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The Language Aspects of Chinese Papercuts

Florence Kuek Chee Wee

This article examines the intrinsic language aspects of 328 Chinese papercuts. It discusses the rich spectrum of the expressed language, allegory, symbols and imagery embedded in the Chinese papercuts.

Introduction

A recent archeological excavation in Yutian County of Xinjiang has brought to the world one of the oldest form of Chinese Papercuts in the shape of a rosette. Its history can be traced as far back to the period known as the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386-581A.D.) Nonetheless, Chinese paper cutting is an age-old handicraft of the Chinese people. One can easily detect thousands of themes and patterns presented in this type of simple, two-dimensional cuttings. Furthermore, one can detect that some Chinese characters or phrases are always presented in the Chinese papercuts. Thus, the Chinese papercuts can be examined as items that have captured the blueprints of Chinese culture, especially in the aspect of Chinese language. This short article seeks to help us examine the rich spectrum of the 'expressed languages' embedded in the Chinese papercuts.

Message on the Chinese Papercuts

Chinese papercuts vary according to their uses and functions. They can be classified as window decorations, wall decorations, gift decorations, embroidery patterns, door decorations, lantern decorations and ritual patterns. A total of 328 papercut samples from among 105 Chinese papercuts artists and collectors were examined and analysed. These samples were compiled, sorted and published by Qin Shijiao in the year 2000. Qin is the director of the first Chinese Papercuts Museum in China Huxia Jianzhi Bowuguan. He is also one of the members in the standing

committee of Zhongguo Mingjian Jianzhi Yanjiuhui, the Indigenous Chinese Papercuts Research Body in China.

The themes of marriage and long life are very commonly expressed in Chinese papercuts. Two Chinese characters, i.e. “*Xi*” (double happiness) and “*Shou*” (longevity) were frequently detected among the papercuts to express these themes. Among the collected samples, “*Xi*” appeared five (5) times only, probably because papercuts consisting “*Xi*” are too common among Chinese folk and thus they were not considered as collectible items. This Chinese character “*Xi*” comprises two components, i.e. “*Xi*” (happiness) and “*Xi*” (happiness). It signifies the blissfulness of both families of the bride and the groom with regard to the union of the newly wed couple as one entity.

Besides the happy occasion of marriage and wedding, long life is another theme often cherished by the Chinese people. The “*Shou*” appeared 25 times, either in its written character or in its implied form of a peach (“*shoutao*”). Indeed, prolonging one’s life and enjoying longevity in life has always been a dream of many Chinese since the olden days. The first emperor of China Qin Shiwang had sent many delegates to search all over his kingdom for such a panacea. A legendary story depicts Chang’er, a king’s concubine, who flew to the moon and has lived there till eternity after she had swallowed the longevity potion. Papercuts with the “*Xi*” characters only appear during wedding functions, whereas papercuts with the “*Shou*” characters are seen as auspicious ornamental items. They are visible throughout four seasons in all possible forms. These types of papercuts include the window decorations, gift decorations, wall decorations, door decorations, lantern decorations.

Among the papercuts, the Chinese character “*Ji*” (luck) appeared 23 times, mainly in its implied form of a rooster (“*ji*”). Historically, the Chinese have a fear and reverence of the divine being as expressed by Confucius: “*Tian he yan zai* (Alas! What’s the sky/heaven trying to reveal to us?)”. Fate and destiny were widely accepted as the natural law in the course of history. The uncertainty of the destiny of human history and the fate of oneself has drawn the Chinese to express their search for good fortune in the Chinese character “*Ji*”.

Closely tied to the character “*Ji*” are “*Xiang*” (soundness) and “*Shi*” (smooth sailing of things). The Chinese character “*Xiang*” appeared seven (7) times among the selected papercuts, mainly in its implied form of a goat (“*yang*”). An excellent piece of Chinese papercut gathered from the province of Hebei, China, depicts three goats flocking under the sun (“*yang*”). It highlights a Chinese saying, “*San Yang Kai Tai*”,

meaning the dawn of a new cosmic order and the return of an entirely good fortune". The Chinese character "*Shi*" appears two (2) times, both in its implied form of a persimmon fruit ("*shi*"). "*Shi*" takes the Chinese idiom of "*Shishi Ruyi*". Hence, Chinese papercuts with the imprint of "*Shi*" are seen as auspicious items in search of good fortune in all aspects of life, especially in one's career path.

"Wealth and prosperity" is an aged philosophy of people of all nations. The Chinese character "*Qian*" (money) appeared 14 times among the papercuts collected, in the implied form of a bronze coin ("*tongban*"). A related Chinese character "*Lu*" (wealth) appeared three (3) times, mostly in its implied form of a deer ("*lu*"). Besides, another related character "*Hou*" (high position in service) appeared 19 times, all in the implied forms of monkeys! Besides, "*Deng*" (a climb, an attempt to achieve high goals) is detected three (3) times among the selected papercuts, all in the implied forms of Chinese lanterns ("*deng*"). Combining "*Deng*" and "*Hou*" in one papercut, one's wishes of a successive career or life path are clearly expressed.

Yet, the above list is not exhaustive. There is another Chinese character which is more generic in usage, the "*Fu*" (blessedness, soundness) detected among the papercuts collected by Qin. "*Fu*" is one of the most commonly used Sinophiles and it usually takes its implied form of a bat ("*fu*"). When combining the five "*Fu*'s (symbolized by five bats) with a "*Show*", it carries the auspicious meaning of "*Wufu Pengshou*", i.e. five types of blessedness for people longevity, wealth, health, respect and good life.

Two connected symbols, i.e. the "*Yu*" and the "*Lian*" (Fish and lotus), are always detected in papercuts too. The "*Yu*" appeared 29 times while "*Lian*" appeared 18 times in the collection. The fish ("*yu*") is homonymously used to signify abundance and lotus ("*lian*") represents succession. The combination of a fish and a lotus or the "*Yu*" and "*Lian*" reminds one of a Chinese saying, "*Niannian You Yu*", which carries the wish for successive years of abundance.

Then, there is again "*Mei*" (the eye brow) that appeared 13 times in its implied form of "*mei*" (plum blossom) among the collected papercuts. The Chinese people has an idiom "*Xishang Meishao*", meaning when one's happiness raises his/her eye brows. "*Mei*" in its physical form, the plum blossom, is the national flora of China. The imprint of "*Mei*" in Chinese papercuts is therefore so common. The "*Mei*" carries a blueprint of Chinese optimism in face of all possibilities of life in every historical account.

The Language Aspects of Chinese Papercuts

Language is a tool of communication. It allows one party to convey ideas and thoughts and the other party to interpret and relate. Chinese papercuts being ornamental items have surprisingly carried with them a load of expressed written characters and symbolic meanings. The papercuts record faithfully the thoughts and messages of their makers and represent them, across time and tide, to the people. In this way, Chinese papercuts has become a medium of communication, through the “language” expressed or implied within them.

The need for communication is intensified during festive season. Therefore, a large numbers of Chinese papercuts are produced to usher Chinese festivals. During Chinese festive seasons, for example, the papercut artists will produce papercuts consisting auspicious phrases such as “Great is one’s Fortune (*Da Ji Da Li*)”, “Ushering the Dawn of a New Year, Receiving the Showers of Blessedness (*Ying Chun Jie Fu*)”, These papercuts, when displayed or given away as gift decorative items, will bring the greetings around to everyone who comes into contact with them.

A language has its own system whereby monosyllabic vocabulary can be arranged to give a complete meaning. Similarly, the Chinese papercuts has its own patterns of graphic compositions to cope with the complicated function as a medium of communication. Chinese papercuts can be very complicated in designs and cutting patterns, in order to bring forth a complex and combined meaning of integrated concepts. A sample papercut from Hubei was presented as such: a vase of chrysanthemum (symbol of wealth) sitting on a lotus (peace and continuity), and the vase itself highly decorated with patterns of lotus leaves and its neck decorated with an artistic Chinese character of “*shou* (longevity)”. So, the full meaning expressed in this papercut is “peace, wealth and longevity”. Therefore, one can be persuaded that Chinese papercuts function way beyond their decorative purposes. They are crafted as in ways to carry symbolic messages or meanings.

Oriental languages can, at times, be loaded with allegorical imageries and meanings. Chinese papercut artists are masters in this aspect. To them, dragons with phoenixes are symbols of marriage, mice with Chinese cabbages are metaphors of childbearing and cats with peonies are allegories of long, blessed life. While examining the collection of papercuts, researchers have also discovered some very cynical Shanxi papercuts. One of which consists of a few “pointed-head individuals”. The “pointed-

head” is referred to as the “*Jiantou*” in Mandarin. “*Jian*” is obviously allegorical, reminding one of another word, “*Jian*” (with the same pronunciation, means ‘wicked’). “*Tou*” represents the “head” or a “leader” of the place. The papercut artist who has produced this papercut, has apparently expressed her dislike of some wicked people in the authority then.

A successful literature is able to beat an audio-visual presentation when it stages the world of stories on a mere two-dimensional paper. Similarly, Chinese papercuts too, are not constrained and limited by their flat interface. The papercut artists have almost no difficulties in presenting people and things across time and space within a little piece of two-dimensional colour paper. They can use the technique of ‘piling up’ to present a village life, i.e. a thorough display from one village gate to another, with details of men and women working within the compound, not forgetting a large poplar at one corner and few pigeons flying across a few roofs. Then, there is also another technique known as ‘re-composition’ where one lady managed to present a mother cat nursing its kitten on a simple and attractive papercut.

Conclusion

This article attempts to include Chinese papercuts into the discipline of language study. When one starts examining the intrinsic aspects of the Chinese papercuts, one will definitely be very much taken by their richness in forms and symbolic meanings. The papercuts connect us to the persons who produce the papercuts. Just in the manner that a literature takes its own life as soon as it leaves its author’s hand, Chinese papercuts carry their makers’ blueprints to where they are sent. To conclude, the language in Chinese papercuts is precise and alive, free and creative: Last but not least, Chinese papercuts are very oriental in character, very much allegorical, full of symbols and imagery.

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FLORENCE KUEK CHEE WEE is a Mandarin lecturer in Universiti Teknologi MARA. Her areas of interests are teaching Mandarin for specific purposes, cross-cultural studies, East-Asia history and research in teaching and listening.