

A Glimpse of Chinese Culture Through Papercuts

By Fatima Wu

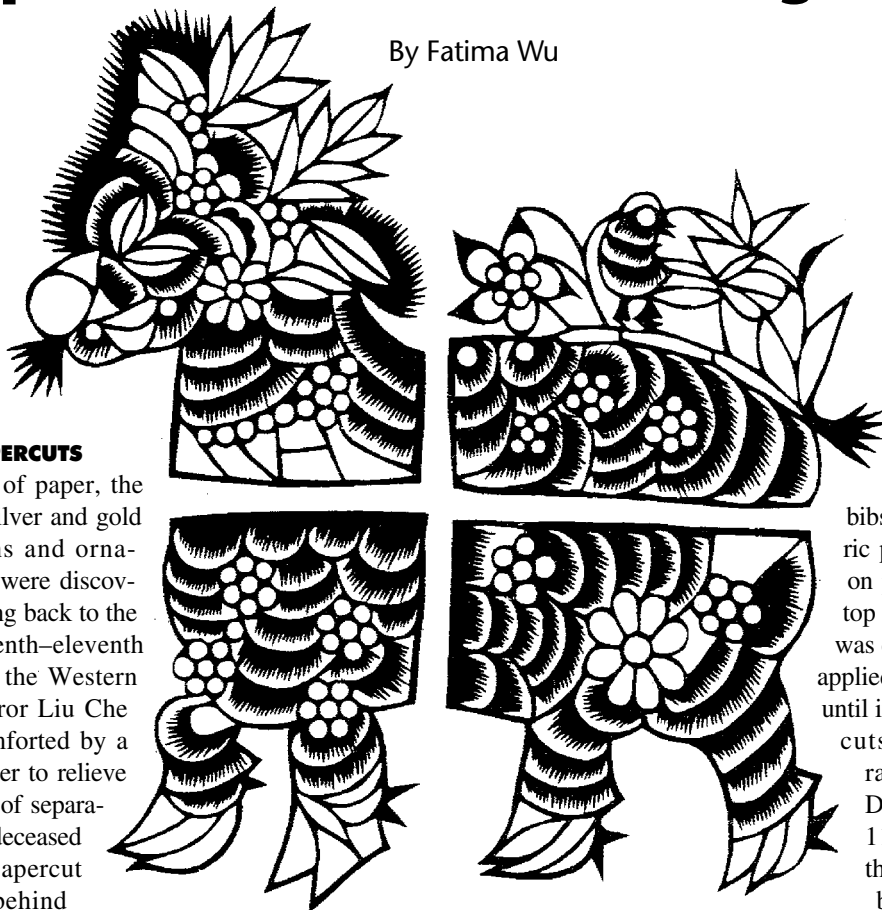


FIGURE 1: The cut of an animal fitted for windowpanes. From Florence Temko's *Chinese Papercuts: Their Stories and How to Make and Use Them*, San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals, Inc. 1984, page 34.

THE ORIGIN OF PAPER CUTS

Prior to the invention of paper, the ancient Chinese used silver and gold leaf to create patterns and ornaments, some of which were discovered in burial sites dating back to the Shang Dynasty (sixteenth–eleventh century BC).¹ During the Western Han period, the emperor Liu Che (156–87 BC) was comforted by a court artist who, in order to relieve the emperor the agony of separation from Lady Li, his deceased wife, did a life-size papercut of her and placed it behind a screen. When light was applied, the emperor on the other side of the screen was entertained by the illusion that

his wife was standing there in front of him once again. However, the credibility of this anecdote is doubtful, for paper was not readily available at that time. Paper was invented by Cai Lun in the year AD 105. Due to the complex process of making paper, the new commodity was a luxury item only to the affluent and the elite who preferred to write on paper rather than bamboo slats or silk. In 1959, ingot-shaped paper money was excavated from a gravesite in the Xinjiang region.² These patterns, with writings that dated back to the year AD 541, were found scattered around the site. Silver ingots were used as a form of currency by the ancient Chinese people.

Many old papercuts we have today come from gravesites and excavations, some of which carry designs of animals like horses. Papercuts are used in place of actual objects not only to economize but also to discourage tomb raiders. From the same gravesite, archaeologists found that some papercut designs matched those on the textile fabric worn by the deceased. This is no coincidence but rather, suggests the common use of papercut patterns in the daily life of the ancient Chinese.

PURPOSE AND FUNCTIONS OF PAPER CUTS

The Decorative Function—After the use of paper became more widespread and more affordable, Chinese women began to use it to

make stencils for embroidery on shoes, caps, and bibs. Nature, animals, or geometric patterns would first be drawn on paper, then glued or sewn on top of objects where embroidery was desired. Colorful threads were applied on top of the paper pattern until it was covered. Chinese papercuts began not as an art but rather as a domestic activity. During the Jin Dynasty (AD 1115–1235), women dressed their hair with designs such as butterflies and flowers made of a glossy paper material.³

Today most papercuts are called *hua*, which literally means “flower.” “Flower”

here carries the meaning of pattern rather than the botanic beauty. Those used as stencils for embroidery are called *xia hua* or “shoe flower,” *mao hua* or “hat flower,” and *zhen hua* or “pillow flower.”⁴ By the same token, there are “bib flower,” “scarf flower,” and so on. Papercuts used to decorate lanterns are called *deng hua*; those on the roof are called *tuan hua*, while *bian hua* or *jiao hua* refers to the ones on windows as the pattern usually runs along the sides or clusters at the corners. Figure 1 shows an animal-shaped *bian hua* fitted over the windowpanes.

Paper patterns of birds and animals cut and glued onto gift boxes are called *li hua* or gift patterns. On the occasion of a marriage, one will find papercuts of dragons and phoenixes or a pair of mandarin ducks that denote marital bliss on the gift containers (fig. 2). *Xi hua* or “happy flowers” are papercuts found on presents, dishes, cakes, and candles for family celebration. During ancestral or religious worship, symmetrical geometric patterns are used to decorate ritual utensils. These patterns include cuttings of Chinese characters that carry an auspicious meaning, e.g., the character *fu* for “luck.”

Papercut patterns also found their way into porcelain designs, wall ornaments, door hangings, and fan patterns. The last one



FIGURE 2: A pair of mandarin ducks swimming on the water amid lotus blossoms. From Ramona Jablonski's *The Chinese Cut-Out Design Coloring Book*, Owings Mills, Maryland: Stemmer House Publishers, Inc. 1980, page 26.

involves a cut-and-paste process in which a finished papercut design is pasted onto the fan in lieu of a drawing.

As one can see, papercuts were found almost everywhere in all occasions of Chinese social and domestic life. It is also important to know that in some cases, paper is not the only medium used, but also fabric and leather, as seen in the shadow plays.

Entertainment Function—An entertaining aspect of papercuts is manifested in a theatrical performance called shadow plays, a popular entertainment up to the beginning of the twentieth century. Papercuts of dramatic personnel were created and glued on sticks, which allowed the artists to handle them easily. Placing a white screen before these paper characters, the artists used a bright light to cast a shadow when the figures were moved around. Since paper wears easily with time, soon these paper figures were replaced by leather. Hence, this special type of theater is called *piyingxi* or “leather shadow plays.”

Subjects and Contents—Besides their entertaining and decorative properties, papercuts do serve other practical purposes in the life of the Chinese people. Mainly speaking, Chinese papercuts can be said to serve the following purposes: 1) to pray for luck, 2) to wish well, 3) to avoid the vicious supernatural, 4) to eliminate evil, 5) to teach a moral, 6) to admonish, and 7) to have fun.⁵

“Praying for luck” papercuts are used in religious offerings and at New Years. The most popular pattern used is *wufu linmen* or “five luck arriving at the door.” This is usually represented by a pattern of five bats (fig. 3) whose pronunciation resembles the word luck or fu. Dragon and phoenixes are mythological animals representing good luck, fortune, and health. The God of wealth, Caishen, is a popular papercut figure during New Years. Many households use red papers to cut out the lucky words, such as *longma jingshen* or “as healthy as the dragons and the horses.” *Siji pingan* or “peace and health in the four seasons” is another popular good luck slogan during this festive period. Coins and gold nuggets portrayed in New Year papercut patterns denote prosperity and profit.

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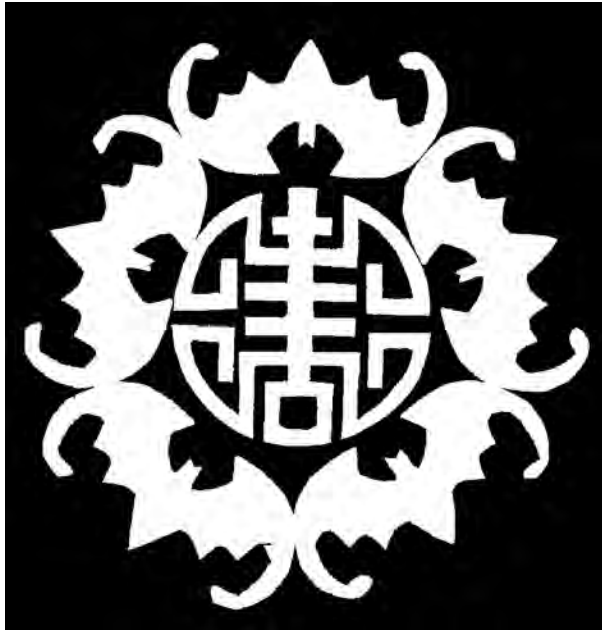


FIGURE 3: Five bats or *fu* surrounding the character of longevity or *shou*. From W. M. Hawley's *Chinese Folk Designs: A Collection of 300 Cutpaper Designs Used for Embroidery Together with 160 Chinese Art Symbols and Their Meanings*. New York: Dover Publication, Inc. 1949, page 259.

Patterns for well wishes are used at birthdays or marriage celebrations. For longevity, one finds symbols such as pines and cranes (fig. 4), while lotus and pomegranates would fill the picture in the case of marital happiness. The word lotus or *lian* is a homophone of the word "year." Having two lotuses in the papercut or *lian lian* means "year after year" or "continuously." Pomegranates have a lot of seeds or *zi* which is also a word for sons. Therefore presenting a papercut of lotuses and pomegranates to a pair of newlyweds is to wish them sons year after year, the best thing that can happen to a couple in the Chinese tradition. A pair of mandarin ducks is also a symbol of martial bliss (fig. 2). The waterfowl is often found in pairs, signifying love and companionship. The character *xi* or "double happiness" often decorates the bridal chamber, which is usually covered with papercuts of lucky charms.

To avoid the vicious force in nature, papercuts of door gods are used to guard the family. Sometimes the image of Zhongkuei, a Taoist immortal renowned for his ugliness, so bad that even evil spirits abhor it, is cut with large bulging eyes set on a fierce countenance. Papercuts on eliminating evil attempt to encourage one to banish wicked thoughts and deeds, as well as to fight difficulties with courage and determination. The common pattern is a cock defeating a scorpion or a man killing a poisonous snake. The lesson is: evil will be defeated.

To teach a moral is probably the most used theme in papercuts. Of course, this trend corresponds to Confucianism in which all art and literature are expected to serve a moral purpose. To present the didactic lesson, artists draw scenes from Chinese history, literature, and mythology. For example, "Wusong Fights the Tiger," from the renowned novel *Golden Lotus*, teaches one about chivalry and courage (fig. 5). "Jiang Taigong Fishing in the Wei River" shows an eighty-year-old man fishing when he is made a statesman by the emperor. The lesson here is perseverance and determination. "Zhao-



FIGURE 4: Two cranes and a pine tree, symbols of longevity. From Ramona Jablonski's book, page 59.

jun Journeys to the North" tells a touching story that happened in the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) when the Chinese court, to pacify its enemies in the north, was obliged to send young Chinese women to be married to the Khans. The papercut shows Wang Zhaojun, the woman selected for the Khan, leaving her homeland to travel outside the Great Wall to greet her fate. The historically renowned beauty serves as a symbol of peace and the spirit of self-sacrifice for one's country. "The Journey to the West" with the monk Xuanzang and his three disciples, Monkey, Pigsy, and Sandy, denotes the idea of devotion and loyalty to a good cause.

Many papercuts are used to admonish the young in their behavior. For example, "The White Snake and Xuxian" teaches the lesson of intolerance and the evil of lewdness. Xuxian falls for Madam White Snake's beauty. To save him from the harm of evil, the monk Fahai uses magical skills to fight the Snake, who responds with a fierce deluge to drown all. Hence Xu's desire for beauty causes many to be drowned. "Mulan Joins the Army" (fig. 6) as portrayed by the Disney movie "Mulan" presents another case of self-sacrifice and chivalry. Mulan, to save her elderly father and baby brother from going to war, volunteers to join by disguising herself as a man. The cut here shows her in front of the mirror, finishing the last touches before setting out.

Fun papercuts, usually meant for children, mostly deal with daily life subjects and characters: a mouse licking the oil lamp, goldfish swimming among the lotus flowers, crickets and cock fights, pandas relaxing in a bamboo grove, acrobatic acts, etc. figure 7 is a papercut that serves purely to entertain.



FIGURE 5: "Wusong Fights the Tiger," an episode from the renowned novel *Outlaws of the Marsh*. From Zhang Daoyi's *The Art of Chinese Papercuts*, Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1989, number 81.

Puns and symbols—Chinese paper artists make use of puns and symbolism to get their messages across. The large number of homophones that exist in the Chinese language play a heavy role in this artistic medium as well as others. For example, as mentioned earlier, the pronunciation of the word "luck" is fu, which is the same as that in "bats." Therefore, bats are often popular and common objects in papercut designs as well as Chinese paintings, sculptures, and other decorative pieces. Figure 5 shows five bats surrounding the character of luck (fu). Five bats together is "five luck" or wufu, namely: longevity, prosperity, health and peace, virtue, and a full life. Another popular pun found in papercuts is the lotus and the fish. Fish in Chinese is *yu*, a homophone of "bountiful," "surplus," or "more than one needs." Fish patterns are always used by well-wishers for pros-



FIGURE 6: Mulan finishing the last touch-ups before setting out to join the army for her father. From Barbara Holdridge's *The Chinese Cut-out Design Book: Designs of Costumes*, Owings Mills, Maryland: Stemmer House Publishing, Inc., 1990, page 17.



FIGURE 7: A playful design with mice and produce. From Ni Wenxin, page 86.

perity and monetary success. The lotus and the fish translate as *nian nian you yu*, signifying "plentiful year after year." In embroidery pieces, one always finds nine fishes because the number nine is a homophone of eternity or *jiu*. Having nine fishes in an art object sends a message of eternal bounty.

Congratulatory patterns intended for a birthday celebration usually involve pine trees, cranes, peaches, or the God of Longevity. Derived from ancient tradition, these cultural symbols continue to

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FIGURE 8: The portrait of the god of Longevity or Shouxing holding a poster that says "Luck and Happiness as bountiful as the Eastern Sea." Notice the shape of the god's forehead. Ni Wenxin's book, page 42.

Shouxing, seen in porcelain figures or paintings, is a popular decoration in Chinese restaurants. The prominent forehead shaped as a peach is his trademark (fig. 8).

By the same token, the Three Great Blessings in Chinese culture: Luck, Prosperity and Longevity, *fu*, *lu*, and *shou*, whose images decorate restaurants, living rooms, shops and so on, are always symbolized by a bat (*fu*), a deer (*lu*), a homophone for prosperity, and a peach. Other major symbols include: magpies, seen as the carriers of good news, and gourds as the conquerors of evil and poison, because gourds are used in Chinese mythology to subjugate wicked spirits. The wish for a smooth and safe journey is symbolized by a boat in full sail in the wind. Often a roc with widespread wings soaring up to the sky represents a wish for a bright future.



FIGURE 9: The sun (Mao) shining on a world of peace. Ruth Bottomley, *Chinese Papercut: A Selection*, Singapore: Sun Tree Publishing Limited, 1994, page 96. Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A Images.

be the most popular icons used in such occasions today. Pine trees are evergreens, signifying health and strength. Cranes are always portrayed as companions to Daoist immortals. The heavenly bird also signifies freedom and happiness. The most famous peaches in Chinese mythology are grown in the Heavenly Garden owned by the Queen Mother of the West, Xiwangmu. There, the peaches ripen every three thousand years and whoever devours the heavenly peach will become an immortal. The God of Longevity,



FIGURE 10: A brave young woman confronting the rising waters: a familiar image during Mao's era. From Florence Temko, page 96.

China's Revolutionary Period—With the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949, Chinese culture underwent a drastic change. This is especially so during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when traditional cultural elements were seen as poisonous weeds and anti-revolutionary. These cultural deviations are demonstrated in papercuts. Figures 9 and 10 are good representations of art in general during this tumultuous political period. Most art works at this time focused on the people and their leader, Chairman Mao. In figure 9, two well-dressed females, mother and child, sit comfortably on horseback. In the background, the sky is decorated with the radiant rays of the sun, a symbol of Mao. The theme is so obvious that no one can miss it. Figure 10 portrays a female holding a lantern in one hand and a spade in the other. Dark clouds loom above while raging waves howl at her feet. But with a determined look on her face, she stands up with her back straight. This papercut is named "Lighting the way as the flood water rises." It is interesting that females are represented in the two illustrations, corresponding to Mao's claim that females hold up half of the sky.⁶ The political detour during the Communist era has added another dimension to papercut. At this time, more human figures are represented than ani-

mals and plants. Now, papercuts are used to serve the needs of the people and the government. Political realism is the foundation or starting point of the artist's themes before he/she designs the pattern.

Today in the twenty-first century, papercuts in China not only serve political, but also artistic and decorative purposes, a return to earlier traditional functions. On the other hand, walking in the art fairs on the streets of America, one often comes upon papercut artists vending their pieces. Some designs reflect foreign influences and cultural changes. It is no longer surprising to see Western patterns of, say, the Statue of Liberty or the Grand Canyon. The economical nature of papercutting, enhanced by the myriad possibility of topics, makes paper art attractive to both young and old. Older generation paper artists stick to their traditional patterns or hua, while for the young and the creative, the sky is the limit. ■

NOTES

1. Daoyi Zhang, *The Art of Chinese Papercuts*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1989), 1.
2. Zhang, 3.
3. Ruth Bottomley, *Chinese Papercuts: A Selection*, (Singapore: Sun Tree Publishing Limited, 1994), 5.
4. Refer to "Introduction: What is Papercutting?" in *Chinese Papercutting Patterns for Seasonal Festivals*, (Taipei: Minsu Yishu Chubanshe, 1979).
5. Refer to "Characteristics of Chinese Papercutting" in *Chinese Papercutting Patterns for Seasonal Festivals*.
6. For more details on Mao's idea on Chinese women, see chapter 31, "On Women" in *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, (Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 1972), 254-257.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bottomley, Ruth. *Chinese Papercuts: A Selection*. Singapore: Sun Tree Publishing Limited, 1994.

This handy little book consists of papercut collections from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Acquired in 1992, these papercuts are printed in their beautiful original colors. The author groups the patterns according to style, subject matter, and place of origin. The book is divided into the following sections: Introduction, Makers, Materials and Methods, Regional Styles, Subject Matter and Symbolism, and finally, The Twentieth Century.

China Folk Art Series, Nov. 3. *The Art of Paper Cutting*. Distributed by Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, Republic of China, 75 minutes. VHS525.

This undated video, narrated in English with Chinese subtitles, is informative and comprehensive. All facts of papercut art are discussed and demonstrated in detail, from history to techniques.

Chinese Papercutting Patterns for Seasonal Festivals. Taipei: Minsu Yishu Chubanshe, 1979.

The essays in this book are quite informative in regards to the various kinds of papercuts and the functions they serve. The illustrations are mainly made up of papercuts depicting festive seasons such as Chinese New Year, Dragon Boat festival, Moon festival, Winter Solstice and much more.

Christensen, J. A. *Cut-Art, An Introduction to Chung-hua and Kirie-e*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1989.

As a papercut artist himself, Christensen focuses mainly on Chinese and Japanese patterns. The book acts as a workshop for amateurs interested in oriental patterns, such as papercut of trademarks, the imperial crest from Japan, or personages from classical literature from China. Basic and advanced techniques on the cut art are demonstrated in detail. This is good class material with step-by-step illustrations.

Hawley, W. M. *Chinese Folk Designs: A Collection of 300 Cut-Paper Designs Used for Embroidery Together with 160 Chinese Art Symbols and Their Meanings*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1949.

This is the oldest book in the group and contains the largest number of papercuts of

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traditional patterns in flowers, plants, animals, and human figures. This collection of patterns comes from the southern and eastern provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Henan, Guizhou, and Anhui. The most valuable section of this book is a fifteen-page illustration of Chinese art symbols, from trigrams to bamboos, from characters to animals.

Holdridge, Barbara. *The Chinese Cut-out Design Book: Designs of Costumes*. Owing Mills, Maryland: Stemmer House Publishers, Inc., 1990.

This is a book of patterns on Chinese personages from the ancient period up to the modern time. The author's two-page introduction gives the reader a brief description of the characteristics of Chinese costumes throughout history. The bibliography is followed by pages of papercut patterns on ancient Chinese women, operatic characters, as well as men and women from minority groups.

Jablonski, Ramona. *The Chinese Cut-out Design Coloring Book*. Owing Mills, Maryland: Stemmer House Publishers, Inc., 1980.

This black and white collection of patterns carries a short introduction by the author on the practical usage and religious significance in Chinese papercuts. An instructor in papercut art, the author is responsible for some of the patterns in this collection, which are meant for both cutting out and coloring.

Ni, Wenxin. *Jianzhi (Paper Cutting): Zhongguo Chuantong Minsu Yishu (Chinese Traditional Folk Art)*. Gaoxiang, Taiwan: Aizhi Tushu Gongsi, 1985.

A colorful collection of Chinese papercut patterns, this book begins with simple symmetrical designs, followed by patterns of Chinese lucky symbols for longevity, marital bliss, etc. The rest of the book is divided into sections on plants and animals, the twelve astrological animals, and finally on historical, mythological, and literary personages. It is an ideal book for beginners as well as advanced papercut artists.

Rich, Chris. *The Book of Paper Cutting: A Complete Guide to all the Techniques—With More Than 100 Project Ideas*. New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 1993.

This is a papercutting workshop in which the author introduces dozens of art projects, beginning with ways of folding paper for symmetrical cuts, color applications, and glue techniques, followed by suggested ideas of wall mounts, gift wraps, card making, stencils, borders, bookmarks, and more. Patterns introduced here are not exclusively Chinese. It is ideal for classroom use.

Schlapfer-Geiser, Susanne. *Scherenschnitte: Designs and Techniques for the Traditional Craft of Papercutting*. Asheville, North Carolina: Lark Books, 1994.

The art of *scherschnitte*, a term used in Europe to mean papercutting, is introduced here by the internationally-known artist Susan Schlapfer-Geiser. The book is classroom friendly to any level of students interested in the art. All patterns used are non-oriental, a nice variation from the norm in this bibliography.

Temko, Florence. *Chinese Papercuts: Their Stories and How to Make and Use Them*. San Francisco: China Books & Periodicals, Inc., 1984.

This is another comprehensive book on the art of Chinese papercuts. Information on history, styles, symbolism, and techniques are given in detail. What makes the book interesting falls in the last chapter, "How to use papercuts?" The author applies the art into our daily life, e.g., using papercut patterns to decorate the home and to create fun gift wraps. Numerous interesting patterns can be found in this collection.

Zhang, Daoyi. *The Art of Chinese Papercuts*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1989.

This is a comprehensive book on papercutting. Zhang introduces the art through a scholarly point of view. There are numerous details and illustrations on the history, styles, themes, and content of papercut, followed by a chapter on techniques and methodology. What makes this book unique is the biographical section on a group of famous papercut artists in contemporary China.

Zhong, Guoren. *Jianzhi Yishu Chubu (Art of Papercutting for Beginners)*. Hong Kong: Yiqun Publishers, 1977.

This Chinese book focuses mainly on the techniques, methods, and process of papercutting, accompanied by fourteen sample patterns at the end. The author discusses in detail 1) the methods of papercutting which include the use of scissors and knives, 2) the styles of cutting which consist of positive and negative cutting as well as combined, 3) the ways of pasting and coloring, and 4) symmetrical cuts and pattern structural design.

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