercuts in Ningxia province according to the papercut patterns' categories, features of humanities spirit in papercut culture from the traditional and modern perspectives, exploring the spiritual life and the idea of the localities by general introduction of the papercuts in the north and south part of Ningxia. Finally, a conclusion is drawn that new innovative ways are adopted for papercut culture' development in the new era. Data in the paper are collected by authors themselves and afforded by the intangible culture inheritors in Ningxia Province.

**Keywords:** *Yellow River culture, Ningxia papercuts, categories, spiritual culture*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Yellow River culture is the root and soul of Chinese traditional culture, it's also the source of the long history it concerned. The Yellow River binds its way from Tibetan Plateau to the Pacific Ocean, which mainly covers 9 provinces from the west to the east. It's so magnificent in Chinese land and endows the River a beautiful scene along its ways into the sea, it also owns specific culture and makes the culture colorful along the Mother River. Mountains and rivers can nurture its unique culture. In Ningxia, the two main Ranges of mountains, Liupan Mountain and Helan Mountain give birth to their respective culture and their culture are the two big branches of Yellow River culture in Ningxia province. Culture of Ningxia is nourished by Liupan mountain and Helan Mountain, people's spirit, innovation and driving force are flourished in the thick culture with the development of history [1]. With Helan Mountain locating in the north and Liupan Mountain in the south, the two elite alike mountain ranges face each other in a distance, forming a different Ningxia scroll on the Chinese map. The two great mountains quietly nurture the local culture side by side, and guarantee the happiness and the passions of the localities.

Liupan Mountain covers a half area in the south of Ningxia, and the way to the northeast section of the silk Road went through the mountain in the past. Liupan Mountain is a name for its geographical feature, spiritual and cultural notion in people's mind. Culture of Liupan is a mixture of farming and grassland. In ancient China, Liupan mountain was rich in grass and water with its humid climate. Many poems and fairy tales were written about the life here. Communication among nations were flourished during Spring and Autumn period (476BC-770BC) to Yuan Dynasty (1368AD-1644AD).

While Helan Mountain is the half sky in the north of Ningxia with the Yellow River flowing around her. Culture in north of Ningxia are mainly the nomadic culture. The father like Helan Mountain and motherlike Yellow River are the main factors which form the nomadic culture in the sands, and make plain culture of Yinchuan prosperous. As a saying goes, the Yellow River in Ningxia made its people rich, and Liupan Mountain give birth to many local culture. The hard working people here create their simple life, physical and spiritual culture generation after generation, such as folk art painting, ballad, fairy tales, embroidery, foot dance, earth making art, and farmers' painting. All the art works vividly reflect the nature and daily life in Ningxia.

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So, in the thick cultural circumstances, papercuts also get developed as one of the art forms. This paper takes paper-cutting as an example to explore the value of outstanding traditional culture's current condition, and the new trend for its development in the new era.

## **II. INTRODUCTION OF PAPER CUT CULTURE IN NINGXIA**

As one part of Chinese papercut culture, papercut in Ningxia is regarded as a fresh specimen by the researchers and scholars, people here share the same culture and folk custom, one can find the development of folk culture and its history in pieces of papercuts if he/she has interest in appreciating and analyzing them.

It is originated and improved from life as an old folk culture, because of specialty of the geographical influence and historical factors, papercut design and patterns show its original ecological feature in Ningxia [2]. With the dramatically changes of the time, the traditional way turns to a collectively making mode with machine's help, such papercut culture in which is only cut by the person themselves as carving and cutting, papercut find its way in commercial and it becomes a hobby, a good memory and homesick for some people who work in the city now. The author still can't clear it away from the memory about the warm bird and blossom pattern stick on windows and doors with colorful papercuts from the 23rd of the last lunar month before the Spring Festival. Villagers can feel joy and happiness in the family reunion in Spring Festival and they also praise their papercut mutually while paying a new year's visit. The good memory can remain in the mind permanently.

Ningxia papercuts has its own value in regional culture. The design and pattern reflect the popular farmers culture, concerning with Yellow River culture, central plain culture and red culture [3]. The author finds that a common feature in paying visits to the inheritors of the intangible culture, their papercut pattern is simple, often cut with green or red paper, blue paper, but rich in its meaning and natural with its localities flavor. It shows not only the artistic charm, simple beauty, and the modern life as well.

Subjects of the patterns often originate from plants and vegetables in life, twelve zodiac animals, red double happiness letters (Shuang xi), tamed birds, beast, fish, flowers, etc. fairy tales, folk stories hero and heroin in play are frequently chosen, and it's quite easy for the paper cutters, they can cut the chicken, duck, goose, ox, horse, sheep, dog and cats very freely with their scissors, because they expertise in cutting the art patterns.

Because papercuts are the proper way to express the feelings about their life, they can understand how significant the animals and birds to them. we can find

harmony between human, nature and the creatures. Clubs, orchids, bamboo, peony, chrysanthemum, lotus and daffodil are also the subject in the papercuts. Because they symbolize the lofty and royalty of people's spirit.

Ningxia papercuts reflect the regional character with its abundant imagination of the pattern design, it also shows wisdom of the localities. Here are three stories which are shown by patterns, for instances.

The fairy tale of Jingshui river which is originated from the Liupan mountain, and it is also the branches of Yellow River, giving birth to the fairy tales that Weizheng, the Prime Minister of Tang Dynasty, who killed the Dragon king of the East sea in his dream for its wrong doings. Legend of Chengji Sihan make Liupan mountain endless charm and magic. Chengji Sihan, a hero of Mongolian, his grandson established the Yuan dynasty in the feudalism history of China. He died in Jingyuan county, the place Jinshui flows while he led the army to siege the West Xia (established by Yuanhao) in his march. Helan Mountain papercuts exhibited in the culture garden confers tourists' vivid pictures of the Yellow River culture in the stone Age. The West Xia papercut is a sense of the grand merits in building up capital by Yuanhao (emperor) in Ningxia province. So, folk papercut is a dynamic culture, we can see our yesterday, today and even tomorrow in the grand land.

Papercuts mainly play the role of enhancing the thick atmosphere in special occasions. Moreover, there are papercuts in some traditional festival, such as double fifth and spring festivals, there are also papercuts for birthday celebration. Papercuts were widely used as decorations for folk customs activities before. Now it's mainly used as the art to appreciate and decorate and beautify the living environment, it is designed for calendar's, cover of package, etc. the function changes don't change its essence of romantic beauty although people has changed the aesthetic view in papercuts with the change of people's needs and the society.

## **III. CATEGORIES OF NINGXIA PAPER CUT CULTURE**

It's really a lucky thing for papercuts in Ningxia surviving in the rapid tempo of the modern society. China is a big country that mainly depends on agriculture. So, it is the rich source of Chinese traditional culture, the design of papercut is full of psychological recognition about the world. Although it is an art for farmers and common people, the recognition about the world is a highlight which mix the beauty of the world and folk customs as well. Maybe that's the very reason for the papercut in Yellow river culture have been thriving so long. Initially,

people only chose one animals, little grass and flowers to cut, it was very simple for each pattern, the traditional way is to use scissors to cut, but now it is a complex for modern technology, the pattern is quite delicate with several designs putting together. It becomes one part for tourism to spread the local culture and show the intelligence, spirit, intangible culture of the region, and the value of people to the world. Categories are as follows in different times.

#### *A. Traditional categories of the papercuts*

Culture in Ningxia is a combination of plain and the Loess plateau culture. Yinchuan plain was disturbed by the northern nomadic culture in the ancient time, while Liupan mountain was mainly the culture of the Central plain and arial culture. So, papercuts in Ningxia has the feature of the two culture of the philosophical thinking, it is obvious to distinguish the two kinds of papercuts when one appreciates them. The two types of papercuts mainly take waters, mountain, desert or their daily livings, according to the data and information gathered from the inheritors, the traditional papercuts types are as follows.

1) *Papercuts of folk stories*: There are many types about the folk stories, Such as twelve zodiac patterns; Mouse wedding; Liuhai cut sticks (Liuhai, a hero in folk story who are in charge of people's wealth); A shepherd return home Late; Mouse steal diet oil; Peony fairy; Dragon king of Jinghe (headstream of Jinshui River); Wife of Gouqi, etc.

2) *Papercuts for rural life in the new era*: Theme of papercut which express rural life are quite new and sing high for the lovely China. For instance, Pursuing the well-being society; Dig well to water crops; Serve people; Pick Gouqi( a kind of fruit rich in vitamins); Change from potato to gold; The medical team; Silk way.

3) *Papercuts for Red culture*: This type of papercuts take the stories of Red army led by chairman Mao in 1935-1936 came to Xiji county, Ningxia provinces as example, such as, old granny making shoes for the dear soldier; Chairman Mao came to Shanjiaji (a small town); noodles of Potato starch (It is quite valuable because the Red Army soldier taught the natives technology of making it); etc.

4) *Papercuts for literature*: This kind of papercuts are mainly about the four great classics in Chinese literature. The well-known Characters of pilgrimage to the west; Dream of Red mansion; Outlaws and Three kingdoms are the favorite by all people, they are very popular and welcome everywhere in China.

5) *Papercut for desert culture*: Because desert climate influences the north of Yinchuan Plain, papercuts mainly show famous scenic spot in the sands.

Such as, Rock paintings of Helan mountain; Desert in the Yinchuan plain; Landscape of Xixia; Sand lake; Xisha watermelon; Camel's bell.

#### *B. New categories of the modern papercut in Ningxia*

Papercuts mentioned here put the core values, harmonious relations among different nationalities, patriotism, love of hometown. It also shows the combination about the Confucianism and classic culture, the world view, people psychology, etc. This is the newest way of papercuts' innovation, it follows the ways to inherit the intangible culture currently. Lu Tingyu says in his paper that the advanced traditional value should be transferred and innovated for its development in the new era. To enrich the deep meaning of it and promote the development in the mixture of the value from the traditional and contemporary perspectives.[4]

1) *Papercuts focus on the idea of core value of our country*: The core value are 24 characters, mainly about prosperous, democracy, civilized, harmony, freedom, justice, patriotic, integrity, kindness etc. Papercut pattern of 24 characters are designed into 6 paintings with bat, bamboo, pine tree and apricot. All animal and plant have special homophonic meaning in papercuts, for example, bat pronounced "fu" in Chinese pinyin, means bliss in English. Bamboo and pine tree mean lofty of person's virtue, and apricot means happy life and people's love for nature.

2) *Papercuts that convey the theme of national spirit*: It is quite a good innovation for the papercut and it's quite easy for person from all walks to understand the ideal of the whole China, such as advocation for human's community, eco-environment protection. In some patterns, it's so striking that chairman Mao's great poems, Qingyuan Chun, snow; Qingpinyue, Liupan Mountain are cut in the patterns. The cutting of each Chinese character is so vivid that it looks exactly like the painting brush art, while appreciating the papercuts tourist also can sense the ambition and will of Chinese to build up a good country for the people.

The author fortunately met the inheritor Li Defu, an old man who is in his seventies, he happily show us around his exhibition hall of the papercut hanging picture, his cutting style is quite elaborate and delicate, he cuts the core value 24 characters with bat shape in the four angle for Chinese dragon, the Chinese are descendants of Chinese dragon, so, this means that the whole nation is rich, peaceful and united. his papercuts not only meet the needs of spreading intangible folk culture, but also show Chinese dream and pursuit.

Master Fu Zhao'e, another expert in papercut art field, who is ranked as the national class inheritor of intangible culture, she lives in Zhenbeibu, a tourist

center famous for film-making site, it's a good place to sell and spread the papercut culture in our homeland and abroad. Her papercut reflects the meaning of bliss rank, longevity, happiness, the series type of the Great four books, beautiful Ningxia, all harmonious are the exact representatives of Chinese traditional culture, which tourist can sense their meaning while enjoying them.

#### **IV. FEATURES OF HUMANITIES SPIRIT IN PAPERCUT CULTURE**

Culture is the home for people's spirit, Chinese pay attention to their own inner cultivation and behavior, and often explore how to live a harmonious life with others. Since ancient times, our ancestor hold the idea which sang highly for benevolence, integrity, justice and great unity, later on which became the national deepest Shared spiritual home.[5] In Ningxia, these people whose thinking and actions show their passionate pursuing, they express the symbolic meaning of the patterns, spreading the policies of eco-immigration for farmers, and pursuing the well-being life, their perseverance and love for the art make the land a green oasis in people's mind.

##### *A. Papercut speaks for inheritors*

Papercut artists in Ningxia province are mainly from the south of Ningxia, of course the North ones are included. Fu Zhao'e, the national inheritor who lives in Yinchuan, she is the representative in the north of Ningxia. Hu Xishan strives in teaching for half of his life in the south of Ningxia. Zhang Guoqing, the elite in protecting the intangible culture, has been doing such a great job in paper cuttings and many other unknowing amateurs are also included.

The intangible culture inheritors of paper-cutting culture use simple art symbols to express a positive and optimistic attitude towards life. The simple art of paper-cutting carries the creator's thoughts, the patterns in the paper-cuts are exaggerated, metaphorical, or homophonic to express personal understanding of life and thinking about life. Among their papercutting masterpieces, the paper-cuts of Sanhe Paper-cutting Studio in Longde County cut Chairman Mao's poems; pictures of five cows (cows stands for hard working diligent, perseverance); Pictures of blossoming peony (peony is the national flower, stands for rich and noble); Paper-cuts of blue and white porcelain, it was once a must in the Silk Road in ancient China, etc. to illustrate the grandeur and lofty aspirations of the people in Liupan Mountain. For instance, a shop named Nostalgia Paper-cutting in Old Alley, a tourist site in Longde county selling patterns of the papercuts, which not only shows the innovative art, but also the traditional rural cutting art. Here you can see the original ecological paper-cuts, chickens, ducks, geese, kittens, puppies,

farming pictures, golden roosters, and the famous paper-cuts of the Sun. The content in the paintings may praise the beauty of farm life. A hot discuss between the author and the owner started while hearing the owner explained the symbolic meaning of the patterns, the author was deeply moved by their wisdom of rural people and their understanding of life philosophy.

##### *B. Paper cutting talks for women*

Paper-cutting is an essential art to beautify the living environment. In rural areas, most of the paper-cutting are women's favorites, they express their feeling to their loved living circumstances with their own style. they expertise in decorating doors and windows during festivals and in folk activities. They skillfully cut patterns with scissors and they know papercuts are exactly an artistic symbol to convey their cognition to the world with patterns deep meaning. [6]

Fu Zhao'e, the well-known folk paper-cutting artist and the "Chinese Folk Arts and Crafts Artist" awarded by UNESCO(the United Nation's Education, Science, Culture Organization), is a representative inheritor of the national intangible culture. She is an example of women's ingenuity, self-reliance and wisdom. Her works "Mysterious Xixia", "12 Chinese Zodiac", "Helan Mountain Rock Paintings", Fu Lu Shou Xi, and "Four Masterpieces" are so popular, she actively displays the excellent traditional Chinese culture in her papercuts. Since 2000, she began to combine folk crafts with modern technology by renewing paper-cut databases, she also innovates her papercuts form, so that paper-cut culture and art can enter the lives of modern life, such as mouse pad decorating with papercut design. she spreads Ningxia's paper-cut culture to Asia, Europe, and the world. At the same time, she spreads the beauty of the Yellow River culture to every corner of the world. The paper-cutting workshop in the Western Film and Television City tells domestic and foreign tourists the wisdom and creative spirit of Ningxia people, and shows our traditional folk culture of the Yellow River.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

Since China's paper-cutting was listed as a world-class intangible cultural heritage in 2009, some folk paper-cutting inheritors stick to their cuttings business so that the precious culture of Ningxia has been preserved well. The family based inherits who cut the paper patters by hands turn to the specialized one which relies on the new machine and can cut as ten or a hundred times papercuts as before.

There are also new ways to spread the traditional paper-cuts culture in cultural courtyards and some tourists attractions. Wang Yonghong Cultural Courtyard in Guyuan city, Old Alleys in Longde county, Longwangba Resort in Xiji county. These places

generally show the combination of various folk and traditional culture. The Wang Yonghong Cultural yard has a collection of local cultures such as calligraphy, painting, paper-cutting and handmade crafts. Red paper-cuts are pasted on the walls and glass windows in Longwangba. Old alleys sell household, traditional paper-cuts in Longde's county. Together, these cultures light up the folk culture of Ningxia in the new era, and make the Yellow River culture shone like stars here and there.

In recent years, Ningxia paper-cutting artists and inheritors have been earnestly improving their skills, they also actively teach primary and middle school students for inheriting the traditional culture. They are not only active in their posts, but also participate in various competitions at all levels to promote and spread Chinese traditional culture. Frequently, Intangible culture inheritors also represent China to participate the international exchanges. Their works show culture of the Silk Road in Ningxia to the world, gaining honor for us in improvement of cultural soft power.

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