

Studies on Aesthetics of the Art of Folk Funeral Paper Binding

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Abstract:

The art of paper binding, which originated from folk rituals and is also a traditional craft, has been practised in our country for at least 1200 years. Paper binding is used to send condolences and educate future generations, and has a certain mass base in folklore. The art of paper binding has now become a special form of artistic expression in our traditional culture, and is even exhibited in museums by the French, without anyone feeling unlucky. When foreigners learn that paper bindings are burnt for their deceased relatives, they find the Chinese way of looking at death very romantic.

Keywords:

Ritual, Paper Binding

1. Introduction

The art of paper binding, as it is known in folklore with various names, such as paste paper work, paper-tying bank, coloured paste, paste paper and so on. The art of paper binding is part of the evolution of Ming ware. From the original “paper figures” to the current “three-dimensional figures”, from a single to a variety, even a wide range of them. Some people say that there is nothing aesthetically pleasing about paper binding. If we think about its function, it is easy to see that the Chinese people have had the idea of truth, goodness and beauty in their hearts since ancient times. I believe that the paper tapes are more of a teaching tool than a ritual, but how can we do without them? This article attempts to unravel the mystery of the art of paper binding from an aesthetic point of view, leading us to a new understanding of paper tying, the shortest-lived artwork of all.

2. The Origin of “Paper Binding”

The art of paper binding cannot be discussed without mentioning the folklore funeral customs of our country. The funeral customs of a people also reflect their ideas about the nature of the afterlife and the necessary preparations for entering it. [8] The formation of paper binding is related to the terracotta warriors of primitive societies, as we all know from the Terracotta Warriors of the Qin Tombs. The terracotta warriors were an alternative to live human burials due to the development of

the pottery industry at the time. The terracotta warriors and horses reflect the ingenuity of our ancient ancestors and, more importantly, our Chinese admiration for funerary customs and funerary culture.

But the terracotta warriors were not continued later on, mainly because building such a large tomb was very labour-intensive and materially demanding, and because firing terracotta warriors is not an easy task, and to this day it is very difficult to fire such large terracotta figures. Later, during the Tang and Song dynasties, when the skill of paper-making became more sophisticated, some people took up the idea of paper, and the art of paper binding was born. In the ancient tombs of the Jin and Tang dynasties in Turpan, a large number of paper objects have been found, including some paper shoes, paper hats and paper belts, but what is more interesting is that the paper objects were made from “waste paper”, or in today’s parlance, second-hand paper.

During the Northern Song Dynasty, the art of paper binding was more mature, with paper horses and paper figurines appearing, and a special industry was formed in the capital with people specializing in “paper horse shops”. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the paper-tying industry took a quantum leap forward, with a richer variety of characters, ghosts and gods, animals and buildings, making paper tying a necessity in funeral rituals, and the craft became more and more sophisticated, and the number of practitioners began to increase. After the Republic of China and in the early years of the Liberation, the paper-binding industry was still in a developed state and demand was still high, which also shows that people at that time still attached great importance to funeral rituals. After the founding of New China, the paper-binding industry began to decline, and was initially considered a feudal superstition, dross and the Four Olds, and went into hiding for a long time. In the later years of reform and opening up, the paper-binding industry was revived and is still active in contemporary rituals and funerals, and it has kept pace with the times. At present, there is a wide variety of paper ties, just like the goods available in shops. There are so many different kinds of paper ties that you can find in shops, from gold mountains, silver mountains, buildings and cars to mobile phones, chargers, clothes and shoes, pots and pans, etc. There is nothing you can’t think of.

3. The Art of Paper Binding Shines in a Foreign Land

The author feels that paper binding is never a taboo; it is the embodiment and transmission of a Chinese culture, a remembrance and attachment to a deceased loved one. Although paper binding is the shortest-lived artwork, it carries with it the reverence and nostalgia for the deceased. With the flames of the fire, there is also a sense of attachment between the living and their deceased ancestors, and the hope for a better future.

3.1. Our taboo paper binding are exhibited in museums by foreigners

Traditional paper works are crude and lack aesthetic appeal, but in June 2019 an art exhibition called “Elysium” was held at a museum near the Eiffel Tower and was named one of the “Top 10 must-see exhibitions in Paris” by the French art and literature guide magazine” ! Seeing this exhibition is like being in a department store in the underworld. When foreigners found out that the beautiful paper artworks would eventually be burnt and given to friends and relatives who had passed away, they felt very sorry for them and suddenly felt that the Chinese approach to death was very romantic.

Such an exquisite model as shown in Figure 1 is actually made of paper! Inside, the tables, chairs, benches, dishes, pots and spoons are all exquisite as if they were real objects. Western wine, hotpot side dishes, Japanese food and Korean stone pot rice are much richer than a buffet.



Figure 1. A paper binding fake hotpot as good as a real one.

3.2. Underworld supermarket

In 2015 the National Art Collection in Dresden, Germany, held an art exhibition called “The Underworld Supermarket”, which featured paper art. The exhibit was so realistic that it could be described as an innovation in paper culture, where real luxury items could be found in the form of faux paper substitutes, similar to those found in real supermarkets, with the same price tags, except that the raw materials used for these items were all common paper.



Figure 2. Explicitly priced paper-binding shoes.



Figure 3. Paper binding works on display at the underworld supermarket.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the paper-binding daily objects that were exhibited at the 2015 supermarket of the underworld. The exhibits were all collected by the famous German artist Wolfgang Sharp during his research in the south of China. The exhibits are displayed and a stroll through them is like walking through a real supermarket.

4. The Greatest Good, the Greatest Beauty

4.1. The beauty of handicrafts

The art of paper binding is another form of three-dimensional composition, a purely craft activity, and a craft that requires a great deal of care. It is not just a matter of binding a frame and gluing a layer of paper. It involves a lot of knowledge and requires a combination of drawing, cutting, cultural literacy, folk customs and architectural engineering. There is a lot to be said for the choice of material, the shape of the figure, and the shaping of the figure..... Each process is not simple, and there are about ten processes: selecting the material, fumigating, laying down the material, binding, cutting, colour matching, painting, pasting, gluing, and finally adjusting the form. Even the simple process of colour matching and painting is a test of skill. For example, how to match the colors of flowers, characters and animals, and how to portray them more vividly, all require an eye and a hand, and reflect the aesthetic qualities of the folk paper-artist. What you can see in life and what is depicted in famous books, folk artists can turn into paper works of art through a pair of skillful hands.



Figure 4. Folk paper-binding artist Wang Chuanqin's paper-binding work on the theme of Journey to the West.

Figure 4 is a paper-binding work of the four monks and their disciples created by Wang Chuanqin, a folk paper-binding artist. The figures are taken from the Chinese classics and are all lifelike, showing the unique beauty of traditional culture. Wang Chuanqin's paper craft has been handed down from his ancestors and is now in its third generation. Do you still feel eerie when you see this work in Figure 4?

4.2. The beauty of culture

It is written in the Analects of Confucius that to mourn for three years is the most common mourning period in the world. This means that the three-year period of mourning is one of the longest periods of mourning in ancient China, which means that the culture of mourning is indeed of great importance in our country. In fact, from the perspective of traditional culture, paper binding is indeed very romantic, as described by foreigners, but unfortunately, contemporary people advocate the protection of the environment, so the phenomenon of burning paper bindings is also very strict control, many places have replaced paper ties with flowers, the art of paper

binding is not valued. The art of paper binding needs to be passed on, as it is a folk culture and a traditional culture. Folklore is originally a remnant of the ancient culture of mankind in China for thousands of years, and is a cultural phenomenon created by working people over a long period of history. When the Empress Dowager Cixi died she did not use a living person for burial, she used two paper-bound people as her companions, again reflecting the importance of paper-binding culture.

4.3. *The beauty of filial piety*

In China, where filial piety and funeral rituals have been emphasized since ancient times, the common “paper” is given a sacred mission and is considered to convey people’s feelings and to be able to communicate with the gods and have a certain spirituality. In traditional Chinese funeral rituals, paper is used as a medium to create a variety of ritual objects to express people’s grief. Although not complex, these works are exceptionally clever, depicting both realistic and generalized objects from the human world, and are considered works of art. As a folk proverb goes, “only one layer of paper separates the yin from the yang”. It is not known whether the paper ties can really be passed on to deceased relatives through the fire like a “courier”, but this is not important.

5. The Aesthetic Value of Paper Binding

Although paper binding is a folk craft, it has always been prevalent in China’s folklore, and reflects the people’s heritage of folklore. Nowadays, paper-binding artworks are becoming more and more exquisite and refined, and the shapes are becoming more and more vivid, which is naturally all the result of the creative use of folk artists on the basis of inheriting the production techniques of their ancestors and combining their own aesthetic sensibilities, which can be described as paper sculptures. The father of He Duoling, former professor of sculpture at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, was a folk paper-binding artist, and it is said that the paper-binding cars he made could really drive away. Paper-binding artists believe that they put their heart and soul into every piece of paper-binding work they make, and behind each piece is the artist’s heart and soul, so the works made with heart and soul are often the most beautiful. When we look at these works, of course, we should not simply regard them as “inauspicious” ritual objects, but rather as a better interpretation of the unique charm of this traditional craft.

6. Conclusions

The culture of paper binding and funeral customs has been used until now without change. Although people still avoid paper binding people, it is undeniable that this seemingly unlucky thing is in fact a unique traditional Chinese culture. The author believes that the development of the art of paper binding is precisely a result of the evolution of human civilization, and although it is more or less tinged with superstition, it has its origins in folklore and its existence is justified. It is a traditional folk art, a long-established and comprehensive art that combines many skills, and at the same time contains many elements of folk culture. As such, it is a “treasure of folk art”. It is very timely and correct that the state is now paying attention to the rescue of intangible cultural heritage. I think the art of paper binding should also be among those to be “rescued” by the state, otherwise it is also in danger of being “lost”. I am not afraid that the craft will be lost, but that the culture of filial piety will also be lost, and that young people will not know how to thank their parents, and that no ceremony

will be held even after the death of a person. What is important is that people can send their condolences and feel better about their conscience if they burn these paper bindings. The paper bindings will be burnt along with the relatives' sadness and concern for the deceased in another unknown world. Perhaps the culture of paper binding will disappear one day, and there may be other ways to replace it, but paper binding is a folk culture that needs to be taken care of.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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