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JIANZHI: A SILHOUETTE OF TRADITION, ART AND FEMINISM THROUGH CHINESE PAPER CUTTING

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JIANZHI: A SILHOUETTE OF TRADITION, ART AND FEMINISM THROUGH CHINESE PAPER CUTTING

Eva Ding

My work examines gender inequality issues affecting Chinese women. By integrating Chinese folk paper-cut art into sculptural works, I seek to reinterpret traditional themes and stimulate discussion about gendered social phenomena portrayed in Chinese women's folk art and fine art, thereby fostering consideration of some specific feminist issues and their potential implementation within the Chinese context.

MY GRANDMOTHER'S PRESENCE

In the quietude of my early memories, my grandmother's presence is a constant, defined by her methodical ways and a dignity that seemed innate to her. She had an evening ritual of folding her trousers with care, placing them under her pillow to ensure they would be smooth and ready for the next day. She made her own clothes, convinced that nothing bought could match the fit of something tailored by her own hands. Her feet, marked by the remnants of a bygone era's practices, bore witness to history's scars, yet she moved through life with a resilience as quiet as it was strong. Being educated was rare for women of her time and place. Yet, my grandmother's narratives hinted at a family history shaped by the shifting fortunes of China during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a story of prosperity and loss. Her lessons on virtues and morals were more like gentle reminders than strict rules. These wise sayings, rooted in a life that had spanned wars and societal upheavals, were her way of passing on a legacy of resilience and understanding.

Raised under her guidance, I appreciate the privilege of being tethered to my cultural roots, allowing me to explore various interests ranging from calligraphy and sewing, to ink painting and cooking, each skill a chapter drawn from my heritage, yet adapted to my own journey. Some Chinese traditions, like paper cutting, were not found in my family's narrative and my grandmother's teachings – a reminder of the regional selectivity with which cultural practices are passed down, shaping our connection to the past in unique ways.

Jianzhi

Paper-cut art, known as *jianzhi*, is a quintessential and enduring folk art form in China. Its historical origins date back to the Tang Dynasty (6th –7th century AD); over time, it has permeated people's lives across diverse regions. This traditional art form encapsulates a rich background of social consciousness, moral values, practical wisdom, life philosophies and aesthetic sensibilities that resonate with most Chinese people. It has exerted a profound influence on the culture's visual languages, shaping the creation of decorations for festive celebrations, the intricate carving of leather shadow puppets, the adornment of porcelain patterns, the design of printed fabric motifs, the embellishment of furniture, architectural aesthetics, and even the production of modern and contemporary animations.

Paper-cut art has historically been called "women's art" within Chinese folk culture, owing to its suitability as an activity for rural women during their leisure hours. In traditional society, paper-cutting was a mandatory skill passed down through generations of women, with young girls commencing their training and skill development under the guidance of their mothers and grandmothers from an early age. After years of dedicated practice, they would attain the status of skilled paper-cutting women, a qualification often associated with readiness for marriage.

Society emphasised a woman's proficiency in *nvhong*, a term encompassing various labour-intensive activities traditionally performed by women, including sewing, embroidery, weaving and paper-cutting. Traditional norms and values determined a woman's standing as an accomplished daughter-in-law, possessing appropriate skills, or as an inept wife with less refined abilities, a judgment encompassing her proficiency in paper-cutting and other *nvhong* skills.

In the context of traditional patriarchal China, the gender status of women stood in stark inequality to that of men, despite the reality that women were closely associated with men within the family unit and the broader societal framework. The assessment and acknowledgement of women's worth were invariably contingent upon the judgment and recognition of a male-dominated society, highlighting deeply entrenched disparities in gender roles and status.

Figure 1. Yuhuan Women Paper-cutting, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yuhuan_Paper-cutting.jpg

Throughout Chinese art history, large-scale portraiture has traditionally been absent – in stark contrast to the cultural context of traditional Western art that developed from the ancient Greek city-state system and its approach to expressing the human body. However, folk art, such as paper-cutting art, sometimes serves as an exception in this respect. Although portraiture is a significant aspect of paper-cut art, the leading creators of the genre – women – have typically preferred to substitute direct representations of female bodies and sexuality with metaphors, symbolism and homophones in order to convey hidden meanings.

Figure 2 features a traditional paper-cut artwork from northern Shaanxi called *Eagle Stepping on Rabbit*. In traditional Chinese Chinese folk culture, birds serve as symbols of masculinity, often used as metaphors for men, while rabbits symbolise femininity, representing women. Moreover, 'rabbit' in Chinese (*tuzi*) is homophonic, also meaning "spit out children," a phrase symbolising fertility. Consequently, this artwork has become a metaphor for sexual intercourse. However, rather than depicting a pleasurable experience of mutual love, the paper cut emphasises the oppressive and coercive aspect of the male–female reproductive process, highlighting the stark disparities in gender status.

Similar implications are found in other traditional paper-cut works, such as *Fish Playing with Lotus*, which is commonly used as a decorative pattern for wedding celebrations and which "not only mimics the shapes of fish and lotus to suggest heterosexual union but taps the power of fertility from fish to suggest the unspoken desire for human reproduction."[1] *Snake Coiling Around Rabbit* and *Phoenix Playing with Peonies* express similar themes related to sexual activities between men and women.

Figure 2. *Eagle Stepping on a Rabbit* by Cao Dianxiang from Ansai, Shaanxi Province Paper-cutting, 23×33cm, Collection of the National Art Museum of China. https://www.namoc.org/zgmsg/xw2023/202301/767b82339ccc4911b5e843c7d8da916a.shtml

Figure 3 shows three renditions of the theme "snake coiling around rabbit." The figure on the left and the one below use the monochrome cut-out technique, while the one at upper right uses the monochromatic folding cut. In the natural world, snakes and rabbits are inherently unequal in size. Rabbits have a relatively uniform size, while snakes exhibit a variety of forms. The image on the left depicts a snake (masculinity) and a rabbit (femininity) of roughly equivalent size. The snake's tail coils within the rabbit's body, and at the centre of this circular composition lies the Chinese character *Xi*, symbolising traditional wedding celebrations. The animals' heads are touching. The snake extends its tongue to gently touch the rabbit's cheek, while the rabbit gazes back with slightly open eyes. This paper cut is a customary motif in traditional wedding celebrations, which employ images of snakes and rabbits as a metaphorical way of wishing the newlyweds a joyful wedding night.

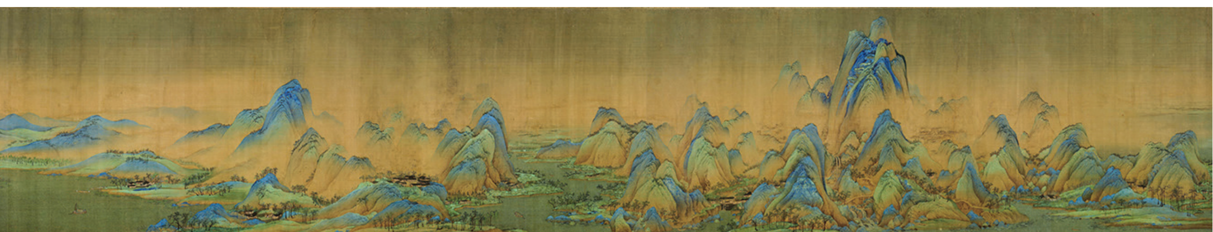
Figure 3. Unknown artists, depictions of *Snake coiling around Rabbit*. https://www.nipic.com/show/16281636.html

In contrast to the tender portrayal of sexuality between the snake and rabbit in the left-hand picture, the two works on the right reveal gender inequality in their underlying message. The image at bottom right positions the snake at the centre of the composition, asserting an absolute dominance. In this instance, a colossal python has ensnared two rabbits, one on the left and the other on the right. The rabbits are not interacting with the snake; instead, they face away from each other. This reflects the reality of many traditional feudal societies, where men could marry multiple wives to maximise reproduction, leading to competition among wives to secure the favour of the male figure.

The image at upper right, employing the technique of folded paper-cutting, is equally intriguing, with its symmetrical composition. In this depiction, the snake takes on some of the attributes of the traditional dragon motif. These sturdy serpents, enveloped by rising clouds, symbolise aspirations for male prosperity and success as indicators of social status. In stark contrast, the tiny rabbits appear as mere decorative elements attached to the snake's body, seemingly trapped within the design's inner space. Again, this portrayal reflects a traditional feudal society where women were typically relegated to invisibility within the confines of their homes by men. Once a woman was married, she was regarded as an integral part of her husband's possessions and was not recognised independently of him.

The distinctions among these three images, all dating to the late twentieth century, are readily apparent. As cut-out depictions of a gendered social phenomenon, each serves as a direct manifestation of the creator's inner subjective expression and attitudes. However, the art of paper-cutting, which as we have seen occupies a pivotal role in women's lives, has undergone some significant changes that reflect women's efforts to gain acknowledgement in Chinese society. An online search reveals numerous versions of the same themes in contemporary paper cuts; they typically lack precise documentation (including the artists' names) and comprehensive information, reflecting the ongoing invisibility of these female folk artists.

Figure 4. Wang Ximeng, *One Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains*, Song dynasty, 1113, ink and colour on silk scroll. Palace Museum, Beijing, China. Detail of original. Complete scroll is 51.3x1191.5cm.



Historically, paper cutting went beyond the realm of folk arts. Within the confines of traditional Confucian education, the acquisition of painting skills constituted one of the four essential proficiencies sought by upper-class women. These four skills encompassed mastery in painting, competence in playing the *guqin* (zither), proficiency at chess and practising calligraphy. Nevertheless, in antiquity, attaining recognition as a female painter was a near-impossible feat. Women were confined to painting trees and flowers, a thematic choice intended to symbolise their inherent femininity. The portrayal of grand landscapes (as in *shan-shui* painting) featuring majestic mountains and rivers, symbolic of power and territorial authority, remained a privilege reserved exclusively for men within patriarchal societies, where dominion and control were firmly ensconced as male prerogatives.

AWAKENING AND AUTONOMY

Jia Fang-zhou (1940–), regarded as one of the pioneering contemporary art critics in China, with a dedicated focus on feminist art, has diligently championed the recognition and advancement of contemporary women artists. In his view, the ascent of women's art is a subject that cannot be avoided in China. However, he also acknowledges the formidable challenges inherent in the struggles of female artists as they confront a deeply entrenched patriarchal cultural paradigm. Notably, despite its significance, he contends that such a movement does not directly threaten mainstream culture. Given the categorisation of women as a "vulnerable group," their quest for enhanced status and collective dignity necessitates an ongoing, individualised empowerment effort, implying (as I understand it) that the awakening and autonomy of each individual (female) are prerequisites for forming a higher collective consciousness.

Jia divides the developmental trajectory of Chinese contemporary women artists into three distinct stages. The initial phase, which he calls the "pre-feminist art" stage, is defined by a self-oppressing attitude, whereby women artists typically refrain from divulging or articulating their innermost sentiments and personal encounters in their work. In the subsequent phase, the "self-exploration" stage, female artists embark on a journey of self-discovery, using their works as a medium of self-expression by exploring their individual experiences in them. The third and final phase, the "greater self" stage, transcends personal boundaries to encompass broader societal and historical dimensions. In this phase, artists reflect on the human condition and social dynamics, channelling their concern for women as a collective into their creative journeys.[2]

If, for Chinese female artists, the first stage was limited to painting mundane subjects like flowers and plants and suppressing their inner expression, the second stage began as part of the New Culture Movement in the Republican era during the early twentieth century. In response to the infusion of Western ideologies that permeated this movement, China dispatched numerous talented young artists abroad to assimilate Western oil painting techniques. Among them was Pan Yuliang (1895–1977), a painter who pursued her studies in Paris; in her self-portraits, she adeptly interwove her distinct identity as a Chinese woman adorned in a qipao with the vibrant backdrop of Western modernity. She intended to bridge the gap between traditional Chinese aesthetics and the contemporary Western milieu. Pan's art developed amid the complex interplay of conflicting dichotomies that played out between West and East, tradition and modernity, male chauvinism and emerging feminism.[3] Through her portrayal of the female body, (for example *Narcissism*, of 1929, Anhui Museum, Hefei.) Pan ventured fearlessly into uncharted art territories in China, embuing her female portraiture with a new expression of individual consciousness. Pan's work marks a pivotal juncture in the evolution of Chinese women artists.

Once women attempted to use their personal experience and "women's perspective" to interpret the twentieth century, their work differed not only from that of male artists, but also from the work of women artists of any former era. Thus, this new approach came to define women's art, and these concepts increasingly came to form the themes and content of "women's art" and its "post-modern" overtones.[4]

Women's art in China underwent a significant transformation when it shifted its focus to self-awareness, imbuing the discipline with genuine creative significance. It was during the 1990s that Chinese women's art emerged from the shadows and experienced a remarkable surge, marked by an emphasis on the pursuit of equal rights to discourse

within China's socio-political milieu, the affirmation of individual self-identity and the candid expression of female sexuality. Chinese women artists had finally gained visibility. Numerous female artists turned to examining attitudes towards Chinese women and female artists. They addressed contemporary feminist issues in China through diverse media including painting, photography, sculpture, conceptual art and performance art.

As a post-doctoral researcher with the Tate Research Centre: Asia in 2013 – 2014,[5] Monica Merlin interviewed Chinese women artists to discuss the intricate dynamics of feminist practice in Chinese contemporary art, such as Tao Aimin and her work *River of Women*, 2005, in the Tate collection. It is important to note that China's socio-cultural landscape diverges significantly from Western societies' and feminist movements. In China, the pervasive influence of traditional patriarchal culture shapes female artists' personal experiences as well as their aspirations for women's rights and equal status. Female Chinese artists approach women's issues through a distinctly Chinese lens rather than adhering strictly to Western ideological '-isms' and feminist methodologies. This perspective is often characterised in the West as a "compromised" stance on freedom and rights, a charge that to some extent reflects the nuanced and multifaceted nature of these artists' engagement with gender-related issues in the Chinese context.[6]

Myriad women's issues permeate contemporary Chinese society. These include the neglect of female gender identity; the objectification of women; the assignment of women's value based on male perspectives; the perpetuation of traditional stereotypes of femininity and sexuality (often propagated through both traditional thinking and "Chinternet" online platforms); complexities arising in intergenerational relationships; gender inequalities persisting within both family and society; the under-representation and limited acknowledgement of women and female artists;, and the absence of understanding and safeguarding of feminist groups within contemporary culture. These multifaceted issues demand serious consideration and action as, in the words of Monica Merlin, "all the contributions converge on avoiding reducing gender to one single concept while pointing at the complexity and fluidity of a wide set of notions which intersect it."[7]

SILHOUETTES OF CHINESE SOCIETY

The phenomenon of gender objectification in traditional paper-cutting arts, where male and female figures are metaphorically transformed into animals or plants – the imagery of "mouse eating grapes," "fish playing with lotus" and "snake coiling around rabbit" – made such an impression on me that I have adopted many of these features and techniques in my own paper-cutting craft, employing vivid crimson hues in traditional patterns.

In my work, I seek to extract and transform the traditional symbols of gender and sexuality in traditional Chinese paper-cutting and weave absurd stories around them, portraying the gendered issues that still affect Chinese women through a process of allegorical narrative.

My first story, originating in traditional paper-cuts featuring "mouse eating grapes." In this tale, grapes symbolise fecundity in women, while the mouse signifies masculinity. Progressively transforming traditional grape paper cuttings into character portraits, I extracted an endless procession of mice from the grape images. Within this narrative, Mickey Mouse, emblematic of Western culture, coexists with traditional mouse motifs, implying conflicts in the subjectivity and ideology of the protagonist.

In the era of globalisation, numerous male labourers migrate from rural China to urban centres and overseas for employment. At the same time, women, constrained by traditional norms, are compelled to become part of the "left behind" demographic.[8] The story culminates in my contemporary portrayal of "mouse eating grapes" within today's societal context.

My second story derives from the theme of "fish playing with lotus." Similar to the first story, the lotus represents women capable of bearing many children, while fish symbolise men. This traditional paper-cutting narrative depicts heterosexual activities. I expanded this story to narrate the birth of a girl amidst lotus flowers and her journey of gender awakening and encounters while growing up accompanied by fish.

Figure 5. Eva Ding,
I am not a Tool for Carrying on the Family Lineage, 2023.
Detail of story 1 – *Mouse Eating Grapes.*

Figure 6. Eva Ding,
I am not a Tool for Carrying on the Family Lineage, 2023.
Detail of story 2 – *Fish Playing with Lotus*.

Sexual assault remains a hidden issue and, even in contemporary China, societal and institutional protection for survivors of sexual assault remains inadequate. From abuse in schools and workplaces to marital rape, the patriarchal mindset of Chinese culture continues to perpetuate traditional notions that wearing revealing clothing or nighttime outings justifies sexual assault. China needs the #MeToo movement, but government suppression of and resistance to feminist developments remain significant barriers to women's quest for equal rights.

My third story originates in the traditional paper-cutting motif "snake coiling around rabbit," which was discussed above. Here, I interpret the snake pattern as a symbol of wealth, as in traditional Chinese culture, and introduce a potted plant with clusters of four leaves. The four-leaved plant and the symbol of wealth represent complementary aspects of positive and negative paper-cutting. As the potted plant slowly grows, it symbolises the girl's ongoing wealth accumulation. Beneath the surface of a narrative about a woman's fall and the exploitation of beauty and sexual relationships in order to amass personal wealth, there may lie some profound reflections on gender structures in Chinese society.

Figure 7. Eva Ding,
I am not a Tool for Carrying on the Family Lineage,
2023. Detail of story 3 –
Snake Coiling around Rabbit.

As I began to explore this traditional Chinese folk-art form this year, the more I read and researched, the more it felt like I was taking an historical snapshot of Chinese society. Page by page, the story of paper cutting records the developmental journey of various ethnic groups with similar cultural backgrounds across different regions, akin to an ethnographic study. History seemed to unfold before my eyes, repeatedly following seemingly familiar yet elusive patterns, until suddenly I was powerfully reminded of Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.[9]

Like the novel's exploration of history's cyclical yet unpredictable nature, my reflections on Chinese culture, feminism and the uncertain future drew parallels with the intricate tapestry of time and events that unfold in the small town that features in Marquez's book. Is human existence, from the past into the future, predetermined or accidental? The novel's magical realism, which blurs the line between reality and fantasy, also reflects the complexity and uncertainty of the human experience, much like the intricate interplay of history and culture I am contemplating – a poignant reminder of our world's intricate and enigmatic character and of our place within it. In my cuttings, I have incorporated history into irregularly shaped red cardboard pieces, folded and extended page by page, creating narratives that depict the chance existence of an individual within history, while also reflecting the memories – cultural and personal – carried by most Chinese people.

In the end, my work involved paper cutting combined with abstract expression. Bamboo – a cultural symbol transformed from a structural material and passed down for thousands of years – embodies qualities of integrity, resilience and devotion. In one of my pieces, such material becomes a point of contention within the cultural framework. Random and irrational, a thicket of bamboo poles constitutes incomplete entities, and through subtle combinations of unbalanced forms made from sanitary pad paper – which is inherently linked to the female experience, particularly the bodily aspects of womanhood, menstruation and the societal taboos and stigmas surrounding them – creates a three-dimensional Chinese landscape painting. I render the white sanitary pad paper with ink splashes like a traditional Chinese *shan-shui* painting, imagining myself wandering amidst a majestic landscape while creating, trampling and rebelling against the historical tradition where Chinese women were limited to painting vegetation. Through this work, I was experimenting with a fusion of traditional Chinese folk-art forms and traditional Chinese scroll painting, shaping a collision between Chinese art and contemporary Western sculptural art seen through a feminist lens.

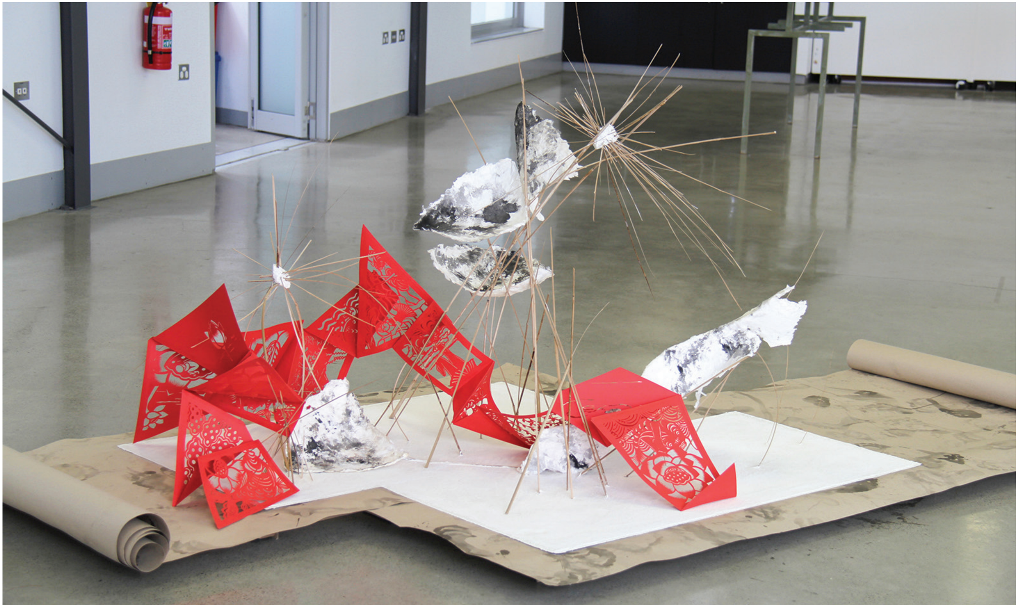


Figure 8. Eva Ding, *I am not a Tool for Carrying on the Family Lineage*, 2023. Installation images.

REFLECTIONS

Unlike Western feminism, which gradually evolved from a foundation of individualistic democratic thought, China's journey has been an experimental attempt to transition directly from feudalism to socialism. This transition has lacked the awakening of independent autonomy and the support of democratic ideals. When women in collectivist-minded China lack independent awareness and freedom of thought, all the issues that feminism seeks to address – equal rights across various facets of society – are essentially rendered inconsequential. Conversely, when autonomy is mistakenly understood as a lifestyle of independence and freedom as a depoliticised form of self-help, it fails to square up to collective action and exacerbates the sense of vulnerability and loneliness felt by each individual.[10] While my experiences in New Zealand have granted me the freedom of self-expression, I cannot shake off the burden – "the burden of ideology" that "is located in its complexities and dilemmas."[11] Detaching from responsibility is like running away from my identity and ridiculing those still in distress, akin to a survivor who, leaping from the sinking *Titanic* onto a lifeboat, exclaims, "Look, I am still alive!"

How will traditional culture transform itself in the face of the globalisation that is such a major factor in contemporary development processes? Will China gradually integrate with the world during the process of globalisation, or will it become increasingly isolated in a new wave of nationalism? Will Chinese women awaken to their independent individualities, endowed with freedom and democratic thinking, as the social and political landscape transforms (if it transforms), or will they struggle, caught in the zone between traditional and modern consciousness?

Chinese women have been uniquely shaped by both traditional culture and the distortions brought about by globalisation. It is as if, when reflecting on my past, half my experience has been endowed with my grandmother's gentle yet steadfast traditional cultural education, and the other half is marked by my self-transforming exploration of the impact of Western culture following immigration. Navigating the terrain of feminism in contemporary China's intricate political and cultural milieu remains challenging. Chinese female artists, over the years and within the context of a post-socialist, globalised China, have charted a course in order to discover an appropriate mode of expression that aligns with their convictions. This journey reflects an ongoing exploration aimed at confronting the complexities of feminism in the dynamic landscape of contemporary China.

Eva Ding is currently studying for her MFA in sculpture at the Dunedin School of Art. Her art practice focuses on Chinese women's gender status in cultural traditions and in the development of globalised modernity. Her process of approaching Feminism reflects her intersected identities as an immigrant living in New Zealand for ten years.

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