

An Analysis of the Compositional Forms and Value Dimensions of Qiang Ethnic Pattern Paper Cutting

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Abstract: *Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting serves as a key source of motifs for Qiang embroidery and clothing decoration, embodying the needlework skills passed down through generations by Qiang women. With its rich compositional forms and profound cultural significance, it combines decorative value with ethnic identity. In the daily needlework practices of Qiang women, pattern paper-cutting serves not only as a template for embroidery but also as a creative act that combines decoration and practical use, embodying unique feminine sentiments, cultural contributions and artisanal skill. Based on fieldwork and physical analysis, this article takes Qiang pattern paper cutting as its subject to explore its compositional forms and multiple dimensions of value, with a particular focus on the transmission of skills and the cultural roles of Qiang women within the integrated process of cutting, embroidering and using these creations. The research aims to broaden the scope of Qiang cultural studies, assist in the preservation and transmission of this ethnic folk craft, and deepen public understanding of the Qiang people's multicultural existence.*

Keywords: *Qiang ethnic; pattern paper-cutting; compositional forms; cultural significance*

1. Introduction

Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting serving both decorative and utilitarian purposes, features unique compositional forms whilst embodying profound cultural significance. With its distinct decorative qualities and prominent ethnic identity, it not only defines the unique character of Qiang embroidery and adorns traditional Qiang attire, but also silently interprets the Qiang people's cultural ethos and historical memory. Regarding research into Qiang paper-cutting, scholars have achieved certain results in areas such as culture, art, religion and village community surveys; however, research specifically focused on pattern paper-cutting remains superficial, with a particular lack of exploration into its compositional forms, cultural significance and value. Yet it is precisely these forms and values that hold irreplaceable research significance for a comprehensive understanding of Qiang culture.

2. An Overview of Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting

The Qiang people are one of the oldest ethnic groups within the Chinese nation. With a relatively small population and no written records, their culture is documented, passed down and disseminated through oral traditions, song and dance, customs, and folk arts. The ancient art of paper cutting, deeply rooted in Qiang regions, is primarily used for daily life, rituals and decoration. It encompasses the production and daily life of the Qiang people, as well as folk rituals and seasonal celebrations, serving as a vehicle for Qiang folk culture and ethnic beliefs. Pattern paper-cutting used in daily life, functioning as 'patterns' or 'backgrounds' to provide designs for embroidery and clothing decoration, constitute the vast majority of paper-cutting works and are representative of Qiang pattern paper cutting. (Figure 1) The 5.12 Wenchuan Earthquake caused a degree of damage to the material culture of the Qiang people, and Qiang paper cutting was also affected to some extent. At the same time, with the acceleration of modernisation, changes in the lifestyle of the younger generation, and the fragile chain of transmission of traditional handicraft skills, Qiang decorative paper-cutting faces the dilemma of being on the verge of extinction. The number of elderly artisans is dwindling year by year, and there is a lack of successors to carry on the tradition. Only a very small number of elderly Qiang artisans are still doing their utmost to safeguard this cultural treasure, persisting to this day by selling pattern paper-cutting (Figure 2).

Traditional patterns and the art of hand-cutting are quietly fading into oblivion. Interpreting this folk art, which embodies the Qiang people's reverence for nature and their ethnic wisdom, is not only an academic necessity but also a mission to rescue and preserve our cultural heritage.

The origins of Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting remain unverified, as there are no relevant literary records or archaeological evidence; however, preliminary inferences can be drawn from three aspects: the choice of materials in the early stages of this art form, the connections between the Qiang people and other ethnic groups, and the sisterly relationship between embroidery and pattern paper-cutting. Regarding the choice of materials in the early period, 'the use of non-paper materials such as muntjac hide, roe deer hide and sheepskin reflects cultural traces left over from the ancient Qiang people's hunting era',^[1] 'and cut animal hides were discovered in an ancient tomb in Puxi Township, Li County, Sichuan, dating back approximately 2,000 years'.^[2] The author also discovered physical examples of patterned animal skins during fieldwork, indicating that pattern-cutting had already begun in the hunting era, as shown in (Figure 3); regarding ethnic connections, Ge Weihang once described how "at times, Qiang women would embroider Han-style patterns on their cuffs and aprons",^[3] Wang Mingke, in *《The Qiang Between the Han and the Tibetans》* records that "the custom of embroidering patterns on clothing and footwear is more prevalent in regions that have been more Sinicised or Tibetanised ; Furthermore, Han-style paper-cut patterns had "already reached a considerable level of sophistication by the Tang and Song dynasties, and by the Ming and Qing dynasties, folk paper-cut and embroidery patterns were already widespread throughout the country";^[4] particularly as "during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Qiang embroidery enjoyed great renown",^[5] "The existence of a large number of physical examples of Qiang embroidery dating from the Ming and Qing periods indicates that embroidery was already extremely prevalent in Qiang regions at that time."^[6] Based on these three aspects of analysis, it can be concluded that Qiang pattern paper-cutting likely existed as early as the hunting era; influenced by Han and Tibetan cultures, they reached their zenith during the Ming and Qing periods, developed in tandem with embroidery, and have been passed down to the present day.

There is a saying among the Qiang people: 'First learn to cut, second learn to sew, third learn to embroider pattern patterns on cloth shoes.' The 'cutting' referred to here means cutting out patterns; it is a craft that all Qiang women must master, though a very small number of men also take part. In their view, paper serves merely as a medium, whilst the act of paper cutting itself is a form of unfettered creativity. Cutting out 'flowers' and 'patterns' provides design references for embroidery; consequently, in the folk tradition of the Qiang region, it is commonly referred to as 'flower-cutting', 'patterns', 'templates', 'flower-patterns', 'flower paper' or 'flower templates'. In the Qiang language, the pronunciation 'Na qie' signifies embroidered paper-cutting, whilst 'Bu' denotes a template. Academic circles have yet to establish a definitive term for Qiang pattern paper-cutting, which is a form of paper-cutting art used to assist embroidery practice. Common terms include 'embroidery patterns', 'embroidery templates', 'embroidery drafts', 'embroidery pattern paper-cutting', 'patterns' and 'pattern paper-cutting'. In his work, Zhang Daoyi^[7] collectively refers to this type of paper-cutting as "embroidery patterns" or "folk embroidery paper-cuttings". Combining the frequency of the terms "pattern" and "design" with the purpose of the paper-cuttings, this paper will use the term "Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting" for the purposes of discussion.



Figure 1: Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting and embroidery.



Figure 2: An elderly artisan cutting paper patterns.

Figure 3: Animal-skin shoe sample.

3. The Compositional Forms of Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting

3.1. Materials Used in pattern paper cutting

The materials selected for Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting are natural, adhering to the principles of frugality and making full use of resources. Taking the literal meaning of the term ‘paper-cutting’, one might instinctively assume that paper is the sole material used; however, throughout the ancient history of Qiang ethnic pattern paper-cutting, materials such as leaves, bark, bamboo shoots, animal hides, silkworm cocoons and fabric have been employed. Legend has it that the earliest ancient Qiang ethnic pattern paper cuttings were created using leaves as a medium; later, materials such as animal hides were employed. Most remarkably, during my field research, I discovered that even today, a very small number of paper-cutting artisans still use silkworm cocoons as a material for their designs, as the cocoons can be peeled layer by layer, facilitating the replication of patterns. Fabric is cut so that the patterns can be directly sewn onto clothing for decoration, which is the most convenient method of adornment. According to the recollections of elderly paper-cutting artisans, these materials were commonly used by their grandparents’ generation; it was only with social development and the increasing abundance of resources that paper began to be adopted. Paper is regarded as precious by the Qiang people; opening a book of patterns kept by Qiang women reveals newspapers, exercise book paper, kraft paper, and straw paper... Any paper suitable for cutting out patterns is included, with even everyday items such as noodle wrappers, cement sack paper, advertising posters and wrapping paper being reused. Nowadays, most tend to favour waxed paper, Xuan paper and kraft paper; as kraft paper is resilient and facilitates embroidery, patterned paper cuttings made from this material are more commonly seen.

3.2. Themes of pattern Paper cutting

As the Qiang people have no written language, pattern paper cutting serves not only as a decorative art but also as a unique symbol that embodies their ethnic memory and cultural identity. The motifs have been passed down from generation to generation, undergoing constant innovation in the process. Centred on the belief that ‘all things possess a spirit’, they have formed a stylised yet metaphorical system of patterns. The motifs of Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting primarily feature natural elements, adhering to fixed conventions guided by specific symbolic meanings. Clouds, sheep’s heads, spiral patterns and ram’s-horn flowers form the most fundamental archetypal motifs. Centring on these core elements, Qiang artisans freely and imaginatively combine them with common elements from daily life—such as clouds, mountains, trees and grass, as well as flowers, fruits, animals and insects—to create a vast array of richly varied composite patterns. These patterns are widely used in the embroidery and decoration of clothing, footwear, headwear and aprons, serving not only to embellish everyday items but also to express reverence for and prayers to the spirits of nature. Nature worship is the most distinctive feature of Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting; regardless of how the themes may vary, its essence remains a means of intimate dialogue between humanity and nature. In terms of artistic style, Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting is simple and naive, at times embracing a realistic charm, at others employing bold exaggeration and distortion; the forms are vivid and free, without a deliberate pursuit of meticulous precision. Yet, regardless of how forms may evolve, what remains constant is the Qiang people’s enduring commitment to connecting with nature and celebrating life in their own unique way, firmly believing that all things

possess a spirit. It is precisely this profound and unadorned faith that renders Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting a uniquely captivating treasure of ethnic art.

3.3. Composition in pattern Paper cutting

The composition of Qiang ethnic pattern paper cutting appears haphazard but is in fact highly refined. During my fieldwork, I observed that paper-cutting artists habitually mark the paper with their fingernails or the tips of their scissors before cutting, indicating that they possess a keen sense of composition. Composition typically adopts a bird's-eye view, transforming objects and scenery from three-dimensional forms into two-dimensional images,^[8] organising the visual content for decorative purposes. The primary compositional methods include repetitive arrangements under scattered-point perspective and compositions combining primary and secondary elements. In the repetitive arrangement composition, the images are linked in an orderly fashion, imparting a strong sense of decorative beauty and rhythmic cadence; the composition combining primary and secondary elements, meanwhile, centres on the theme to be expressed, emphasising the main subject whilst downplaying the supporting figures. These two compositional forms enable the decorative nature of the paper-cutting itself to transcend its narrative function.^[9] Overall, the composition of Qiang ethnic pattern paper-cuttings is cohesive, full and rich in variation, with diverse forms, exhibiting the following characteristics:

Firstly, the composition is holistic, pursuing a form-fitting approach and presenting a scattered, flat visual effect. Qiang pattern paper-cutting often constructs its compositional framework based on the requirements of clothing embroidery and decorative areas. Centred on the main motif, it combines other patterns to create a scattered, flat visual effect, fully showcasing the visual relationship between the whole and the details, as well as between the main subject and the supporting elements.

Secondly, the compositions are full and balanced, skilfully adapting to the form to create momentum and rich variation. The pattern paper-cutting for Yun Yun shoes are the most typical example of this adaptation to form. Their composition is form-adaptive, full, cohesive, balanced and rich in detailed variation; the connections between individual shapes are orderly and unbroken. While retaining the outline of the Yun Yun shoes, they form a form-adaptive, repetitive arrangement characteristic of the Qiang people.

Thirdly, the compositional forms are rich and harmonise movement and stillness. In terms of the application of decorative paper-cutting patterns to embroidery, there are three main types: standalone patterns, symmetrical patterns and composite patterns. Standalone patterns extract the overall or partial contour features of an object and present them in a balanced, single-form manner; symmetrical patterns are formed by combining standalone patterns into symmetrical arrangements, giving rise to two-way repeats, four-way repeats, form-adaptive patterns and corner patterns, all of which align with the decorative areas; Composite patterns feature diverse compositional forms, primarily employing formal principles such as variation and unity, rhythm and cadence, symmetry and balance. For instance, the upper section of a waistband might feature continuous patterns, the middle section a medallion, and the lower section or edges corner motifs, with the patterns complementing and enhancing one another. (Figure 4)

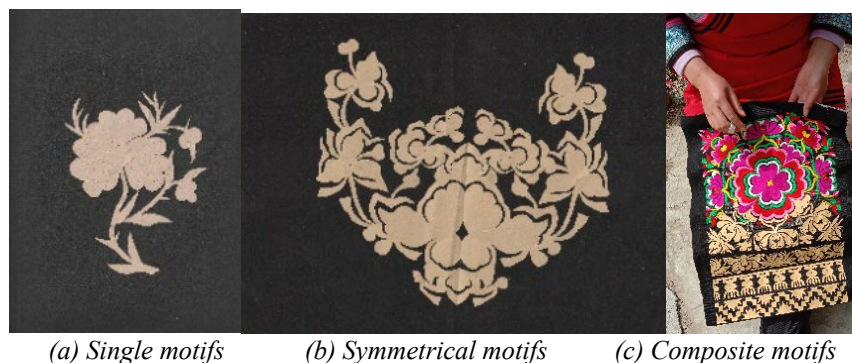


Figure 4: Compositional forms in Qiang pattern paper cutting.

3.4. The Colours of pattern Paper cutting

The choice of colours in Qiang pattern paper cutting is not subject to any rigid rules; the final colour scheme is determined by the availability of materials, with white and earthy yellow being the most

common. This colour palette is deeply influenced by the Qiang people's living environment, their belief in the natural world, and their historical memory. The Qiang have revered white for generations, viewing it as a symbol of the sacred and the pure; white holds a lofty status. In clothing and embroidery, white patterned paper is regarded as the colour that imbues the embroidery with a 'soul' during the embroidery process; consequently, white paper has become a key choice for patterned paper. By comparison, the use of ochre stems more from practical considerations. As ochre-coloured kraft paper is exceptionally durable, it can be reused repeatedly during the embroidery process without tearing easily. As a template for embroidery, earth-coloured kraft paper patterns can guide the thread more precisely; even after being pierced repeatedly by thousands of stitches, the design remains intact, greatly facilitating women's daily needlework. Beyond this, embroiderers are remarkably flexible in their choice of paper colour. Readily available materials such as newspapers, exercise books and scrap paper can all be used for cutting; plain-coloured paper is by no means the only option. This tradition of selecting colours according to purpose and adapting techniques to materials profoundly reflects the essential characteristic of Qiang Ethnic pattern Paper-cutting: the dual purpose of 'decoration and utility'. Colour is not the ultimate goal of aesthetic expression; rather, serving the practical function of embroidery is at its core. It is precisely this material-driven logic of colour that imbues the paper-cutting with wisdom amidst its simplicity and reveals the craftsmanship within the everyday.

4. The Dimensions of Value in Qiang Ethnic pattern Paper cutting

4.1. Decorative and Practical Uses: Enhancing Aesthetics and Guiding Practical Applications

Decoration is a human instinct, it springs from every healthy mind and is present in every corner of life. ^[10] Qiang ethnic group paper-cutting is a vivid embodiment of this instinct, serving both a strong decorative purpose and a practical function in guiding embroidery; it can truly be described as combining decorative and practical uses. With a pair of scissors and a sheet of paper, Qiang women use their scissors as a brush, creating pattern designs on paper and cutting out patterns that are bold, elegant and rich in symbolism. These patterns possess a strong artistic appeal; their natural beauty is simple yet moving, and their lines are concise yet full of vitality. Even when viewed on their own, they serve as outstanding decorative pieces, exuding a rich sense of local character and ethnic charm. At the same time, these paper-cut patterns serve as 'templates', providing scope for secondary creation in embroidery and guiding the colour schemes and stitch patterns. The patterned paper, incorporated into the embroidery, is adorned alongside the thread on everyday garments such as dresses, shoes, headscarves, belts, sashes, aprons and belly wraps. This not only adds a three-dimensional quality to the embroidery, making the patterns richer and more vivid, but also enhances the durability of the garments, extending their lifespan. Whilst beautifying daily life, patterned paper-cutting serves an extremely practical purpose, fully embodying the wisdom and talent of Qiang women in creating and applying beauty within their ordinary lives. Between every cut and every sheet of paper lies both an artistic expression and a foundation for daily life, showcasing the Qiang people's simple yet profound aesthetic philosophy.

4.2. Heartfelt Connection: An Expression of Emotion and a Source of Spiritual Solace

The art of paper-cutting is often referred to as the 'art of emotion', brimming with the creator's genuine feelings and aspirations. The Qiang ethnic group's decorative paper-cutting is a vivid embodiment of this art created for everyday life; like other forms of paper cutting, it adheres to the principle that 'every design carries a meaning, and every meaning is auspicious', whilst also serving as a vital bridge for social interaction among the local people. Paper-cutting artisans sell their patterns and guide embroiderers in their work; they often gather in small groups to exchange techniques. Whilst fostering camaraderie, they also pass on the ancient craft of patterned paper-cutting. As symbolic motifs, these designs are imbued with the sincere emotions of Qiang women, embodying the Qiang people's prayers and blessings for life, and reflecting their dreams that transcend reality. ^[11] They express the essence of history, culture and life aspirations in the form of paper-cut patterns, manifesting as visual compositions such as 'Flower Bells Like Brocade', 'Moths Playing Among Flowers' and 'Many Children, Much Prosperity'. The densely arranged compositions reflect the people's simple aspirations for prosperity and fulfilment, as well as their aesthetic sensibilities. ^[12] Flowers, fruits, vegetables and vines—devoid of roots and leaves—are intricately interwoven, defying the laws of natural growth yet forming a distinctive artistic language. These patterns not only adorn and beautify daily life but also embody hopes for prosperity, peace, good fortune and happiness. Within every cut and every sheet of paper lies the Qiang people's yearning for a better life and their spiritual attachment to their ethnic beliefs, making

pattern paper cutting a unique artistic medium that carries both emotion and culture.

4.3. *Craftsmanship: Creative Wisdom and Artistic Skill*

Folk paper cutting has always adhered to the principle of combining decoration with practicality. From the perspective of creative wisdom, the design philosophy behind Qiang ethnic paper-cutting embodies the ingenuity of frugality, making the most of available materials, saving time and labour, reimagining designs, using craftsmanship to convey deeper meanings, striving for perfection, and preserving cultural heritage.

Firstly, there is the creative wisdom of frugality and making the most of available materials. Pattern paper cutting utilises limited tools and readily available materials to convey the richest decorative meanings through the simplest and most unadorned forms of expression. Meticulously crafted patterns adhere to the principle of ‘making the most of available materials’ in relation to daily life; they are intended not only for decoration but also for practical use.

Secondly, there is the craftsmanship wisdom of saving time and labour, and achieving efficiency and convenience. To facilitate replication and repeated use, multiple patterns are produced in a single paper-cutting session, saving both time and labour. The paper templates provide precise guidance for embroidery; by simply following the template, the work can be completed with focus and efficiency.

Furthermore, they preserve scope for secondary design in the embroidery. Most paper-cut patterns are monochromatic with clear motifs, leaving room for colour coordination and the design of embroidery layers; thus, the same pattern yields different results when executed by different embroiderers. During my field research, I observed that the embroiderers have also boldly experimented with intentionally exposed-edge embroidery (exclusively for non-woven fabric patterns) and machine embroidery, thereby innovating the expressive forms of embroidery. (Figure 5 and Figure 6)

Finally, there is the artistry of using craftsmanship to convey cultural values, the pursuit of perfection, and the ingenuity of cultural preservation. The deliberately left-behind knife marks, openwork sections and guide lines in the paper-cutting patterns are all designed to provide precise guidance, enabling the embroidery to be executed with ever-greater precision in accordance with the design. Adorned together on garments, paper-cutting and embroidery not only embody Qiang culture but also become deeply embedded in people’s daily lives. This represents a profound fusion of culture and craftsmanship, using skill to convey philosophy and ensuring the living transmission of Qiang culture.



Figure 5: Embroidery with exposed pattern edges.



Figure 6: Sewing machine embroidery.

4.4. *Preserving the Craft: Feminine Virtues and Cultural Contributions*

Folk paper-cutting is a simple yet magnificent creation of rural women. [13] Whilst Qiang Ethnic pattern Paper cutting are used as templates, they essentially embody the fine qualities of Qiang women and their contributions to cultural heritage. These rustic patterns are imbued with their wisdom, dexterity, and a resilient spirit characterised by a love of learning and life. Just as a single artist’s work on the same theme, composition, or similar design combinations exhibits both established conventions and flexible variation, this reflects, on the one hand, the artist’s constant refinement and pursuit of perfection; on the other, it serves to cater to the diverse preferences of embroiderers. Most precious of all, it embodies the simple yet resilient qualities of women. During my fieldwork, I observed that the women engaged in paper-cutting are eager to learn and highly skilled; though many have endured hardships, they remain self-reliant, kind-hearted and optimistic. From a young age, through oral instruction from elders and by

osmosis, in order to master the art of paper-cutting, they overcame limited resources. After completing household chores and farm work, they would use their spare time and moments of leisure to practise repeatedly with sticks or charcoal on sandy ground or walls, teaching themselves or seeking guidance from others on paper-cutting and embroidery techniques. Engaging in patterned paper-cutting is not only a source of income to supplement the family budget, but also a medium for showcasing their exquisite craftsmanship; moreover, it embodies their passion for, dedication to, and steadfast commitment to this art form. Using scissors instead of a pen, they skilfully and thoughtfully chronicle their lives, ethnic culture and history. The designs and meanings of these patterns rely entirely on them to commit to memory, pass on through oral tradition, and cut into 'patterns', ensuring their transmission to the present day. Their quiet perseverance, much like the pattern Paper cutting itself, has shaped the art of embroidery whilst 'concealing' their own identities. This embodies the very essence of Qiang Ethnic pattern Paper cutting and the unpretentious, intelligent character of Qiang women. They may be said to 'cut' the myriad things of heaven and earth whilst 'guarding' the art within their hearts through the seasons; they are, without a doubt, contributors to a living, dynamic culture.

5. Conclusion

Qiang Ethnic pattern Paper cutting is an integral part of Qiang ethnic culture. Drawing inspiration from daily life and serving practical purposes, it places equal emphasis on ornamentation and utility, profoundly reflecting the coexistence of Qiang folk art and the necessities of life, as well as the principle of creating objects for practical use. The composition of patterned paper-cutting—from the selection of materials, themes and composition to the choice of colours, and its application in embroidery—adheres to the principles of naturalness, efficiency and the pursuit of perfection. To enhance the efficiency and quality of embroidery, artisans incorporate wisdom regarding economy, time-saving, labour-saving and redesign into the entire process of patterned paper-cutting. These rustic patterned paper cuttings are not only beautiful and practical, but also embody the Qiang people's aspirations for a better life, as well as their reverence for nature, humanistic spirit and ethnic beliefs. They are, at the same time, a manifestation of the resilience of Qiang women and an outstanding cultural contribution. Most precious of all is that they have been passed down to the present day, continuing to serve both decorative and utilitarian purposes, and stand as a living exemplar of Qiang culture.

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