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Cutting Through Silence: Women's Voices in the Art of Chinese Papercutting

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Abstract

This paper explores the journey of Chinese papercutting, also known as jianzhi. It has evolved from a traditional craft for women into a modern form of artistic expression and female empowerment. Historically, papercutting was part of what was known as nühong (women's work). This art form gave women a way to be creative and also helped them navigate their expected social roles, which were often anonymous and practical. An examination of this tradition demonstrates how artists occupied the space between collective creation and social norms that desecrated it; and this was juxtaposed to cultural conventions of high (male-dominated) "mainstream" art forms like literati painting. The case study focussed on a "baby" motif called zhuaji, when viewed through this lens of traditional practice, shows how even the most traditional forms served to reinforce, whilst gently subverting patriarchal views and practices. From this consideration of traditional papercutting practice in China, the subsequent examination shifts to examine how contemporary artists like Bovey Lee are reclaiming this "craft" to address contemporary identities, movements, and feminist critiques. Ultimately, the paper argues that papercutting offers an integral and powerful language for female expression as it continues a journey from muted, complicit to vocally challenging practices in the agential world of global art.

Keywords

Chinese papercutting, nühong, gender expression, folk art, contemporary Chinese art.

1. Introduction

In her intricate papercutting work, We Are All Mountaineers (2018) (see Figure 1), contemporary female artist Bovey Lee (b. 1969) presents a stunning paradox. At first glance, the piece resonates with the familiar aesthetic of traditional Chinese papercutting, particularly in its medium, craftsmanship, and use of negative space. A closer formal analysis, however, reveals that unlike the typically flat, monochromatic, two-dimensional compositions of folk tradition, Lee's papercut possesses remarkable visual depth. The picture displays elements of nature, such as mountains, oceans, and leaves, alongside the artificial constructs, such as roads, buildings, and gates, that encroach upon it, indicating humans' departure from the natural world toward a built environment. Moreover, motifs like stars, gates, and oceans also draw on the artist's personal migration experience [1], adding a layer of autobiographical narrative.

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Figure 1: Bovey Lee, We Are All Mountaineers, 2018, Chinese xuan-paper on silk, 20x30 in.

Despite being filled with intricate elements, the composition directs the viewer's attention to a meticulously cut female figure who is creating a papercut at the top center. Though she is the creator of the entire composition, Lee, sitting on a mountain away from the urban city, is, however, enclosed by a series of imposing gates and architectural structures of her own making. As the female figure is engaged in papercutting, this work functions as a "papercutting about papercutting." Furthermore, as a female artist trained in both Chinese calligraphy and American digital arts, Lee uses her work to reflect on her contemporary experience in a manner reminiscent of generations of women in China [1]. While rooted in hand-craftsmanship, the unconventional, modern themes of this and other similar works by Lee signal a deliberate break from tradition. The reimagining of papercutting acts to reconfigure it from something that is a relic of the past into something actively located within a feminist framework of the present. I will detail how to characterize this papercutting further in the rest of the paper; simply put, Lee's work reveals how the technique can be used to fortify the few remaining instances of manual labor that is gendered in today's digital age, all while retaining the unique artistic quality of artful paper repair and reimagining in the process. Cowey Lee's contemporary practice serves as our point of entry into a much larger, longer, and richer narrative than papercutting as reflective of a historical norm. The goal of this paper is to consider the shift in papercutting as both a domestic craft that exemplifies gendered norms to a sharp tool for interrogating those practices, particularly in the contemporary moment.

This paper sees Chinese papercutting, a traditional women's art, as a space for complex gender expression. Women used it to both fit in with social norms and subtly resist them at the same time. As a form of nühong (women's crafts), it was a natural way for women to express their identity. However, because it was seen as a domestic "folk art," it was left out of the official art history, which favored art made by men. This paper argues that despite this, papercutting has always been a powerful tool for female expression. Its history is not one of silent obedience, but of quiet communication that has now become a loud proclamation. The scissors and knife, once tools of the home, are now used to carve out a space for identity, critique, and resilience.

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2. The Art of Chinese Papercutting: A Historical Overview

Chinese papercutting (jianzhi) is both an ancient craft and a living art form, with a history that stretches back over two millennia. As one of the major Chinese folk art genres, papercutting utilizes the deliberate removal of paper with scissors or knives to create intricate designs. However, it serves much more than a decorative function, for its specific cultural practice is deeply rooted in China's social life for thousands of years.

While the exact origins are difficult to pinpoint, textual and archaeological evidence suggests its presence in Chinese culture as early as the Western Zhou period (1046–771 BCE). The earliest literary record appears in Lüshi Chunqiu [The Annals of Lü Buwei], which recounts the story of "Cutting a Parasol Leaf to Enfeoff a Younger Brother," or Jiantong fengdi in Chinese. In this tale, King Cheng of Zhou (1055-1021 BCE) cuts a parasol tree leaf into the shape of a gui (a ceremonial jade tablet) and presents it to his brother Shu Yu, symbolically granting him the fiefdom to establish his own state. Cutting a specific pattern or form from humble materials and endowing it with a specific symbolic meaning, the practice started very early on, and the legend has been considered the origin of papercutting.

By the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589 CE), when paper as a material was widely available, papercutting had emerged as a recognizable craft art. Jingchu Suishiji [The Seasonal Records of Jingchu], a sixth-century book that compiled many records and anecdotes of regional craft practices, notes that during the Renri Festival—the "Day of Humans" celebrated on the seventh day of the first lunar month—people would cut colorful paper or gold foil into human shapes, which they pasted on screens or wore in their hair as a charm for good fortune. These early references show that papercutting was intertwined with seasonal rituals, religious beliefs, and the cyclical rhythms of agrarian life [3].

Surviving material evidence further confirms papercutting's longstanding history. The "Horse and Floral Pattern" papercut (Figure 2) from the Northern Dynasties, preserved today in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum, is one of the oldest surviving works uncovered from a tomb. Delicately rendered from a single sheet, it demonstrates both the technical skill and aesthetic sophistication achieved at this early stage. The motif shows a horse surrounded by stylized floral patterns, which likely speaks to the symbolic associations of strength, vitality, and prosperity, themes that appear frequently and would remain central to the papercutting tradition. Over the centuries of its existence, papercutting has expanded from a ritual function to a decorative and narrative use, as illustrated in the remainder of the paper, but it has always maintained a close connection with seasonal rituals, religious beliefs, and the cyclical rhythms of agrarian life.

The availability of papercutting (paper cutting) distinguishes this art form as a democratic practice and is in stark contrast to elite art forms, like classical calligraphy and silk painting, that demanded significant resources and scholarly training. Papercutting, by contrast, required very minimal tools—usually paper (frequently in red) and a cutting tool, making it affordable for mass distribution geographically and socially. By the Tang and Song dynasties (seventh to thirteenth centuries), papercuts would have an invaluable role in both domestic and ritual life of the era by ornamenting windows, altars, on clothing, and in architecture. In the countryside, they were of utmost importance to ceremonial events related to weddings, Lunar New Year, and ancestor worship, while in the cities they created markets and commissioned work by artisans specializing in the craft. The concept of "collective anonymity" was also crucial to papercutting's history. The artists were almost always women, but they rarely received credit for their creative work. This was because folk art was typically anonymous and not considered "high art." Unlike elite scholarly painting, where the artist's name was important, papercutting was seen as a common, everyday art form created by women.

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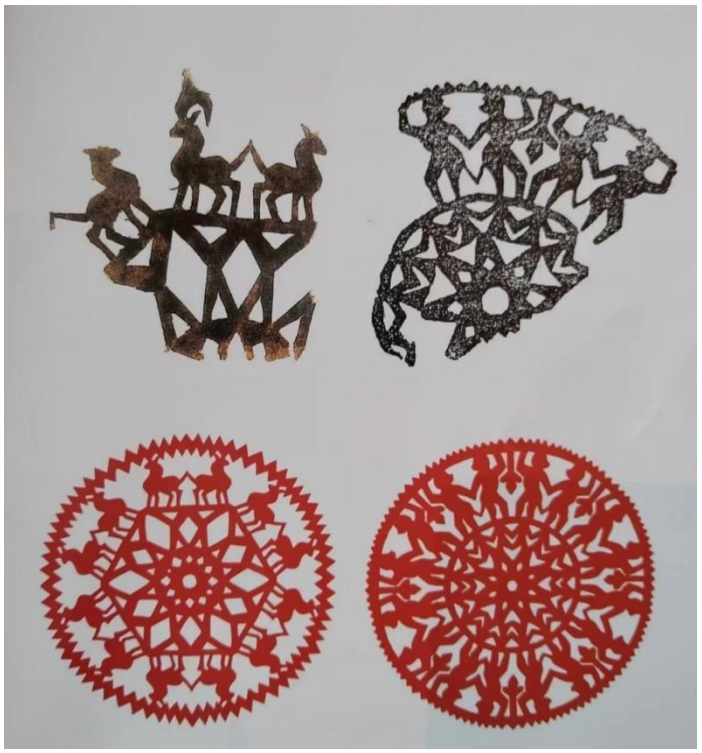

Figure 2: China's earliest paper-cut works (top) and their modern restorations (bottom), size unknown. This is one of the oldest surviving examples, unearthed from a tomb in Xinjiang.

3. Rethinking the Art Historical Framework: The Concept of Nühong

Investigating Chinese papercutting raises an important question: what does it mean to study an art form that seems defiantly outside the standard categories of art history? It will be an error to try and analyze the study of Chinese papercutting using the same methods we apply to, for example, the works from the Renaissance or Chinese literati works. The claim is that employing the standard art historical critical apparatus to analyze the artistry of Chinese papercutting is a bias to its fundamental essence and value. The dominant art historical critical methods based on creativity, originality, and aesthetic value, centered on authorship, are incapable of fully inquiring into the fundamental essence and value of the artistic nature of Chinese papercutting. Instead, I will propose using a culturally specific framework, namely nühong (women's handicraft), to allow us to appreciate papercutting beyond the conventional criteria of "high art" as a powerful expression of gendered cultural practice.

Traditional art history is built upon a set of values that have long defined what is considered "art." Its narrative is driven by the named artist whose unique vision and stylistic innovations break from tradition. It prioritizes objects made for aesthetic values and collection, often supported by theoretical or commentary texts and market valuation. Literati painting (wenrenhua) is a perfect example of an art form that fits this model. Practiced primarily by educated men, it was celebrated as a scholarly pursuit that combined painting, poetry, and calligraphy to express moral and intellectual refinement. The artist's signature, seals, and personal style were essential to its meaning and value. Papercutting, however, exists in a different realm, and its core attributes clash with this traditional model in many aspects.

First, the principle of authorship is undermined by the pervasive anonymity of papercutting. While a literati painter gained fame through his inscribed name, the vast majority of papercut artists were women who worked without any expectation of individual recognition. Their creations were communal and functional, not personal statements. Not having known papercut artists challenges art historians to construct a narrative for these works. Second, papercutting

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values collective tradition over individual innovation. Skills and motifs were not invented but were passed down through generations of women within families and villages. A papercut was considered successful if it effectively deployed a shared visual language. This emphasis on continuity and adaptation directly opposes the art historical obsession with originality and breakthrough. Third, the ephemeral and functional nature of papercutting contradicts the demand for the permanence of art objects. Most papercuts were created for specific, temporary occasions, such as a New Year celebration, a wedding, or a festival. After serving their purpose, they were often discarded, allowed to fade on windows, or burned in rituals. They were not meant to be collected and displayed in museums. This transience means there is a sparse historical record of older works, making it difficult for art historians to trace a precise stylistic evolution—a critical issue in art history. Last, the materials and labor-intensiveness of papercutting have led to its classification as "craft." Using cheap, accessible paper and simple tools like scissors, it was practiced primarily by women in the domestic sphere. Traditional art history, reflecting broader cultural biases, has historically drawn a hierarchy that elevates the "fine arts" of the (male) elite over the "handicrafts" of the (female) home. Consequently, papercutting was dismissed for its mundane materials and its association with women's work, despite its visual complexity and cultural importance.

Given these fundamental mismatches, an analytical framework that originates from the cultural discourse of papercutting should be ideal. Nühong, literally "women's work," offers precisely this perspective. The term encompasses traditional female handicrafts—including weaving, embroidery, papercutting, and hair embroidery (faxiu)—that were central to women's domestic and social responsibilities in Confucian society. Nühong, embodying social propriety (li)—one of the "Four Virtues" (side) expected of women—was a measure of skill, patience, and moral character [4]. Skills were passed down matrilineally through informal, oral transmission, from mothers to daughters and aunts to nieces, preserving regional styles and motifs within tightly-knit female communities. The framework focuses on drawing out/teasing out meanings from the entirety of these practices in their original sociocultural context as labor, expression, skill, social bond, and moral embodiment. The power of this framework becomes evident when studying papercutting by referencing hair embroidery, another quintessential nühong practice. Though distinct in form, they reveal the same core principles.

Both arts were produced outside male-dominated institutions. Papercutting was integrated into the domestic rhythm, created for functional ceremonies that structured family and community time. Hair embroidery, which uses human hair (often the artist's own) to stitch images of Buddhist deities (an example of which can be seen in Figure 3), shared this domestic context but leaned into the devotional. In this case, the home became a site of spiritual practice, and the act of stitching was a profound offering that blended craft with piety.

In both cases, the individual art form is anonymous by nature, but manifested in two different modes. Papercutting's anonymity stems from its folk nature, where the efficacy of a universal symbol it creates is more important than its maker's identity. Hair embroidery presents a fascinating paradox as the artist's physical body is literally woven into the work, creating a powerful intimacy, yet her name and identity were almost never recorded. This erasure was not a mere oversight but a feature of their production within the nühong paradigm.

Both practices emphasize that the nühong framework lies in how value is ascribed through embodied labor. In papercutting, value is manifested in visual intricacy. The breathtaking delicacy of a design is a direct record of the maker's skill, patience, and steady hand. Hair embroidery takes this physicality to the extreme. As the medium is the maker's own body, it requires the creator to willingly endure the pain of hair pulling and to carry out the embroidery with sincere labor, with the goal of gaining the sympathy and blessings of the deities through this sacrifice and dedication [4].

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Figure 3: Hair embroidery Buddha by Ms. Wu, 1649. The inscription is translated as: “April 1649, The believer, Ms. Wu, pulled her hair and embroidered Buddha for her parents,” size unknown. Source from: Yuhang Li [4].

Additionally, traditional women's craft (nühong) was more than just copying patterns. There was always space for personal creativity within the shared traditions. Artists could change designs and add personal touches, weaving their own meaning into the work. For example, embroidering a strand of hair into a design was a quiet way of claiming presence. It also signals that the artist's identity is deeply connected to her creation [4].

Papercutting within the nühong tradition was therefore more than just a decorative craft. It was a key cultural practice for women and a way for them to express themselves without words. This art form gave them an accepted space for creativity, socializing, and passing down skills. It allowed them to live within a patriarchal society while also subtly shaping its rules. So, we shouldn't see these arts as neglected. Instead, they represent important values like community, tradition, dedication, and the power of hands-on work.

4. Case Study: The Zhuaji Baby as Embodied Nühong

One of the most powerful and common designs in northern Chinese papercutting is the zhuaji baby. Its name literally means "girl baby with hair knots." This is a stylized image of a child facing forward with their legs spread apart and arms stretched up. The figure has two top-knots in its hair and is often shown holding lucky animals or plants. In the example shown in Figure 4, the baby is holding a rabbit and a rooster. Superficially, it is an unambiguous symbol of blessing, promising fertility, prosperity, and the continuity of the family lineage. A deeper reading, however, reveals more visual complexities.

Visually, the motif is highly distinctive and codified. The image of the female baby carries symbolic meanings of fertility and its form resembles motifs often seen in folk arts like New Year prints and embroidery panels, demonstrating its deep cultural entrenchment. Its prevalence in agrarian regions like the Loess Plateau in north-central China directly ties its symbolism to the practical concerns of survival and continuity within peasant families. Although the motif is used rather universally, it has become an important shared visual language across the land that is particularly meaningful.

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Figure 4: The Zhuaji Baby, a popular papercutting motif from northern China, contemporary artwork, open source.

The production and function of the zhuaji baby exemplify the core characteristics of the nühong framework. First, this practice reinforced a collective female identity rather than an individual artistic one. Papercutting served as one of the primary leisure activities for rural women during agricultural off-seasons. After completing household chores, they would often gather to engage in papercutting while socializing, or alternatively, sit alone by the bed in a state of focused immersion into the creative process [5]. The choice of subject matter seldom reflected individual expression; rather, it predominantly drew from motifs and patterns common within the village, thereby embodying collective values and aesthetic conventions of the community.

Second, the creation of a zhuaji papercut is a profound act of embodied labor. A papercut is more than just an image; it is also an embodied record of hand memory, as Cheng Furong [5] has observed. The delicate cuts that result from scissors or knives illustrate the worker's technique, as well as her patience and conscientiousness around the craft, all of which are characteristic of nühong. The fact that these particular skills take considerable time to complete was, in itself, considered a virtuous contribution to the family's well-being.

Lastly, the zhuaji baby reflects the simultaneous nature of female expression located in a prescribed role. The image promotes Confucian social expectations by prioritizing the most important fulfillment of bearing heirs. Effectively, the woman creating this image is visually expressing the pressure she feels. The act of creating was an authorized location for agency. A woman could demonstrate her worth and skill while participating in a community of practice with other women, eventually contributing to the construction of the cultural and spiritual life of her family. Thus, nühong was not only a restriction, it was a resource for constructing and finding meaning in that restrictiveness.

5. A Living Tradition: The Evolution and Reinvention of Papercutting

Modern Chinese papercutting has transitioned from a valued anonymous domestic craft to a recognized art practice that holds value in a government-supported economy and art market. Support from the government, advances in technology, and rising public interest around traditional culture has stimulated advancements in techniques, themes, and expressions.

Papercutting's status has recently grown thanks to its acceptance by formal cultural institutions. A key reason is China's policy of naming it an "Intangible Cultural Heritage" (ICH). This program gives official titles like "Inheritor" to top artists. This process has turned papercutting from an anonymous craft into a recognized art form with known creators. For example, artist Cao Hairen is now a public figure who shares his story and has even appeared on national TV [6]. In short, this shift validates individual artists and gives them recognition and economic opportunities they never had before. As a result, the art of papercutting has expanded far

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beyond traditional symbols to include new techniques and ideas. Execution has advanced beyond traditional repetitive patterns and simple scissor-cut forms. Many artists now employ intricate knife-cutting techniques, multi-layered designs, and large-scale compositions that approach the complexity of fine art.

Figure 5: Cao Hairen, Cuncun Zhifu Lu [Road to Rural Prosperity], papercutting, 60 cm×125 cm, 2021.

For example, the legacy of pioneering artists like Ku Shulan (b. 1920), who is known for her innovative collage-like technique, continues to inspire new generations to experiment with form and materiality (Figure 6). The Jianhua Niangzi is a cultural symbol originating from folk beliefs, integrating craftsmanship, blessings, and the worship of female deities. Her image and legends were entirely created and perpetuated by women, and she is revered as the "patron saint of the craft" and the "primordial ancestor" [7]. The intricate decorations, meticulous compositions, and vibrant color schemes in Figure 6 demonstrate both her exceptional skill and the considerable labor intrinsic to nühong. Within the traditional socio-economic structure of "men plough the fields and women weave," papercutting was one of the few domains where women could showcase their talents, express themselves, and engage in spiritual creation [8]. By creating and venerating the Jianhua Niangzi, women not only affirmed the value of their own labor but also established a cultural space and spiritual world of their own.

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Figure 6: Ku Shulan, The Jianhua Niangzi [The Lady of Scissors and Flowers], papercutting, 55 cm×85 cm, 1989.

This pursuit of technical virtuosity signals a shift from purely decorative functions to a focus on artistic expression and narrative depth. The range of subject matter has vastly expanded. While traditional motifs for fertility and fortune (e.g., the Zhuaji baby, see Figure 4) remain popular, many artists now engage with contemporary stories, such as national narratives, social issues, and personal, and cultural identity. This diversification allows papercutting to both express modern values and reinforce official social expectations, while also providing a platform for subtle social commentary and critical resistance in the work of some artists.

The material value and cultural meaning of papercutting have been transformed through its entry into the art market and creative industries. With the public's renewed interest in traditional culture, the trend of embracing traditional Chinese elements has gradually emerged [9]. The adaptation of papercutting motifs into a wide array of consumer goods—such as notebooks, silk scarves, packaging, and home decor—signifies its acceptance as a valued national aesthetic. For instance, some counties have successfully turned papercutting into a viable source of income for rural women, with some artisans earning tens of thousands of yuan annually by selling both traditional pieces and innovative products online and offline [10]. This commercial success validates papercutting's aesthetic and craft value in the modern economy, offering economic empowerment to practitioners. Nonetheless, it prompts inquiries vis-a-vis the potential "hollowing out" of its limitations as a traditional symbol, as well as its displacement from its ritualistic context and community significance. However, there is a risk that comes with papercutting's new market value. The focus could shift to flashy, sellable designs, which might overshadow the art's deeper cultural roots. This could harm its connection to local communities and the historical, social, and spiritual meanings tied to the art form.

Even with recent changes, papercutting is still deeply connected to women's lives and communities, showing the enduring spirit of nühong. Women are still the main practitioners of papercutting in China, leading workshops and teaching in schools to strengthen community ties. This shows how the craft is still used to pass down values, especially among women. For many rural women, papercutting has also shifted from a household skill to a tool for economic empowerment, with training programs helping them earn an income from home. The internet has created even more opportunities. On apps like TikTok, female artists sell their work and

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build online communities. This digital sharing is a modern version of the traditional spaces where women used to create art together.

Chinese papercutting has transformed from a minor craft into a recognized national cultural heritage. This "living tradition" continues to succeed thanks to government support, business, and its deep roots in women's lives. It also holds great promise for future innovation. Today, papercutting reflects the complexity of modern Chinese culture while also carrying on the unique traditions of nühong, or women's craft.

6. Conclusion: Gendered Expressions Across Time and Medium

From ancient artifacts to the modern art of Bovey Lee, papercutting has always engaged with the gender norms of its time. This paper has shown that papercutting and nühong ("women's red") have been a constant, though often ignored, outlet for women's creativity and strength, existing at the crossroads of art and craft. By looking at this topic through visual culture and gender studies, we see that papercutting is not just a piece of history. Instead, it is a living language that people adapt over time to navigate, reflect on, or resist social expectations. In the past, women who made this craft were usually considered extension of women's domesticity, an ideal that valued the produce but overlooked the individual who made the craft - equally elegant, thoughtful, and proud of their piece. This functional and anonymous context contributed to its classification as craft, in contrast to, for example, the named authorship of male-dominated literati painting. Yet, even within these constraints, women embedded layers of meaning into their work—through auspicious symbols, devotional acts, or subtle personal touches—transforming domestic handiwork into a discreet form of visual storytelling and a means of asserting presence in a world that often omitted their voices.

The contemporary reappropriation of the tradition marks a pivotal shift from quiet presence to visible articulation. Artists like Bovey Lee actively reclaim these techniques, asserting their authorship and infusing the mediums with explicit political, social, and environmental commentaries. In We Are All Mountaineers (see Figure 1), the first papercut artwork discussed at the beginning of the paper, Lee centers the entire work around the laborious process of producing papercutting. She creates a world in which women are simultaneously restrained in the “gated” society and a gendered space of her own creation, represented by the mountain she sits on. Lee’s unease as an immigrant, woman, and person of color looms like mountains. The title We Are All Mountaineers thus mirrors the arduous struggle of navigating these identities, while affirming a shared desire for community, acceptance, and belonging. In this and other of Lee’s works, the papercutting that once adorned bridal chambers becomes a vehicle for her to explore and critique important sociocultural issues, including immigration and environmental issues. This kind of progress challenges the old hierarchy that valued elite scholarly painting over women's craft (nühong). It helps establish nühong as a fine art, on the same level as dance or other global contemporary art. Notably, while women are the main artists, men sometimes participate, especially in professional roles. This suggests that an art's connection to a gender is not permanent. Likewise, the meanings of common symbols like fish or flowers can also change over time. The gendered meaning of an artwork is ultimately created by its context: how it was made, the artist's life, and the culture in which it is received.

In today's digital age, traditional crafts have a new importance. Their focus on slowness, precision, and manual labor offers a quiet protest against the speed and waste of mass production. For women artists, this work connects them to the labor of their ancestors while also freeing them from the constraints those women faced. As a result, their art is both deeply cultural and very modern, tackling issues from migration and climate change to identity and belonging.

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In summary, we can't know for sure how papercutting affected society's view of women, but it is clear that women have always shaped papercutting. They gave it meanings that reflected their own lives, hopes, and criticisms. From decorating a bride's room in ancient China to challenging modern policies, these artworks show that a knife's edge cuts more than just paper—it carves out a space for women's voices in our cultural history. This creates a lasting visual memory of them through time. The tradition matters today because it shows us that the expressions that last the longest are those that can also change, resist, and speak to the complexities of being human.

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