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Papercut Stories of the Manchu Woman Artist Hou Yumei

Abstract

Searching for ginseng is an avocation of peasants in northeast China that has had an important influence on local popular culture. It can be found in folktales, popular songs, proverbs, popular performing arts, embroideries, and papercuts. Hou Yumei, a Manchu woman folk artist from Tonghua countryside in Jilin Province, produces papercut story-books with well-known folktales from the Changbai Shan area. Ginseng is an important motif in these tales. The article presents the special art and style of Hou Yumei and introduces the possible traditional contexts from which she draws.

Keywords: Manchuria—ginseng folklore—Manchu—papercuts—material culture—folk art

NUMEROUS CHINESE PUBLICATIONS and some in Western languages have in recent years described and documented the art of Chinese professional and popular papercuts.¹ The authors tell about the history, techniques, styles, and topics of papercuts in China. Their religious origins have only rarely been investigated in detail, and many formerly sacral elements are now archaic symbols of which the meaning is no longer easy to comprehend (JIN 1989a; ZHANG 1989, 1–5). Some of the authors have described the work and art of professional papercut artists (LIU Jiang 1988). Still, there are two significant shortcomings in this literature: (1) a general neglect of the artist's personalities, and (2) a rather superficial treatment of the topics shown in the artists' papercuts.

Folk papercuts still are, with some rare exceptions, treated as an anonymous art only differentiated in local styles. Today any art historian would be very astonished if asked about the personality of the artist as a means for understanding a piece of art. But in the case of papercut arts it is still necessary to give special emphasis to the importance of studying the artists, their biographies, and the genesis of their pieces of art for our comprehension of regional styles and contents. Peasant papercuts are the art works of local artists. They are one of the expressive dimensions of local popular culture and thus a source for better knowledge of it.

Despite numerous descriptions of Chinese papercuts there are very few thorough investigations of the topics they illustrate. How are the everyday lives of people expressed in the art of peasants, such as papercuts? And, what does everyday material culture look like in peasant art? These questions are rarely asked even though everyday objects appear in folktales, proverbs, peasant paintings, embroideries, carvings, and, not least, papercuts. In papercuts one may find agricultural implements such as stonemills, baskets, wardrobes, and clothing. Furthermore, many of the objects shown in the papercuts are “old,” i.e., no longer used today, but remembered through the medium of papercuts. “Can these motifs themselves tell us anything about peasant material culture?” is a question that is worthy of consideration.

Possibly because of their very dense symbolism and expressiveness, papercuts are often appreciated as single pieces of art. In this article a peculiar set of peasant folk papercuts from northeast China that illustrate folktales will be introduced. The artist is Hou Yumei 侯玉梅, a Manchu woman from Tonghua in Jilin Province who was born in 1952. The papercuts by her can be used as ethnographic materials to briefly address the questions mentioned above.

THE PAPERCUT ARTIST HOU YUMEI

Books and magazines have in the past only printed single works by Hou Yumei, usually anonymously or with only a mention of her name.² Recently, however, JIN Xin (Jin Naixiang), a well-known folklorist from Tonghua, published an article about Hou Yumei in which he states that she was born in the county of Xinbin, Liaoning Province, and grew up in the Changbai mountains in Jilin (1997, 55). Her mother was a Manchu woman, her father was Han. She learned the techniques of papercutting from her mother. In her childhood Hou Yumei watched her mother telling stories and cutting motifs of the tales out of paper.³ A concentration on the ginseng subject in the tales possibly has to do with the father's searching for ginseng.

Hou Yumei grew up in an area of China where Han-Chinese people were and are living together with ethnic Koreans and Manchus. The cultural backgrounds of the three ethnic groups can be found in her art. The patterns and costumes that appear in most of her papercuts, which tell about Hou Yumei's Manchu ancestry, are traditional and no longer commonly used today.

We know very little about Hou Yumei's life. Talking with her, one very quickly becomes aware that she did not have an easy life and that her work as an artist has become an important liberating activity for her. Jin Xin informs us that Hou Yumei has been married and divorced three times. Since her last divorce she has raised alone her two children, earning money as a peasant farmer and by selling her handicrafts. Jin describes her special trait of clinging to her art in times when she could not even afford to buy the paper or when traditional papercutting had politically fallen into disrepute.



FIGURE 1. Hou Yumei, 1993.

At the beginning of the 80s, a time when folk art studies in China experienced a revival, Hou Yumei's talent was discovered by Wang Chunxin 王純信, then vice director of the "Arts Center of the Masses" of Tonghua City (*Tonghua shi qunzhong yishu guan* 通化市群眾藝術館). Since that time her work has been supported by the Cultural Center (*Wenhua guan* 文化宮) of Tonghua County. From 1985 to 1987, by her own account, she went to the Lu Xun Academy of Arts in Shenyang, but it is not clear what she studied. JIN Xin claims that during this time she took part in a two-year special course in arts at the Tonghua Teachers Training College (JIN 1997, 56). To what extent Hou Yumei's art was influenced by her formal education and other factors in comparison with her family traditions is difficult to assess.

Wang Chunxin calls the papercuts of Hou Yumei *Manzu minjian jianzhi* 滿族民間剪紙 ("popular Manchu papercuts"). His main criteria for this classification are the patterns and costumes of the figures (WANG 1988, 95). When asked about her personal opinion, Hou Yumei insists on her Manchu identity. While explaining details of her papercuts, she often uses the phrase "We Manchus...." She produces papercut tales as well as single papercuts with scenes from the everyday lives of the peoples of Changbai Shan. Apart from these papercuts, her repertoire of crafts comprises cloth-pictures, basketwork, and dough-figures that she models. Today Hou Yumei is a well-known popular artist. She has won several prizes and has traveled with artist delegations to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Sweden, Austria, and Germany.

PAPERCUTS OF HOU YUMEI: FORM AND TECHNIQUES

Hou Yumei creates single papercuts as well as picture stories with which she illustrates folktales widely known in the Changbai Shan area. Her hand-bound folktale booklets have never been published, but I know of eleven illustrated tales in private or museum collections in Germany and Austria.⁴

The picture stories of Hou Yumei are handbound into booklets. The design of the booklets is similar. In volumes III, VI, VII, and X, the cover of the book is decorated with the Chinese characters of the title cut out of colored paper. The internal structure of the booklets varies slightly. Only two volumes (I and II) have title pages that head the papercut tale. In volume III, impressions of name or picture stamps (with ginseng maidens or ginseng seekers coming home from the forest) decorate the first pages. In volumes II, III, and IV, a short introduction to the story may be found. Volumes III, IV, and X have biographical notes about the artist added to the papercut tale.

The arrangement of text and picture in the booklets is simple and reminiscent of the tradition of popular literature illustrated with woodblock prints.⁵ The papercuts are the central part of each page. Texts are short, writ-

ten with black ink, either underneath a papercut or opposite to it on the left (see figure 16). In volume X a square is left out in the papercut. The text is in this case written on cardboard in traditional style from top to bottom, and the papercut is attached to the cardboard so that the Chinese characters are optically part of the papercut (figures 2–11). The style of the texts is written in simple, colloquial Chinese. The texts are handwritten in volumes II, VIII, and IX by Hou Taiping, the elder brother of Hou Yumei. Explanations on colloquial expressions are added in smaller characters as footnotes.

Of the eleven books investigated for this article, seven are in oblong format and four are in vertical format. Each volume consists of white or cream-colored thin pieces of cardboard sewn or clipped together. The papercuts are at single points delicately fixed to the cardboard. Except for volume X, where black paper has been used, all the pictures are cut in red paper.

If one looks through the volumes in the chronological order of their completion, it becomes clear that Hou Yumei's art has developed markedly since 1985. While in the first volumes the papercuts are very simple in form and content (figure 16), papercuts in volumes X and XI are much more refined and detailed (see figures 2–11). Hou Yumei uses a combination of positive and negative cutting techniques, but most of her work consists of the former. The papercuts are done with scissors, mostly without prior outlining of motifs. According to the artist, the completion of one series of papercuts has to be done from beginning to end without stopping. If she is interrupted, she has to start again from the beginning. She describes her state of mind while cutting as a kind of trance. After having finished one series she feels exhausted. She is unable to repeat the cutting of the same tale with the same motifs. There are only three to four original copies of each series, since Hou Yumei cuts several layers of paper at a time.

The peculiar style of Hou Yumei is the result of her using paper and scissors with a very refined combination of different techniques and forms. Apart from the above-mentioned alternation of positive and negative cutting, the following forms are important: figures in the tales are cut in profile, front or rear (figures 7, 15, 17); posture and gestures play an important role and are designed in a very sensitive way (see figures 3, 7, 9); changes in the plot are shown through addition or omission of single elements (e.g., blindness is represented by leaving out the eyes and, when sight has been restored by healing the eyes are reintroduced [figure 18]). Because of the technical need to have all parts of a papercut connected, Hou Yumei completes them with linking elements that also have meaning for the tale. Thus the content is enhanced by symbolically rich attributes in the form of animals, plants, and objects (figure 19). Symmetry is a means to express luck, harmony (figure 19), or a happy end, while asymmetry shows quarrel or betrayal (figure

17). Changes in perspective are a means of indicating complicated aspects of the plot. Thus the bird's-eye view may be used beside a front view (figure 20). Changes in proportion are used to indicate details in the plot. Thus an acting figure or a main item may be cut bigger than others to show its action in a group (figures 6, 8). Objects that are very important or about to be employed are shown in huge dimensions (figure 17). The extension of performance dimensions through the introduction of a stage or another plane in the papercut allows Hou Yumei to show two points of parallel action at a time (figures 21, 24). Time is indicated by using different devices. The heavenly bodies or lamps, for example, may symbolize day or night, while the new or already mentioned motifs introduced behind the acting figure, thus "invisible" to him or her, allude to past events or announce future developments (figure 3). Chinese characters in the papercuts show loud articulations such as shouting or cries for help (figure 3). They may also be used to indicate place-names or to underline the plot, like the character for double happiness (*shuangxi*) that represents a marriage (figure 19).

PAPERCUTS OF HOU YUMEI: THE CONTENTS

With her picture stories, Hou Yumei illustrates folktales well known in the Changbai Shan area. Eight of the tales have to do with the tradition of searching for ginseng (I–IV, VI, VII, IX, X).⁶ Two stories deal with Nurhachi (VIII, X), the legendary founder of the Qing dynasty. In volume X, in which both subjects are interwoven, Nurhachi's first hunt for ginseng is articulated. Volume V is a story of a wind-ghost, while volume XI tells an animal fable.

Stories about Nurhachi are a central subject of Manchu folk literature.⁷ Tales of ginseng are to be found not only in Manchu oral traditions but also among the Han⁸ and Koreans⁹ in Jilin. They are part of a complex of subjects and motifs (FLITSCH 1994b, 136) that has evolved within the context of traditional ginseng seeking in Changbai Shan. Even though the ginseng tales of Hou Yumei are Manchu with regard to traditional material culture (e.g., decoration, dresses, hairstyles, houses, and house equipment [see figure 13]) as well as certain gestures (see figure 14), the plot and motifs of the stories are similar to those of Han-Chinese ginseng tales.

Most of the stories belong to the category of initiation tales.¹⁰ The basic structure of these tales is tripartite. In the first episode a young person in a deprived condition (unmarried, poor, etc.) goes out looking for ginseng in order to solve his problem. In a second episode he has to go through hardship and is put through a trial; he eventually dies and is revived. It is mostly during this phase that ginseng roots change into human spirits and that divine beings and other supernatural things appear. In the third episode the protagonist



1. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。



2. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。



3. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。



4. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。



5. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。



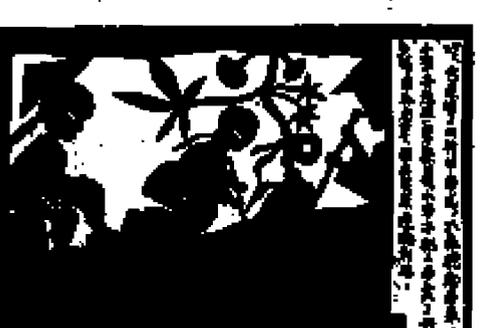
6. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。



7. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。



8. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。



9. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。



10. 小皇帝逃到长白山，被明兵追赶，他只好躲进山洞。

2	3
4	5
6	7
8	9
10	11

FIGURES 2-11. After having escaped from the soldiers of the Ming (2), Nurhachi is helped by the god of the mountain (3) who lets him meet with eight ginseng seekers. Together they pray to the mountain god (4) and go to look for ginseng (5). A tiger menaces the group (6). Nurhachi wants to fight him (7), but the tiger shows him the way to a valuable ginseng root (8). The seekers are happy (9). While Nurhachi takes a rest, the others dig out the ginseng (10). After having become emperor, Nurhachi honors the mountain god (11). (X-3, 5, 11, 15, 18, 19, 25, 26, 27, 28)

finds the valuable root (i.e., he is initiated into the traditions of ginseng seekers) and his condition of depravity is brought to a close. If he does not pass the trial he dies and turns into a divine being, a plant, or an animal. Volume X tells about the young Nurhachi who, after having escaped from the Ming dynasty general Li Chengliang, follows a group of eight ginseng seekers. One day a tiger threatens the group and Nurhachi is prepared to sacrifice himself. To the astonishment of the men, the tiger does not want to devour him but leads him to a patch of ginseng plants. With the proceeds from this ginseng, Nurhachi later founds the dynasty of the Qing (see figures 2–11). Volume III relates the story of the legendary first ginseng gatherer, Sun Liang, who came from Shandong to Manchuria in search of the precious root. He died of hunger and was buried in Jilin. His soul became the *lao batou* 老把头, “the old leader,” the ancestor and patron of later ginseng seekers.

The papercuts of Hou Yumei have a very distinct and characteristic style and charm. Every tale with its own peculiarities gives the reader the impression of looking at a kind of performance on paper. This is underlined by pictures like figure 12 where the artist expresses her thanks to the audience. The papercut tales lead the spectator into his or her own peculiar world. Apart from the plot there are a multitude of details. In the case of the ginseng tales one can say that all the important facets of the complex of motifs and subjects mentioned earlier are to be found in them. In her papercut tales Hou Yumei condenses the oral traditions as well as the geography and folklore of her native country to a minimized form and shape.

In order to understand the cultural context of Hou Yumei’s art, let us take a closer look at the traditional practice of searching for ginseng in the Changbai Shan area that forms the background of the ginseng tales she articulates. For centuries, in order to make a living, Han Chinese peasants migrated seasonally to the northeast to look for ginseng. From the early years of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to the mid-nineteenth century the state monopolized ginseng, and during this period the economic impact of ginseng gathering in northeast China was considerable (VAN SYMONS 1981).



FIGURE 12. Hou Yumei herself appears in this papercut. With the Chinese character for “Thank you” she bids farewell to her audience.

From the decline of the state's monopoly to the present, small-scale ginseng gathering has continued in the region. The ginseng seekers are known as *fangshan de* 放山的 (“guardians of the mountains” or “those making their way into the mountains”) or *wa bangchui de* 挖棒槌的 (“diggers of ginseng”). Their organization resembles the structure of guilds well known throughout China. They venerate a patron saint, the first ginseng seeker, referred to as *lao batou* (“the old leader”). Various places in Jilin are identified as the place where he died and left a message on the bark of a pine or on a rock for later seekers; these sites are still regarded as his graves today, and are thus places by which local seekers identify themselves.

The conditions of the search are determined by the annual life cycle of the perennial ginseng root. Searches mostly take place in autumn when the red berries of the plant make it easier to find. In the course of its life, a ginseng plant runs through seven stages of growth or ages, corresponding to the number of leaves, which gradually increase to six. The value of a root increases with the number of leaves (FLITSCH 1994b, 14–31). Ginseng seeking is characterized by a set of specific rules and by a specialist vocabulary. In autumn men form hierarchically structured groups that are led by a *batou* 把头 (“the leader”). After an initial purification ritual and sacrifice to the patron saint, they go into the mountains, where they erect a small hut. This hut is looked after by the lowest-ranking seeker, the cook. While they are in the mountains, the seekers' main food is millet. Near the hut a small altar for the mountain god is set up and daily sacrifices are made. Every day the seekers go out for ginseng. Most of the men believe in vision-dreams in which supernatural beings (ginseng spirits) lead them to a place where they can find roots. While they are searching for ginseng, the group has to strictly obey the *batou*, and any disobedience may be severely punished. Special regulations must be observed in the forest (e.g., the seekers are expected to walk in straight lines, it is forbidden to speak loudly, and for certain objects and animals magic names must be used). The seekers scan an area for ginseng with the help of their long wooden staffs, the *suobogun* 索撥棍, which they also use to communicate between themselves in the forest. The leader may beat his staff against a tree to call the members of his group (*jiaogun* 叫棍, “to call the staffs”). Their answer is called *jiogun* 接棍 (“to receive [with] the staff”) (ZHEN 1985). The rank of a seeker is designated by the term *gun* (“staff”) combined with a number. A find of ginseng is proclaimed by calling it loudly by its magic name, *bangchui* 棒槌, and tying it to a wooden stick with a string of red thread to which two old copper coins have been attached. Then the laborious work of laying bare the root without damaging any of its fibers begins. For this task only bone or wooden instruments may be used—no metal may touch the root. Once it is dug out, the ginseng is packed in

earth and in a piece of tree bark. Where the bark has been peeled off the seekers leave a *zhaotou* 兆頭 (omen), a message to the patron saint, the mountain god, and later seekers (ZHONGGUO MINJIAN WENYIJIA XIEHUI JILIN FENHUI ed. 1986; FLITSCH 1994b, 34–75; 1997, 43–45).

Hou Yumei's papercut stories show the traditional search for ginseng. Being a woman she herself has never participated in the search for the root, but has watched the gatherers coming back from the forest, has listened to their stories, and has seen their implements. Her papercut motifs are conditioned by this experience. A part of her motifs certainly reflects the style of her mother, from whom she learned the art.

Needless to say, it is not Hou Yumei's aim to document the ginseng gatherers' material culture in her papercuts. Rather she uses ethnographic details, in the form of stereotypes, to characterize persons and actions. The important stereotypic elements concerning the ginseng seekers are the conical straw hat, the basket or leather bag carried on the back, the seeker's staff (*suobogun*), the deerbone needle, and the thread with coins bound to its ends. Just as in daily life, where our eyes only take notice of a selection of all the things visible, the above-mentioned attributes of the ginseng seekers' equipment are always present without necessarily being shown. In the introductory scenes of a tale a complete set of equipment may be shown, but later on only single elements will be used to characterize the person.

The use of parts of the ginseng seekers' equipment is for practical reasons and for emphasizing their actual employment by means of the proportion technique mentioned above. A deerbone needle in action has gigantic dimensions (figures 10, 25). In figure 26 the deerbone needle is held like a big knife, a detail that, together with the naked female ginseng root, unveils an erotic symbolism in the act of digging out the plant. In this papercut the coin attached to the red thread with which the root is bound has also huge dimensions. This indicates that the root is dug out after binding it to the place where it has been found so that it cannot run away.

It is impressive to look at the motif of the ginseng plant in the papercuts. Since ginseng is the topic of the tales, the root is always cut in big dimensions. All the details of the plant—the stalk with five-fingered leaves and seeds, the root with rhizome, lateral roots, taproot, fibrous roots—can be found in the papercuts. The seeds may be decorated with children's faces or, if the papercut decorates the title page, with letters. The rhizome is often shown with its knot, scars that remain when the hibernating root loses its stalk in autumn. The taproot may show patterns alluding to the natural wrinkles formed when the root grows and shrinks at the same time. Anthropomorphic ginseng roots allude to the human-like shape of many natural ginseng roots. As in the case of the implements, the root may, according to its position

FIGURE 13. Inside a Manchu house. The hero Shenbao 神寶, his mother (wearing Manchu headdress and shoes), and his mother's younger brother are sitting on the *kang*, the heated brick bed. To the left, cushions and bedclothes are piled on a low wooden closet. A small *kang*-table with a lamp stand is behind the *kang*. The figures are sitting on the wooden edge of the *kang*. The mother's brother, the guest, has taken off his shoes and placed them on the ground in front of the *kang*. (IV-5)



FIGURE 14. Traditional Manchu gesture of greeting. (I-16)



FIGURE 15. The mother's brother comes for a visit. The papercut shows him entering the main gate of the house. The season of the visit, harvest time, is indicated by ripened corncobs. (IV-4)

6. 在这山中有一苗千年棒
槌精。想要引度一凡人做
山神。保佑进山的好人。他
见孙良志诚心善。就变成
一位青年与孙良结伴。



FIGURE 16. A ginseng spirit changes into a young man and becomes the sworn brother of the ginseng seeker. The symmetry achieved by the tree and the plant to the right and to the left of the figures as well as through the bowing of the figures toward each other expresses harmony between them. The tree behind the ginseng spirit is a pine tree, which the seekers believe to be the protector of the ginseng plant. (III-6)



FIGURE 17. The mother's brother steals the ginseng his nephew has dug out. It shows both the profile and front of the character to depict the shaking of his head.



FIGURE 18. The heroine's mother has lost her sight. She is lying on the heated *kang* covered with a quilt made from traditional indigo-blue-dyed cotton cloth with white patterns. Her head rests on a square Manchu cushion. The table with the lamp, indicating nighttime, stands in the back. The papercut shows the ginseng maiden visiting the mother and healing her eyes. (I-22)



FIGURE 19. The papercut plays on the "double-happiness" emblem of the two Chinese characters for happiness 喜 (*xǐ*) put together. This "double-ginseng, double-happiness" papercut stands for the marriage of a ginseng seeker with a ginseng spirit. It shows a courtyard with the main gate and enclosure, the main house with the entrance door in the middle, "double-happiness" emblems symmetrically decorating the window to the left and right of the door, and a straw-thatched gable roof. (II-10)



FIGURE 20. The hero steams meat and bakes flat cakes. The perspective chosen allows the spectator to look into the pot. (VII-2)

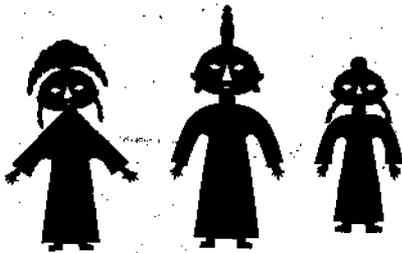


FIGURE 22. *Mama ren*. 婆婆人. (JIN 1989a, 57)



FIGURE 23. The more the rich landlord thinks it over, the more he becomes suspicious. He decides to secretly follow the young herdsman and see if he has found a precious ginseng root. (VI-18)



FIGURE 21. While the mother's brother steals the valuable ginseng root, his nephew, left alone in a deep gorge, cries for help. The ginseng root beside the nephew is the real treasure root. (I-8)



FIGURE 24. The hero watches a shadow theater play where the action of the tale is shifting. (IV-24)



FIGURE 25. Shenbao, the hero, cautiously clears away the grass with a *suobo* staff and digs out the root with a deerbone needle. (IV-14)



FIGURE 26. Digging out the ginseng root. (Single paper-cut, March 1993)



14. 他们穿过了三片密不透风的树林，树枝挂破了脸和胳膊、腿，也不怕疼。

FIGURE 27. Searching for ginseng. (X-14)

FIGURE 28. The ginseng maiden is pursued and threatened with iron weapons. She punishes the aggressors with a flood that she emits from her magic box. (IX-28)



in the scene, be cut with all the details or with only some. Seeds, leaves, and rhizome are most often shown.

Apart from material culture, Hou Yumei shows the rules and manners of the traditional practice. While searching for ginseng the men are hierarchically organized. With the seekers' *suobogun* in front of them, they systematically comb through the thicket, always walking as straight ahead as possible (see figures 5 and 27). Ginseng seekers traditionally take the whole plant with them, packing it into tree bark and carrying it on their backs or in their backpacks. In the papercuts, ginseng roots are often carried on the back like children or old people (figures 17, 21). Here again the identification of the root with an anthropomorphous being is unveiled. The prohibition of touching the root with metal implements is shown in figure 28, where the use of (metal) weapons against a ginseng maiden leads to severe punishment of the aggressors.

THE PAPERCUT TALES AND THEIR ETHNIC CONTEXTS IN JILIN PROVINCE

Several elements in the picture stories of Hou Yumei recall religious or epic traditions of the Manchus or other Tungus peoples of northeast China, even though the influence of traditional Han-Chinese papercuts is clearly visible. Some Chinese researchers have investigated the genesis of Manchu papercuts. Although these articles do not focus on Hou Yumei's papercuts, they may nonetheless contribute to a better understanding of them.¹¹

It is difficult to estimate the influence of the above-mentioned ethnic traditions on Hou Yumei's art since little is known about the socialization of her and of her mother. The possible implications of Manchu elements in the papercuts is, however, worth consideration.

First of all, the elements of Manchu culture in the papercuts are interesting. The dresses, hairstyles, and gestures are traditional Manchu in style. Hou Yumei's papercuts apparently have evolved from traditional patterns. We do not know if picture tales have been a Manchu tradition, but we do know that papercuts have been used in sacral matters and—hardly surprising—in children's games. Certain figures in Hou Yumei's papercuts resemble paper figures used in shamanistic rituals of the Manchu. One category of such figures is called in Chinese the *Mama ren* 嬷嬷人 ("Mama-people").¹² Jin Zhilin is of the opinion that they belong to a group of protection and fertility gods known as the *Zhuaji wawa* 抓髻娃娃 ["seizing-the-hairbunchild"] that are widespread throughout China. Wang Chunxin also writes about the *Mama ren*. He thinks they were originally paper idols of the *Mama shen* 嬷嬷神 [*Mama*-goddesses] like the goddess of descent, *Omosi mama*, or the goddess of marriage and luck, *Saksa mama*. Wang Chunxin sees these goddess idols as the models for a children's game popular among the

Manchu that is played with an anthropomorphous *Mama ren* cut out of white paper, which children use to imitate scenes from their everyday lives (WANG 1988, 94; JIN 1989a, 7).¹³ These *Mama ren* stand upright and are cut *en face*, with arms extended and the fingers splayed out. The sense organs are cut in negative technique, with a triangular nose. The costumes and hairstyles are traditional Manchu (figure 22). Some figures in Hou Yumei's papercuts strongly resemble these *Mama ren* (figure 23).

Apart from the idols of these goddesses, papercuts can be found in other contexts such as Manchu shamanic ritual. In healing ceremonies, for example, shamans use anthropomorphous figures cut out of white paper.¹⁴ *Lashou wawa* 拉手娃娃 (“children holding hands”), described by Jin Zhilin, are put at night into glowing ashes in order to protect newborn children. Without any doubt Manchu papercuts should be seen against this sacral background (JIN 1989a, 7). WANG Chunxin cites another example of sacral models for today's Manchu papercuts. He describes white papercuts hung at the sacrificial ancestral board on the western gable wall of a Manchu house (1989, 7; JIN 1989a, 7; ANONYMOUS 1991, 309) Finally, the *Fodo* 佛頭¹⁵ staff has to be mentioned in this context. It is a staff traditionally planted at the side of a Manchu grave. Attached to the top of the staff are papercuts in five colors, cut in negative technique. WANG Chunxin believes that the negative technique also indicates the influence of these papercuts on today's Manchu papercuts (1987, 7).

Hou Yumei's papercut tales have, as already mentioned, clearly been influenced by theater and epic forms. In some motifs of Hou Yumei's picture stories the shadow theater (figure 24) serves to tell a story within the story or as the place to where the action of the tale has shifted. Seen from a technical point of view, there are apparent similarities between the manufacturing of shadow theater figures and papercuts; but this is not the only aspect that relates Hou Yumei's papercut art to shadow theater. We are dealing with an art that, like the picture tale, is based on the epic form. WAN Yin shows in his article on Manchu theater in the district of Gai, southern Liaoning, that in this area shadow theater traditions have been adopted and “Manchurized” from Leping shadow theater traditions in Hebei (1991).¹⁶ This Manchurization has brought about a change in the equipment of the figures (design and costumes), as well as in the content of the performed plays. Could Hou Yumei's papercut tales be a similar case?

Very few of the innumerable popular artists like Hou Yumei in China have yet been studied, though books on popular art are abundant. Thus the question of the artistic as well as ethnic originality of Hou Yumei's papercuts remains difficult to answer. I do not know of any example of papercut tales in China, nor in Manchu tradition, similar to those of Hou Yumei. This is

probably due to the still insufficient research on and documentation of similar artists. Even though Hou Yumei personally insists on her Manchu identity, the influence of Han Chinese and Korean folklore on popular arts in the Changbai Shan area cannot be denied. This is one of the results of the continuous migration of Han Chinese settlers from Shandong, Hebei, and Liaoning to the area since the mid-nineteenth century (BAO 1992) and of the long relations with neighboring Korea that have transcended national borders.

If we look only briefly at northern Chinese (i.e., Han) papercut art, we discover that motifs from folk literature may very well be the object of papercuts. In Han-Chinese folk art one may at least speak of a tendency towards the picture tale. Two examples may show this.

First, there are thematic complexes that illustrate oral traditions (ZENG BERLINER 1986, 31–35). One prominent example is the *Laoshu quqin* 老鼠娶親 or *Laoshu jia nü* 老鼠嫁女, the “marriage of the rat.” These are papercut motifs based on a religious ritual widespread in northern China. It is part of the New Year’s festival and takes place in the beginning of the first month of the lunisolar Chinese peasant calendar, meant to prevent rat plagues. The motif does appear in papercuts as well as in other domains of folk art like earthenware toys and New Year pictures, and in Hunan we know of a children’s game on the subject (ZENG BERLINER 1986, 45–46; BREDON and MITROPHANOW 1966, 143–44; PAN 1992, 8–12; YE et al. eds. 1990, 32; YE 1992). The papercuts dealing with the rat’s marriage are not a picture series directly bound to a larger oral tradition like that of ginseng seeking. In the papercuts, characteristic motifs and traits of the ritual and its related folk literature, especially the marriage procession, are illustrated and memorized.

A second example is the use of papercuts as illustrations of biographies. DENG Yanfang describes thirty papercuts by her illiterate mother. With the aid of the papercuts the old lady could tell about events in her life. Unfortunately, specialist literature does not allow us to know if this case corresponds to any Han-Chinese tradition (1990). The name of the old lady is not even mentioned in the article, and in PAN Lusheng’s book her papercuts are reproduced as anonymous papercuts from Hebei Province (1992, 3, 5, 6, 7, 23). I only hope that the academic world concerned with popular Chinese arts will start to study the personalities and cultural context of the artists themselves before they disappear.

SUMMARY

Ginseng seeking has had an important influence on the local popular culture in the Changbai Shan area. Themes and motifs relating to the plant and to traditional seeking are found in folktales, popular songs, proverbs, popular

performing arts, embroideries, and papercuts. Hou Yumei has always felt that her expression of Changbai Shan area folklore themes in her peculiar style of papercut tales is a continuation of what she learned from her mother as well as a product of her own unique skill and vocation. A closer look at her art and the cultural heritage she draws from, however, shows that her papercuts go far beyond a personal expression of her Manchu identity and her individual art. The amazing variety of motifs and details in her papercuts reveals her knowledge of ginseng folklore, which she herself might not be fully aware of. Her art work, although not a result of her own experience of ginseng seeking, shows a way in which knowledge of this tradition may be conserved in popular art and be transmitted through women who are themselves excluded from it. In this way, popular art serves as a visual means for transmitting knowledge and teaching tradition.

NOTES

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1. For important publications see the references.

2. See, for example, ANONYMOUS 1988; PAN 1992, 30–31; LIU Jiang 1988, 69; WU 1987, 90; WANG 1991.

3. Information on Hou Yumei can be found in annexes to her booklets. Details about her life given in this article are in part taken from short private talks with her in November 1988 in Tonghua as well as in March 1993 in Berlin. For more information on her life see HOU 1989, FLITSCH 1992, and JIN 1997.

4. See list in the appendix.

5. For more information see, for example, BAUER ed. 1976, and ZENG BERLINER 1986, 197–99.

6. Roman numbers refer to the list of booklets in the appendix.

7. See STARY 1985. Included in this article by Stary is a translation of PENG Bo (P'eng Bo) 1983 with the title "Die Figur des Khans in den mündlichen Werken und die volkstümliche Literatur des Mandschuvolkes," (430–45).

8. Talking about *the* Han-Chinese papercut art is problematic insofar as today's Jilin local popular culture is the result of a long acculturation of different ethnic and local groups. The Han in Jilin refers here to the Han coming from inner provinces of China like Shandong, Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Hebei who have seasonally migrated to northeast China since Han times (second century BC) to exploit natural resources in the area such as wood, ginseng, medicinal herbs, and wild animals. It is within this traditional context that Han Chinese popular culture in Jilin evolved. The proper settlement of most of Jilin only started in the nineteenth century (see LI 1991, 166–67).

9. The materials available for this article on ginseng tales of the Korean nationality in China are so few that the question cannot be dealt with in detail.

10. With his pioneering work on the general significance of initiation in any society, VAN GENNEP paved the way for a new comprehension of oral traditions that reflect the subject of

initiation (1909; see also TURNER 1964). For initiation tales see LINDOW 1978.

11. About Manchu papercuts see LIU Jiang 1988, MENG 1990, WANG and YING 1992, WANG 1986, 1987, 1988, and WU 1987.

12. It is difficult to find an original Manchu term for these *Mama ren*. *Mama* is a Manchu term for “grandmother” or “ancestress” (HAUER 1952–1955, 637). It is also one of the terms used for shamanist Manchu goddesses (see CHENG 1985).

13. A similar tradition is known among the Daur, whose children play with *hanika* figures cut out of paper (see ANONYMOUS 1985, 285, illustration 96)

14. See STARY 1992, 40, annotation 5 and STARY 1992, 55–59. According to HAUER anthropomorphic paper figures used to prevent nightmares are called *unge* in the Manchu language (1952–1955, 967).

15. *Fodo* is the Manchu pronunciation of this term; it is also sometimes spelled *foiou*. For more on this term see HAUER 1952–1955, 301, and CHENG 1985.

16. See also LIU Jilin 1988, 14, illustrations 75–78. The Leting tradition of shadow theater has spread throughout northeast China.

APPENDIX: LIST OF HOU YUMEI'S PAPERCUT TALES

Volumes of Hou Yumei's papercut-tales in collections in Germany and Austria.

- I. *Qiaoyu shengou: Dongbei minjian Manzu jianzhi lianhuan gushi* 巧遇參姑: 東北民間滿族剪紙連環故事 [Accidental meeting with the ginseng maiden: A northeast China Manchu papercut picture folktale], 1985. Twenty-six sheets, title page photocopied (vertical format, papercuts about 18 x 13 cm), red. Together with *Mao'er Shan jianzhi lianhuan xiao gushi* in one booklet. In Flitsch collection.
- II. *Mao'er Shan jianzhi lianhuan xiao gushi* 貓耳山剪紙連環小故事 [Short picture story from Cat-Ear Mountain], 1986. Text written by Hou Taiping 候太平. Seventeen sheets (square, vertical format, papercuts about 27 x 27.5), red. Together with *Qiaoyu shengou: Dongbei minjian Manzu jianzhi lianhuan gushi* bound into one booklet. In Flitsch collection.
- III. *Washen zushi ye* 挖參祖師爺 [The master ancestor of the ginseng seekers], 1987, summer (the papercuts are rough in form and content and maybe of an earlier date). Text written by Hou Taiping. Twenty-two sheets (oblong format, papercuts about 19 x 25 cm), red. In Flitsch collection.
- IV. *Qiaoyu shengou* 巧遇參姑 [Accidental meeting with the ginseng maiden], ca. 1989, September. Fifty sheets (oblong format, papercuts about 12.5 x 17 cm), red. In Flitsch collection.
- V. *Hei fengguai* 黑風怪 [The black wind ghost], 1989. Forty-five sheets (oblong format, papercuts about 13 x 23 cm), red. In Dr. E. Unterrieder collection, Vienna.
- VI. *Shenwa: Ren Shen* 參娃人參. *Shangji* 上集 [The ginseng child: Ginseng. First volume], ca. 1989. Fifty-nine sheets (vertical format, papercuts about 12 x 9 cm), red. In Flitsch collection. Papercuts numbers 5, 10, 18, 19, 24, 36, 47, 55, 58 of this story have been published in NENTWIG 1994.
- VII. *Bangchui gou: Ren Shen* 棒槌溝人參. *Xiaji* 下集. [The ginseng valley: Ginseng. Second volume], 1989, December. Fifty-six sheets (vertical format, papercuts about 12 x 10 cm), red. In Flitsch collection.

- VIII. *Aixin Jueluo: Manzu zuxian Aixin Jueluo Bukuli Yongshun* 愛新覺羅: 滿族祖先愛新覺羅布庫里雍順 [Aisin Gioro: The ancestor of the Manchus, Aisin Gioro Bukûri Yongshun], 1990, January. Text written by Hou Taiping. Fifty-seven sheets (oblong format, papercuts about 22 x 24 cm), red. In Museum für Völkerkunde collection, SMB-PK, Berlin.
- IX. *Mao'er Shan chuanqi: Bangchui guniang* 貓耳山傳奇: 棒槌姑娘 [A legend from Cat-Ear Mountain: The ginseng maiden], 1990, December. Thirty-nine sheets (oblong format, papercuts about 13 x 19.5 cm), red. In Dr. E. Unterrieder collection, Vienna; Museum für Völkerkunde collection, SMB-PK, Berlin; Flitsch collection. (The papercuts and handwritten text are not bound.)
- X. *Xiao Hanzi washen* 小罕子挖參 [Nurhachi searches for ginseng], 1992, April. Thirty sheets (oblong format, papercuts about 20 x 23.5 cm), black. In Flitsch collection.
- XI. *Mao dimei yu gou da bozi* 貓弟妹與狗大伯子 [Younger brother's wife and father's elder brother], 1993, March. Twenty sheets (oblong format, papercuts about 13 x 19.5 cm), red. In Dr. E. Unterrieder collection, Wien; Flitsch collection.

In epilogues or prefaces to the papercut tales in the Flitsch collection several other papercut tales are mentioned:

Manzu zuxian Bukuli yuanshun 滿族祖先布庫里雍順 [The ancestor of the Manchus Bukûri Yongshun].

Mao'er Shan chuanqi: Kaishan yaoshi 貓耳山傳奇: 開山鑰匙 [A legend from Cat-Ear Mountain: The key to open the mountain].

Mao'er Shan chuanqi: Bangchui niao 貓耳山傳奇: 棒槌鳥 [A legend from Cat-Ear mountain: The ginseng bird].

Renshen gushi 人參故事 [The ginseng tale].

Shenlü 神驢 [The spirit-donkey].

Sun Liang washen 孫良挖參 [Sun Liang digs out ginseng].

Wuya jiu jia 烏鴉救佳 [The crow's good rescue].

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