

The relationship between silkworm and paper cutting art is explored

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Abstract: The silkworm, as a creature in nature, provides endless inspiration and raw materials for paper-cutting art through its unique way of life. Paper-cutting art, with its exquisite skills and rich cultural connotations, nurtures the growth of silkworms. This distinctive artistic form and the bidirectional interaction between sericulture production are rare in other art fields. This paper aims to explore the intrinsic connection between silkworms and paper-cutting art. Through field investigations and the organization of literature, it delves into how they influence each other and reveals their shared value and profound significance in Chinese culture.

Key words: Silkworm; Paper cutting art; Cultural relevance

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Silkworms and paper cutting have no direct biological or natural connection, they belong to different fields. Although these two seem unrelated in the realms of nature and art, an in-depth study of their history, cultural background, and artistic expression reveals a remarkable fusion. There is a unique bond between silkworms and paper cutting that transcends the boundaries of biology and art, with each interdependent and developing together. Silkworms provide valuable material for paper cutting art, while paper cutting protects the healthy growth of silkworms through its form and meaning. This relationship embodies the harmonious coexistence between nature and humanity, matter and spirit.

1 silkworms provide creative materials for paper cutting art

The life cycle of silkworms provides rich material for paper-cutting art. Mulberry leaves, cocoons, and silk all directly or indirectly serve as materials for paper-cutting. First, cocoons can be cut into cocoon flowers, which are worn on the head; this custom is attested in Feng Zun's poem from the Qing Dynasty: "Wu girls also learn to flip, adding silk flower to their temples." This indicates that cocoons became one of the materials used in paper-cutting for silk flower designs. Second, silk can be made into silk flowers through paper-cutting techniques, which are worn on the head or pinned to the chest, or attached to the silkworm house, to pray for a bountiful harvest of cocoons. Third, mulberry leaves, cocoons, and silk are the primary materials for paper production. Mulberry trees are the raw material for paper, and Wang Juhua's edited book "A History of Ancient Chinese Papermaking Technology" frequently mentions mulberry bark paper, detailing its manufacturing process and production methods, how mulberry bark is made into "mulberry root paper," and its historical applications. The text also cites Su Yijian's "Four Spectrums of the Scholar's Studio" Volume Four, "Paper Spectrum One · Narrative": "Lei Kongzhang's great-grandson Mu Zhi still has a letter written by Zhang Hua to his ancestor, which is mulberry root paper." Silkworm cocoons made into paper are called cocoon paper, as recorded in the "Cihai". During the Jin Dynasty, calligrapher Wang Xizhi wrote the "Lanting Xu" using cocoon paper and mouse-whisker brushes, as noted in Zhang Yanyuan's "Essential Records of Calligraphy" Volume Three, citing He Yanzi's "Lanting Ji". Silk, according to ancient beliefs, was derived from silk threads. Guo Weitao and Ma Xiaowen proposed in their article "New Exploration of the Origin of Ancient Chinese Papermaking Techniques" that the character "paper" initially referred to silk items. He cited Xu Shen's definition from "Shuowen Jiezi": "Paper, one of the fluff," and recorded Duan Yucai's view: "Papermaking began with the floating of fluff; initially made from silk fluff, it was then reinforced with bamboo or wood, and now uses bamboo or wood bark as paper," suggesting that there was first silk paper, followed by plant fiber paper. The "Book of the Later Han · Biography of Cai Lun" records: "Silk is called paper". Feng Chihang wrote in his article "Papermaking": "Materials used for recording in our

country include oracle bones, bamboo, and silk, with the invention of papermaking dating back to the Western Han Dynasty." Dai Jiazhang mentioned in "A Brief History of Chinese Papermaking Technology" that banner paper is made by cutting silk, which is also known as jinbo. This indicates that the paper-cutting banners in folk customs are made from jinbo. According to historical records, people made paper from mulberry trees, cocoons, silk, and silk fabrics, and then created paper-cut art works from these papers. In summary, materials related to silkworms such as mulberry trees, cocoons, silk, and silk fabrics all became materials for paper-cutting art creation, and paper-cut works were applied to the growth process of silkworms, protecting their healthy development through various display methods.

2 Silkworms provide creative materials for paper cutting art

Silkworms, as an essential material for paper-cutting art, provide artists with endless inspiration and imagery. Given the significant role of sericulture in the lives of our people, silk culture is widely reflected in literature, art, daily items, and more. Artists use their exquisite skills to depict the forms of silkworms, the production process of sericulture, and legendary stories through various means, praising the spirit of silkworms and promoting their value. For example, in 1973, a toothed cup-shaped vessel with silkworm patterns was unearthed at the Hemudu site in Yuyao, using the form of silkworms to express it. In 1971, pottery from around 2500 BC was excavated at the Zuwai City site in Jiangxi, featuring silkworm patterns, cocoon patterns, and silk twisting patterns, which sufficiently prove that ancient people used silkworm themes in their creations. These crafts demonstrate the deep roots of sericulture culture and the superb craftsmanship, illustrating how the prosperity of the sericulture industry brought a prosperous life to the people.

In the field of paper-cutting art, there are many works that depict themes related to sericulture. There is paper-cutting art primarily featuring silkworm flowers, including silkworm cats, silkworm tigers, silkworm flower chickens, silkworm flower ladies, treasure pots, money trees, mulberry trees, evergreen plants, and ingots; there are paper-cutting works based on mythological stories, such as the Silkworm Flower Lady and the Twenty-Four Divisions of Silkworm Flowers; and there are creations that focus on the image of silkworms or scenes of people's labor in silkworm rearing. In the collection of "Yan' an Paper-Cuts," works with silkworm themes can be found, mainly in the form of kangwei flowers and window decorations, primarily used to convey blessings for happiness and prosperity.

People not only apply elements of silkworm culture to daily life but also to production, living, and sacrificial rituals, making it an essential part of sericulture. Various forms of expression transform the creative materials of sericulture, yet they all revolve around silkworm culture. For example, in the Tongxiang Silkworm Song, there are many references to paper cutting in the lyrics. Hu Tang's "Yu Xi Zhao (Three Poems)" from the Qing Dynasty describes this: "In cold villages, every household draws heavy curtains, all saying that the silkworm family has strict taboos; yet I envy the young lady's skillful hands, who cut flowers from peach blossoms and stick them on paper."

The artist employs techniques that are both rooted in reality and transcendent of it, crafting the highly evocative art of silkworm flower paper cutting. This artistic form stems from people's reverence and worship of silkworms in sericulture practices, creating works of art with divine power through the simplest means. It is not only an affirmation of artistic value but also profoundly influences the deep structure of Chinese society and Eastern thinking. Tracing back to the state rituals of "worshipping the ancient silkworm" from China's vast historical texts and images, and examining the moral teachings of "farming and mulberry cultivation," what is even more precious are the silk and mulberry myths, legends, and traditional customs passed down through generations, forming a living treasure trove of resources for the art of silkworm flower paper cutting.

3 Silkworms provide a creative carrier for paper-cutting art

Silkworms provide a creative carrier for paper-cutting art, with silk being the primary material. During my visits, I found that many embroidered garments in the Hangjiahu region are made of silk. These clothes are not only daily necessities, but also have the function of blessing. Some of them are specially used for the custom of silkworm flower worship. Additionally, there is a popular folk custom of hanging amulets shaped like treasure pots to ward off evil and bring good fortune. For example, during my visit, I discovered that people in Tongxiang firmly believe that mulberry trees are money-making trees and silkworms are treasure pots, symbolizing wealth and prosperity. Therefore, locals make these

amulets to wear, hoping to avoid evil and seek blessings.

According to ancient Chinese embroidery techniques, folk embroidery mainly relies on paper-cut patterns. When the embroidered piece is completed, the paper-cut patterns are hidden within the embroidery, marking the end of their mission. Today, the Hangzhou-Jiaxing-Huzhou region preserves a large number of folk embroidered items. These garments, made of silk and adorned with exquisite embroidery, serve not only as daily wear but are also regarded as talismans for warding off evil and praying for good fortune. After my on-site visits, no embroidery samples (i.e., paper-cut works used for embroidery) have been found so far. In an interview with Lu Zhangzhu, she mentioned that as a child, she had witnessed the process of embroidery firsthand. The embroiderer first carefully outlines the pattern with a pen, then cuts it out with scissors, and finally completes the embroidery. Perhaps through further in-depth research, more new discoveries may be made in this field.

These embroidered garments are not only made of silk but also symbolize silkworm breeding. In the movie "Silkworm Flower Girl," Liu Qiaolian gives Tao Xiaoping an embroidered apron, leading Tao Xiaoping to mistakenly think that Liu Qiaolian will raise silkworms. This indicates that folk aprons have practical uses in the process of raising silkworms. To understand the purpose of the embroidery pattern, the author reconstructed an embroidery process based on the application of paper-cutting patterns. The first step is to design the pattern according to the style of the garment, then draw it out using a painting method, and subsequently cut out the paper-cut pattern. The paper-cut motif is then pasted onto the fabric with rice paste. The second step involves directly embroidering the paper-cut pattern onto the fabric. The third step is to wash the finished embroidery several times in water, allowing the paper-cut work hidden beneath the embroidery to dissolve. If the inner pattern is not washed, the embroidery will become stiff. To ensure the softness and comfort of the embroidery, the paper used for the paper-cut patterns is typically thin and easy to clean. The "Zhouquan Town Gazetteer" records this embroidery technique. Zhang Daoyi clearly states in "Taowu Embroidery Manuscript: Folk Embroidery and Woodblock Printing" that the embroidery pattern is the hidden charm within the embroidery. The embroidery pattern is not only the foundation of the embroidery but also plays a foundational role beneath the colored threads.

4 Application of paper cutting in sericulture production

Paper cutting works are widely used in sericulture production. Silkworm flowers are worn on the head or attached to the silkworm house. The purpose is to express people's wishes and promote the healthy growth of silkworms. There are many places where paper cutting is needed in the growth process of silkworms.

Through paper-cutting works, people can entrust blessings and wishes for silkworms, using this medium to further promote their healthy growth through ritual ceremonies. For example, "Sweeping Silkworm Flower Ground," which originated in the eastern and central areas of silk production in Deqing County, is a form of song and dance in folk activities that gradually formed and developed during local silk production and folk customs. During "Sweeping Silkworm Flower Ground," performers wear "silkworm flowers" on their heads, making silkworm flower paper-cuts decorative items in the ceremony. Paper-cutting works such as silkworm cats and treasure pots pasted at the entrance and inside the silkworm house serve as the guardian deities and auspicious symbols of the silkworms.

5 sum up

Through the above research and analysis, a unique connection exists between silkworms and paper-cutting art. Silkworms provide rich materials for creation, textures, and carriers for expression in paper-cutting. Paper-cutting art is not only widely used in sericulture but also carries people's blessings and wishes, playing the important role of a guardian in sericulture production. This unique artistic form and its interactive relationship with sericulture have formed an independent sericulture cultural system, as shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the structure of the relationship between silkworms and paper-cutting art. It not only demonstrates the harmonious coexistence of nature and culture, material and spirit, but also holds significant importance for the inheritance of Chinese agrarian culture and traditional culture.

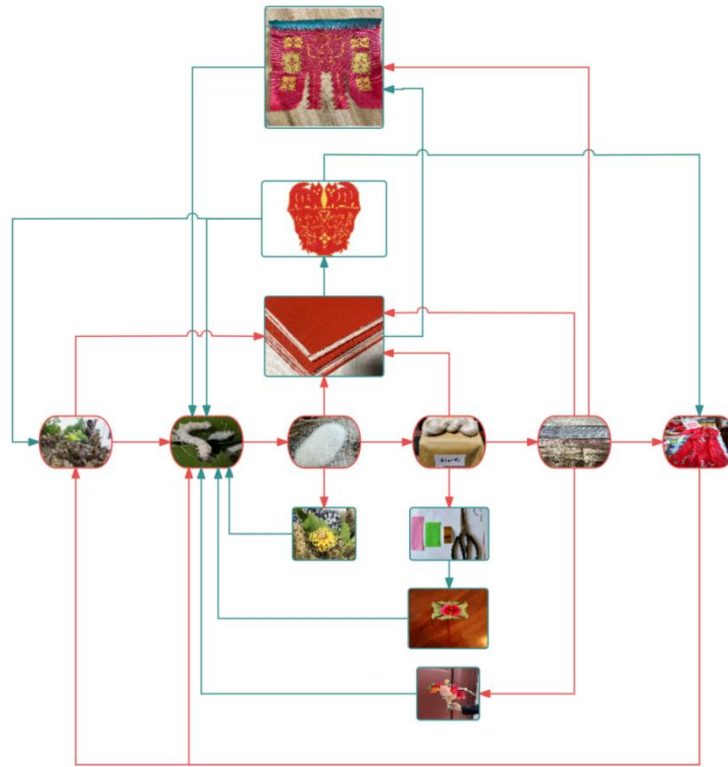


Figure 1. Diagram of the relationship structure between silkworm and paper-cutting art

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