

# A Cross-cultural Study of Foshan Paper-cut Art

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## Abstract

Foshan paper-cut boasts a wide variety of styles, extensive subject matters, and rich cultural connotations. During the process of “Chinese culture going global”, the translation of Foshan paper-cut holds significant historical importance. Nevertheless, the translation of Foshan paper-cut has not received adequate attention. There exist certain issues in the translation of Foshan paper-cut culture, such as the deficiency of cultural elements, generalization of the translated content, and ineffective translation methods, etc. This requires translators to select the most appropriate translation approach based on the different paper-cut corpus and adhere to the translation principles of effect-first and centering on the target audience. Additionally, we can also establish a parallel corpus and a network database to promote Foshan paper-cut art in multiple ways and facilitate cross-cultural exchanges.

**Keywords:** Foshan paper-cut art, cross-cultural study, translation, problems, countermeasures

## 1. Introduction

Foshan paper-cut art, a significant representative of Lingnan culture, was incorporated into the first batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list. It showcases boundless artistic allure through its profound cultural heritage, rich expression techniques, variegated artistic content, and abundant national customs. Amidst the backdrop of cultural integration in the Greater Bay Area, it is profoundly necessary to study the cross-cultural exchange of Foshan paper-cut art to facilitate the excellent traditional culture of Foshan to “go international”, enhance the cultural connotation of the city, and enable the world to acquire a deeper acquaintance with Foshan culture.

This paper endeavors to explore the cultural

connotations of Foshan paper-cut art and investigate the current state of the translation of Foshan paper-cut art, with the aim of identifying the problems in the cross-cultural exchange of Foshan paper-cut art and exploring the strategy for the cross-cultural exchange of Foshan paper-cut art, which holds considerable strategic significance for contributing to the cross-cultural exchange of Foshan paper-cut art and promoting the cultural cause of Foshan.

## 2. Culture Connotations of Foshan Paper-cut

### 2.1 Introduction to Foshan Paper-cut Culture

Foshan paper-cut boasts a long history, having originated in the Song Dynasty and flourished during the Ming and Qing dynasties. In 2006, Foshan paper-cut was enlisted in the first batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list.

Foshan paper-cut is classified into four types, namely pure color paper-cut, lining paper-cut, writing material paper-cut, and copper chisel paper-cut, based on diverse materials. It can further be divided into nine categories, including pure color material, paper lining, copper lining, dyeing material, woodcut overprinting material, copper writing material, silver writing material, paper writing material, and copper chisel material. The paper-cut techniques are categorized into two types: cutting and engraving. The thematic content embodies the meanings of blessing, prosperity, longevity, and auspiciousness, and the eternal theme pertains to auspiciousness, happiness, blessing, exorcism, gods and Buddhas, and longevity and so on. After hundreds of years of inheritance and accumulation, Foshan paper-cut has developed its distinctive characteristics and system, emerging as a renowned folk art within Foshan's traditional culture.

## 2.2 Culture Connotations of Foshan Paper-cut Art

Foshan paper-cut art constitutes a component of Foshan folk culture, carrying the humanistic spirit and ideological pulse of the Foshan people and possessing rich and profound cultural connotations.

### 2.2.1 Foshan Paper-cut Art Embodying the National Spirit of Foshan People

The paper-cut art expresses the thoughts and ideas of the Chinese nation in a plain and simplistic manner. For instance, paper-cutters prefer to select the images of tigers and lions to convey people's confidence and aspiration to conquer nature, and utilize the images of cows to represent diligence, dedication, and pride. The themes of "sweeping the five evils" and "Zhong Kui" demonstrate people's praise and admiration for truth, goodness, and beauty, and the image construction of flying geese, deer, and rabbits expresses the vitality and vigor of life.

### 2.2.2 Foshan Paper-cut Art Reflecting the Social Life of People in Foshan

As people employ different purposes and choose diverse themes, paper-cut art extends to all facets of social life. It can be utilized for weddings, birthdays, housewarming ceremonies, social and foreign exchange gifts, and can also be employed for the decoration of residences, hotels, shopping malls, cultural entertainment venues, and even as an art collection. Paper-cut itself is no longer a single picture or flat display but has evolved towards

three-dimensional, multi-dimensional group paintings, series of pictures, and comic book orientations.

### 2.2.3 Foshan Paper-cut Art Showcasing the Pursuit of the Ideal Life of the Foshan People

Foshan paper-cut art conveys people's expectations and desires for a better life, and the images in some paper-cut works have become symbols of good fortune and favorable cultural symbols. For example, *Nian Nian You Yu* (looking forward to an increasingly prosperous life every year), *Wu Gu Feng Deng* (abundant grains), and *Zhao Cai Jin Bao* (wealth); and Gods of Harmony, Gods of Happiness, Wealth and Longevity; Guan Gong, Generals with Sword (for driving out evil spirits), and so on.

The unique folk language and strong themes of paper-cut art reflect people's longing and wishes for a better life.

## 3. Problems in the Translation of Foshan Paper-cut Art

### 3.1 Lack of Complete and Systematic Translation Materials of Foshan Paper-cut Art

Several books on the atlas of Foshan paper-cut collected by the Foshan Library, such as *Foshan Paper-cut Atlas* edited by Liang Shiyu, *He Yan Paper-cut Art* edited by Xie Zhongyuan, and *Cai Jian Jin Xiu* edited by Huang Lixia and Liang Shiyu, have no English translations. Several monographs on Foshan paper-cut culture, such as *Foshan Paper-cut* by Liang Genxiang, *Research on Foshan Paper-cut Art* by Yan Mingxia, *China Foshan Paper-cut Culture* and *Foshan Copper Chisel Paper-cut* by Guan Hong, except for the English version of *China Foshan Paper-cut Culture* by Guan Hong, the other monographs lack corresponding English versions. Additionally, the Foshan intangible cultural heritage database network platform also features the introduction of Foshan paper-cut art, but there is no English comparison.

### 3.2 Problems in the Existing English Translations of Paper-cut Art

#### 3.2.1 Cultural Deficiency

The translations fail to accurately reflect the connotations of folk paper-cut culture, and there is a problem of cultural deficiency. Paper-cut patterns often employ artistic expression techniques such as exaggeration, homophony, and metaphor to express people's inner blessings or expectations. Paper-cut in folk customs, wedding customs, birthday and

funeral activities all convey distinct cultural customs. For instance, the Qing Dynasty copper chisel paper-cut “Wealth and Peace” from Foshan depicts a peony in the center of a vase, with bats, the sun and moon fairies on both sides, and two cranes beside the vase, surrounded by straight ripples as lace. This paper-cut holds its folk meaning: the peony symbolizes wealth, and the combination of the vase and peony implies wealth and peace. The sun, moon, money, bats, cranes, etc., are all mascots, signifying years of age, happiness, peace, and auspiciousness. For such paper-cuts rich in cultural connotations, when communicating externally, if the cultural connotations are not translated and only the title is simply translated, the true meaning of paper-cut culture cannot be conveyed.

### 3.2.2 Generalized Content and Poor Translation Methods

The translation content is generalized, and the translation methods are poor and inadequate. Folk paper-cut culture serves as a mirror reflecting the times. Currently, most of the paper-cuts communicated to the outside world demonstrate support for the government and love for the people, red culture, ecological culture, and current political culture, presenting their connotations to the world in a detailed and comprehensive manner. Therefore, reflecting the contemporary value of paper-cut culture is an important task of translation as a cultural bridge. However, some of the English translations involved in the investigation are not smooth, and the sentence structure is chaotic, unable to clearly reflect the phenomenon referred to, and unable to showcase the beauty of paper-cut culture. Such translations not only fail to promote the exquisite paper-cut art culture but may even reduce its artistic value.

### 3.2.3 Lack of Professional Research on Foshan Paper-cut Translation

There is a dearth of translation research on Foshan paper-cut art. When using “Foshan paper-cut translation” as the keyword on the CNKI, the search results are zero. Therefore, the research on the translation of Foshan paper-cut needs to be significantly strengthened.

## 4. Countermeasures for the Translation of Foshan Paper-cut Art

### 4.1 Adhering to Two Translation Principles Guided by Communication Theories

#### 4.1.1 Principle of Effect-first

The principle of effect-first implies that in the process of English translation, factors such as the communication subject, communication content, communication media, and communication audience should be fully considered regarding their impact on the communication effect. Translators should effectively control these influencing factors in English translation to ensure that the translation is recognized by the target audience to the greatest extent and achieves a favorable communication effect.

#### 4.1.2 Principle of Centering on the Target Audience

According to the theory of communication, communication audiences possess subjective initiative when receiving information. They often seek specific information based on their own interests and needs to fulfill their own requirements. Therefore, in the translation of paper-cut art, the target audience should be placed in the central position, and the acceptance preferences and needs of the audience, as well as the reading expectations and habits of the text, should be fully taken into account.

### 4.2 Selecting Different Translation Methods Based on Different Corpora

The work of paper-cut art is tangible, which we term as “form”, in contrast to the “text” that describes, introduces, and studies it. In the process of translation, it is necessary to effectively translate the textual parts of paper-cut works, namely the title and description sections, and introduce them to the audience. This text may be the self-statement of the original creator of the paper-cut work or the interpretation of the cultural promoter of the work. In the process of translating the content and culture of the work, the following specific translation methods can be adopted: transliteration with annotations, amplification, transposition, eclectic translation, and complied translation.

Foshan paper-cut has a wide variety and extensive applications. In addition to the publicity translation of paper-cut works, there are also research works on paper-cut culture, production techniques, and other content, as well as the appreciation and publicity of the text. For these research texts that provide detailed introductions of Foshan paper-cut, the compiled

translation method can be adopted. That is, in the process of translation, the information needed and interested by the target language audience is selected for translation and introduction. Professor Wu Keyan (2011) also pointed out that in order to realize readers' recognition of intangible cultural heritage, emphasis should be placed on its origin, characteristics, forms of expression, historical and cultural values, and its protection should also be emphasized. Therefore, when translating the text of Foshan paper-cut research and appreciation, we should focus on the above content and adopt the method of compiled translation.

#### 4.3 Building a Parallel Corpus for Foshan's Paper-cut Translation

A parallel corpus is a bilingual/multilingual database consisting of the original text and its corresponding translations, including word, sentence, paragraph, and whole article. There are three types of parallel corpora based on translation direction: unidirectional, bidirectional, and multidirectional. Paper-cut, a traditional Chinese folk art of decoration, conveys the public's aspirations to bid farewell to the old and embrace the new, as well as to welcome blessings and auspicious omens. Typically created with bright red paper, these artworks symbolize prosperity and great wealth. As paper-cut art reflects various aspects of daily life and numerous cultural elements in China, Chinese paper-cuts are highly regarded internationally. Therefore, establishing a parallel corpus for traditional Chinese paper-cuts is particularly significant. The creation of a paper-cut corpus will facilitate the introduction of Chinese paper-cuts to foreign countries, enhance foreign understanding of traditional Chinese culture, help disseminate Chinese culture worldwide, and significantly enhance cross-cultural communication.

#### 4.4 Establishing a "Chinese-English Bilingual Paper-cut" Online Database

The author has observed that Foshan's intangible cultural heritage database has been preliminarily established, encompassing representative projects, inheritors, and bases of intangible cultural heritage in Foshan. The database also contains introductions to Foshan's paper-cut art yet lacks an English version. Consequently, establishing a bilingual database for Foshan's intangible cultural heritage or

paper-cut is imperative. The establishment of a Chinese-English online data platform will enhance the speed of information updates, broaden reader awareness, and significantly contribute to its effective global promotion.

#### 4.5 Multi-Channel Promotion of Foshan Paper-cut

To disseminate Foshan's paper-cut culture and more effectively present Foshan's cultural essence to foreign visitors, a booklet titled "Foshan Paper-cut Culture," compiled in both Chinese and English, can be created. This booklet should include an overview of Foshan paper-cut, its various styles, pictures of representative works, and the cultural significance of these works. It can be provided to Foshan's paper-cut inheritors, various tourist attractions, and institutions such as the Foshan Folk Art Research Society. Professional websites and media can be leveraged to promote Foshan's paper-cut culture. Additionally, the Foshan Museum and Foshan Lingnan Culture Research websites can be employed to standardize translation terminology related to paper-cut culture. Moreover, documentaries or promotional films can be produced on the craftsmanship, classification, and iconic works of Foshan paper-cut, utilizing film and television to introduce Foshan's paper-cut culture to the global stage.

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