

Reverberating Chinese Traditional Folk Art in a Contemporary Context

Kong Ho

Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam

Envisioned as a practice-based research, this paper explored Chinese traditional folk arts and crafts with a focus on traditional decorative patterns, vivid colors, and symbolic motifs that enliven Foshan style paper-cuttings, New Year wood block prints, paper kites, festival lanterns, and Shiwan pottery figures from the areas of Foshan and Shiwan, near Guangzhou, China. The goal of this research was to create a series of original paintings by investigating Chinese traditional folk arts and handcrafts and integrating them physically or ichnographically on Ho's new body of paintings. Chinese traditional motifs including Chinese characters and Buddhist iconographies had already been important motifs in the contemporary Western paintings of Kong Ho for the past 10 years. This paper examined not only the artistic, cultural, and historical values but also the impacts of Chinese traditional folk arts and crafts on Ho's painting through a personal research travel and studies of a certain amount of Chinese paper-cuttings, folk prints, pottery, and handcrafts found in the famous Foshan Folk Art Studio and Foshan City Shiwan Ceramics Factory in Foshan, China. Furthermore, this paper investigated the symbolic meanings founded in Ho's spiritual paintings with strong Chinese heritage and how he reinterpreted those artifacts in a contemporary context.

Keywords: Chinese cultural and art history, traditional Chinese folk arts, and contemporary Chinese paintings

Introduction

Western artists who were looking for Chinese motifs to use in their own artistic work would find the Foshan traditional folk art and handcraft to carry an inspiring selection of these motifs. Kong Ho has been a bicultural teaching artist, who grew up in Hong Kong under Chinese cultural background and updated with Western educational values. As a citizen of the United States for almost 10 years, Ho felt the urge to push aside certain cultural stereotypes, and to find new inspirations for his practice-based research in painting in Chinese traditional folk art, especially southern Foshan style.

Envisioned as a practice-based research in painting, "Reverberating Chinese Traditional Folk Arts in a Contemporary Context", explored Chinese traditional folk arts and crafts with a focus on traditional decorative patterns and motifs that enliven Foshan style paper-cutting, New Year wood block prints, paper kites, festival lanterns, and certain Shiwan style pottery figures in Foshan, near Guangzhou and along the Pearl River Delta of China. The goal of this practice-based research was to create a series of original paintings by investigating the unique quality of Foshan traditional folk art and handcrafts in terms of artistic, cultural, and historical values and reinterpreting them in a contemporary context.

REVERBERATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL FOLK ART IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

In the fall of 2010, Ho received a China research travel granted from the Asian Studies Center of the University of Pittsburgh to conduct his research travel to Foshan, China in May 2011. He traveled from Hong Kong to Foshan by train and visited several famous Chinese folk art sites, including the Foshan Folk Art Research Institute (FFARI) (see Figure 1), Foshan City Shiwan Ceramics Factory, New Foshan Kiln God Temple Complex and Nanfeng Ancient Kiln. The FFARI was recently relocated to the historical site next to the famous Foshan Zumiao (Ancestors' Temple) in Foshan due to city development. During his visit, he was lucky to witness the traditional custom of lion dancing as part of the celebration of the ancestors' festival. The traditional dancing lion and mask dancers' costumes were examples of the still widely used and appreciated handcrafts produced by the FFARI.



Figure 1. Kong Ho visiting the FFARI in May 2011.

Paper-Cuttings Produced by the FFARI

The major handcrafts produced by the FFARI include paper-cuts, tying dancing lions or dragons, colored lanterns, New Year wood block prints, ink paintings, calligraphies, paper kites, Shiwan pottery figures, and autumn color—a special term for paper laminating. They also created crafts using sculpture, carving, adhering, and casting crafts. The FFARI was founded by the local government in 1956 and served as a special institute for researching, inheriting, and developing Foshan traditional folk art (“About Us”, n.d.). In the past 55 years, the FFARI had actively embraced its legacy of nurturing and developing Foshan folk art. The 10 mission areas of the FFARI in the 21st century posted on their website and entrance bulletin board explained that they served as a center for folk art research, vocational training, art tourism, practitioners, intellectual heritage, exhibition and promotion, cultural development, Lingnan folk art marketing and trading, international exchange, and Foshan folk art services (Park Construction, n.d.).

Besides visiting the FFARI, Ho also visited the Foshan City Shiwan Ceramics Factory, New Foshan Kiln God Temple Complex and Nanfeng Ancient Kiln. Chinese typical motifs including floral patterns, landscapes, prosperous symbols, lucky animal figures, theatrical figures, totem door gods, legendary heroes, and poetic calligraphy were motifs in most Shiwan potteries and other handcrafts. It would expand his research greatly if he had to include all of his findings about the arts and crafts of this city in one research paper. Therefore, Ho decided to focus his research mainly on Foshan paper-cutting or the Chinese term “Jianzhi” which stands for cutting paper because he shared similar opinion with Zhang (1996) described in his edited book *The Art of Chinese Folk Papercuts*, “No other form of art can be compared with papercuts in terms of popularity, the number of producers and quantity... It can be said that paper-cuts are the foundation of Chinese design” (p. 10).

According to the information collected from the FFARI, Foshan paper-cuttings are famous for its traditionally highly-skilled folk art designs. With almost 800-year history, beginning in the Song dynasty and prospering through Ming and Qing dynasties, and up until the present day this craft has been highly respected. According to Zhang (1996), “A hundred years ago Foshan paper-cuts were used as patterns for architecture and furniture carvings, then developed into ornaments on windows, doors, walls, festival decorations, and religious offerings” (p. 141). Foshan paper-cutting demonstrated many types and styles based on the use of different materials and production methods, including copper cut, paper mount, copper writing, copper chiseling, paper writing, woodcarving printing, dye-carving, and pure color (“The Introduction of Foshan’s Paper Cutting”, n.d.). Foshan paper-cutting can be compared to Yangzhou paper-cutting in its significance, because Yangzhou was considered one of the earliest areas producing regional paper-cuts in China. According to Jin (2010):

With a vast territory and multi-ethnic population, Chinese folk paper-cut bears distinct national and geographical features. In art style, northern China is more straightforward, unconstrained, and broad minded; while in the south, it is more exquisite and delicate, full of delight and witty. (p. 118)

Aesthetic Characteristics of Foshan Paper-Cuttings

The tool for paper-cutting also changed from using a pair of scissors in the north to the southern use of custom-made bamboo-fastened knives or cutters in Foshan, as shown in Figure 2. As Hang and Guo (2010) described in their book *Chinese Arts & Crafts*, in comparison with scissor-cutting, knife-cutting can have more patterns cut at one time (p. 130). In order to meet the need of the commodity market, Foshan paper-cutting grew into a style of a multi-layer paper engraving art with highly-skilled carving and coloring techniques (Jin, 2010). The traditional northern paper-cutting technique using scissors for cutting symmetrical patterns, had become to multi-layer paper carving in Foshan. Usually, the Foshan paper-cutting style is carved with excellent delicacy and graciousness in a more realistic artistic expression of style. Also, Foshan paper-cutting emphasizes multi-layer and multi-color composition with embroidery patterns and delicate craftsmanship. Generally, Foshan paper-cutting was used as ornaments or good-luck charms for windows, doors, walls, adornments, and lanterns for use in traditional customs, such as wedding ceremonies, memorial services, birthday observances, and festival celebrations. The themes of traditional Foshan paper-cuts range from sceneries to classic literature, such as *Dream of The Red Chamber*, historical legends, heroic figures, totem door gods, Chinese zodiac animals, cultural festivals, floral patterns, birds and landscapes, beneficent creatures, prosperous symbols, lucky characters, and Buddhist icons. The unique characteristic of Foshan paper-cuttings is exquisite compositions spaced within exaggerated and compact designs.

REVERBERATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL FOLK ART IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Chinese traditional motifs including Chinese numeral characters and Buddhist iconographies were already important motifs in Ho's Western paintings on canvas for the past 10 years. Through his practice-based research in painting, he gained a better understanding of the aesthetic merit of Chinese traditional paper-cutting in reference to its cultural, historical, artistic, and philosophical origins. It was his intention to incorporate what he had found about the artistic qualities of Foshan paper-cutting into his semi-abstract symbolic paintings. Through his analytical study of Foshan paper-cutting, he discovered that five major aesthetic qualities or characteristics exist for Foshan paper-cuttings. These qualities are precise linear quality, exaggerated shallow depth, contrasting elements, compact design, and subtle expression.



Figure 2. The craftsman of the FFARI demonstrating traditional Foshan paper-cutting with custom-made bamboo-fastened cutters on a stack of 10-20 pieces of red-toned rice pap.

Incorporating Foshan Paper-Cutting Characteristics into Ho's Paintings

In order to use the concept of cut paper as a visual element in his painting without using actual delicate Foshan paper-cuttings, Ho incorporated some common mass-produced Western paper-lace doilies onto his paintings. This was one of his practice-based research methodologies to transcend an ordinary machine-made paper-lace doily, like a piece of traditional hand-made Foshan colored rice paper-cutting, into a unique artifact with aesthetic value. This gave his recent series of symbolic paintings added an ongoing spiritual theme of transformation. The spiral decorative embroidery pattern carved on a common paper-lace doily, which usually sits under a dessert or cake, served as visual inspiration for his paintings and as a conceptual reference to the Chinese aesthetic of embellishment. He revealed a bit of common paper-lace doily in his recent painting, titled *True Nature of Philosophy* (see Figure 3), in a sublime and elegant manner. The viewers are meant to discover these fauxembroidery patterns under a subtle glaze of color when they get close enough to exam the painting. The transparent color glaze (see Figure 4), helped to reveal the inherent shallow space and delicate pattern of

REVERBERATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL FOLK ART IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

the carved out paper-lace doily.

The technical aspect of paper collage is a common skill expressed by gluing down some physical flat objects onto the canvas. Collage was a popular technique employed by most Cubism artists, like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, in the 20th century when collage became a distinctive part of modern art with emphasis on experimentation. However, the application of collage in his recent work not only added texture to the composition, but also revealed the delicacy of the geometrical order found in a common paper-lace doily. Each piece of cut-out paper-lace doily section was placed carefully onto the paintings with the consideration of its pattern and relationship with the surrounding elements as well as the overall composition. Like Foshan paper-cutting, the aesthetic value was not about the remaining lines and patterns on the paper-cuts, but about the cut-out void, or negative space created between the lines and patterns within the composition.

Undoubtedly, the delicate linear quality is the most important feature of Foshan paper-cutting. In order to reflect the lesson of this subtle linear quality onto his painting, Ho chose subject matters that were embedded with natural linear quality, such as the bilaterally sectioned nautilus shell, lotus petals, bodhi leaves, DNA double helix, butterfly wings, and Chinese characters. Instead of cutting out the space between the lines, like traditional Foshan paper-cutting, he primed the areas between the lines of his design on the raw canvas with gesso to disclose the precise linear structure of his painting, titled *When Nature's Paths Cross...* (see Figure 5). Also, Ho emphasized the line quality by enhancing the rendering of reflective light and shadow on his subject matter. Parts of the bilaterally sectioned nautilus shell chambers in this painting became lotus petals. Conversely, parts of the parallel veins of lotus petals transformed to become a part of the chambers of nautilus shell or floating ribbon-like background. The line quality facilitated a continuous change from one form to another in this painting. The work moved from illusionary painted lines to actual linear patterns formed by the collaged paper-lace doily. The ambiguous space was formed in this work by interweaving the lines or sections that extended from the subject matter into the background. These interwoven lines helped to create a dramatic rhythm throughout the square format composition.



Figure 3. Kong Ho's *True Nature of Philosophy*, 2011. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 16" × 16".

REVERBERATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL FOLK ART IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT



Figure 4. Detail view of *True Nature of Philosophy* showing the collaged paper-lace doily on one of the nautilus shell chamber.



Figure 5. Kong Ho's *When Nature's Paths Cross...*, 2011. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 24" × 24".

REVERBERATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL FOLK ART IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Accentuating the shallow feeling of depth that is characteristic of space in Foshan paper-cuttings was another challenge in Ho's recent work. Previously, Ho strove to create depth in his semi-abstract spiritual paintings. However, Ho chose to render composition with shallow depth instead of deep space in his new series of paintings because he wanted to orchestrate the art elements on his painting, *When Nature's Paths Cross...*, to have a subtle spatial effect through the use of lights and shadows. Ho's spiritual painting served as a cultural carrier of Chinese Taoist/Buddhist philosophy of the seemingly ambiguous idea of Wu-Wei, or action through non-action. He created illusionary space in a flat canvas and at the same time he destroyed this illusionary depth by depicting the shallow depth of collaged paper-lace doilies. Besides applying glazing to enhance the shallow depth of the collaged patterns, he also used less contrasting colors within the subject matter of this painting to expose the short illusionary distance he created. Overlapping and size contrast were the other spatial devices, which he used to intensify the shallow depth in this painting. The layered images in this painting were designed to have a fluid Chinese aesthetic sense and philosophical underpinnings.

Taoist/Buddhist Philosophical Concepts Behind Ho's Paintings

By using a composition with interchanging negative and positive shapes, plus a contrasting warm and cool colors scheme like that found in Foshan multi-color paper-cuttings with their overlapping with layered textures and patterns, Ho has given his recent paintings a more contemporary look in terms of color, texture, and space. He applied the concept of high contrast between the delicate lines and void space of Foshan paper-cutting in his recent work by focusing the tensions created by two opposite elements, such as warm against cool color, smooth versus textured surface. In order to augment the contrasting effects in his recent work, he applied the opposite reflective color to highlight the shallow space. This contrasting effect suggested a dramatic and luminous atmosphere within the stable square composition. Moreover, Ho chose this square painting format and circular nautilus motif for his new series of paintings to symbolize the roundness heaven above a square earth. This arrangement echoed the ancient Chinese philosophy of unlimited and limited space.

Ho's recent body of work exemplifies the transcendental thought in Chinese philosophy, especially Ch'an or Zen Buddhism and Taoism through the influences found in Foshan paper-cutting. Around the globe today, Asian philosophy is being applied to Western art concepts. According to Baas (2005), "The Impact of Asian philosophies on European and American culture is a huge topic that has been addressed by a number of fine writers" (p. 1). The Taoist-Buddhist perspective for understanding ourselves challenges rational thinking as a primary path to truth and knowledge in the contemporary world. Baas (2005) stated, "The Buddha's view of existence emerged as an insight that was complete but hardly sudden. It was an insight about the nature of reality so basic that it seemed obvious to him, although not easy to convey in words" (p. 3). Works of art are complex intellectual properties of a person's mind and feeling. Multi-layers of values and knowledge always point to a person's cultural origin, which is a reservoir of artistic concepts. As a bicultural artist who grew up in Hong Kong under both Chinese social rules and British colonial values and history, Ho felt the urge to push aside certain cultural stereotypes, and to find his own identity and what his art means to himself and therefore others. It was his intention to use his recent series of paintings, as a vehicle to trace the inspiration that frequently materializes in his work in order to reveal the real issues that are important to him as an individual and an artist. In this practice-based research in painting he examined both the aesthetic importance and his personal association with Chinese folk arts, especially Foshan paper-cuttings, which form the basis of his work.

REVERBERATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL FOLK ART IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Through the course of this artistic experiment and practice, he found that his art had enabled him, as a contemporary Asian-American artist, to find his own personal voice and identity in reinterpretation of Chinese aesthetic values through the traditional folk arts.

Strikingly painted in a technique consisting of spontaneous washes of glaze held in check by subtle controlled exacting trompe l'oeil objects, Ho's spiritual paintings exemplify the theme and style indicative of his recent body of work, the "Cycle Series". This series evolved out of a 2002 transitional painting entitled *Beauty of Complexity* (see Figure 6). The compositions and imagery in this painting were meant not only to be spiritually up-lifting but also to be practical in the sense that his imagery could help to guide him through his life experiences. Instead of expressive splashes of colors, Ho used bold glaze washes to define the color change from one motif to the other after the priming stage was complete. This spontaneous glaze wash allowed the unprimed lines to show through the glaze layer and thus unified the overall color composition.



Figure 6. Kong Ho's *Beauty of Complexity*, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 50" × 50".

The compositions of his recent series of paintings were designed around simple forms with compact structures and significant symbolic meanings, such as Buddhist lotus flowers and lotus leaves, Tai Chi-like sweeping waves, yin-yang-like contrasting elements and scientific icons of cross-sectioned nautilus shell and DNA double helix spirals. In a sense, these symbols or motifs enabled Ho to create art that would support Ho and his viewers in their quest to simultaneously better understand both the natural and human-made world, and our position in it. Ho presented work that gave the viewer a chance to explore to feel the complex aesthetic values that are a part of Chinese art and traditional crafts.

REVERBERATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL FOLK ART IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

When Ho analyzed his work, he realized that he had internalized the influences of Chinese traditional art and crafts as well as Taoist-Buddhist philosophy as a means for understanding the world around him. After he began his “Cycle Series”, Ho became more comfortable about incorporating Chinese art motifs and Taoist-Buddhist symbols in his work. Interestingly, the use of these symbols brought him tranquility while painting, and Ho though this calmer state of mind allowed for the creation of paintings that are very energetic in expression, but at the same time contain harmonious and complex compositions.

Although Ho used the cross-sectioned nautilus shells and blossoming lotus flowers in his early paintings, he revived the use of these objects and gave them a more contemporary feel through the use of warm and cool colors incorporated into a contrasting color scheme, as well as the Taoist-Buddhist concepts of flux and void. In his recent “Cycle Series”, he created an asymmetrical composition by off-setting the cross-sectioned nautilus shell and the blossoming lotus against the angular edges of the squared off canvas. It was his intention to create a bit of tension in his otherwise harmonious composition by playing two similar organic forms against a rigid or formally balanced square format. It has long been recognized that Chinese culture influenced the development of language, pattern recognition, and concept of numbers. The use of a square format in Ho’s recent work was meant to correspond to the notion of Chinese characters, which were originally square in structure. The Chinese characters that have appeared in his recent paintings were originally Chinese numbers. He used them to symbolize the rational and intuitive understanding of the world around us.

Ho chose the blossoming lotus as one of his significant symbols in his recent work because of its spectacular shape and color as well as its sophisticated symbolic meaning of purity and enlightenment in Buddhism. The beauty of a blossoming lotus has always been admired in Chinese culture and it is the most popular subject matter in traditional Chinese ink paintings. Its lustrous quality represents the striving and inspiring virtues of an individual. Ho was attracted by the blossoming lotus flowers because of their unique aesthetic form and inspiring symbolic meanings that Lotus flowers bring beauty and pureness out from the muddy darkness at the bottom of the pond. By merging the blossoming lotus with cross-sectioned nautilus shell, Ho created a unique form to reveal the essential subtlety of Chinese art as well as the transcendental thinking of Taoist-Buddhist philosophy.

Conclusions

Just as everything else in life, the images in Ho’s art have deeper meanings than what their physical appearances might suggest. Many of his personal symbols had evolved from objects that have become personally significant to him because he associated them with his cultural heritage along with his interest in Taoist-Buddhist philosophy and mathematical patterns. The converging images and colors in his paintings create a dynamic and almost vibrating surface that is a paradox of contrasts between seemingly opposite colors that are energized with interlocking patterns and textures. Further interest is added to the composition of his recent work through the articulation of the segments of the split nautilus shell and the linear texture of lotus petals. Rhythmic movement was created from a simultaneous growth and dissolution of both the nautilus shell and lotus with the background. His imagery is also intended to create the feeling of engagement with his lived experience of Eastern and Western cultures and his belief in Taoist-Buddhist transcendental thought. Ho shares the feeling of Robert A. F. Thurman’s (2005) concepts from the foreword of *Smile of the Buddha* (Baas, 2005) that said:

REVERBERATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL FOLK ART IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

How wonderful that Jacque lynn Baas has seen the light of the Buddha's smile shining from faraway Asia into the realm of the art of modern times in what we think of as the West! How amazing that some of the great artists whose works move us so, who have opened our eyes to the shimmering beauties and deeper dimensions of our world, might themselves have been inspired by the enlightenment arts emanating from Asia through the imperialist economy into the museums and bazaars of Europe! (p. 11)

Foshan paper-cuttings share similar aesthetic aims as Chinese calligraphy. Both art forms transcend regular lines no matter if it is done by a carving knife or a paintbrush into extraordinary rhythmic expression. Although the lines are important, the negative or void space they create and the shadows cast by the lines are like the intriguing negative space found between calligraphy strokes. Ho's recent work has not been only about what he had chosen to represent or reveal through realistic rendering and collage but also about the unseen parts of the whole—the fundamental transformation for which no beginning and end can be discovered. On one level, his art can also be considered as visual interpretations of Taoist void or Buddhist enlightenment and the expression of the subtlety of Chinese arts and crafts because his art reflects the essences of Taoist-Buddhist philosophy and Chinese beliefs.

Like many artists today, Ho does not follow a single school of thought or a major art movement, because today there really is not a dominant mainstream style in art. It is difficult for him to recount all of the many influences that have led to the work that he has and is now producing because some of these influences are related to his up-bringing as a bi-cultural artist. Ho claims that he has never tried to pinpoint the exact origin of some of his symbolic images because they are continuously growing and modifying. Also, he is afraid that to do so might somehow destroy the mysterious quality of his art, which involves a sense of fundamental transformation. However, his practice-based research in Chinese folk arts and crafts had definitely augmented the continually evolving content of his painting in terms of techniques, expression, and textuality.

References

- Baas, J. (2005). *Smile of the Buddha*. Los Angeles, C. A.: University of California Press.
- Foshan Folk Art Research Institute (n.d.). *About Foshan Folk Art Research Institute*. Retrieved from <http://www.fsfolkart.com/zh-CN/introduce.html>
- Foshan's Paper Cutting. (n.d.). Figures Retrieved from <http://www.fsfolkart.com/en/products.html?proID=100408214>
- Hang, J., & Guo, Q. (2010). *Chinese arts & crafts* (Y. Zhu, & P. Song, Trans.). Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. <http://www.fsfolkart.com/en/products001.html?proTypeID=100041633&proTypeName=Park%20Construction>
- Jin, Z. (2010). *Chinese folk arts* (B. Jin, Trans.). Beijing: China Intercontinental Press.
- Park Construction. (n.d.). Figures in S. Zhang, F. Rao, J. Huang, & H. Liu (Eds.) (1996), *The art of Chinese folk papercuts* (Z. Fang, & G. Fang, Trans.). Beijing: China Today Press.
- Zhang, S. X. (1996). *the art of Chinese folk papercuts*. China Today Press.