

## Book Reviews

***Up in Flames: The Ephemeral Art of Pasted-Paper Sculpture in Taiwan.* Ellen Johnston Laing and Helen Hui-ling Liu. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004. 232 pp.**

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Intended for the Chinese supernatural world, paper sculptures are spiritual objects fashioned to be burned and thereby transferred to the heavenly plane during funerals and religious rituals. In dazzling flames and vanishing ashes, this delicate art tradition has been observed for more than a thousand years, yet has left merely vague traces in written texts. Fortunately, the authors of *Up in Flames* offer us a great chance to grasp this ephemeral art with its lavish illustrations, including 75 gorgeous color photographs taken in contemporary Taiwan. There is no doubt that, even taking studies in Chinese language into account, this is the first major work on the largely ignored traditional folk craft of paper sculpture.

The first two chapters of *Up in Flames* delineate a general religious and historical backdrop, positioning the authors' fieldwork-based local analysis in a larger temporal and spatial scope. Sketching out a brief overview about the afterlife, ancestors, and the supernatural realm, chapter 1 points out the dominant Chinese belief that there exists a reciprocal relationship of exchange and retribution between the living and the deceased. What burning paper objects in rituals represent then is the important transfer of money and materials to the other world. Chapter 2 scrupulously uncovers traces of the ancient folk craft scattered in Chinese historical sources, piecing together a loose history from oral legends and texts of its possible origin in the mid-eighth century to its period of greatest prosperity, as captured in visual records of the early 20th century. It thus sets up a basic reference point for comparison throughout the whole volume.

In four later chapters, based upon three sessions of fieldwork with paper artisans in five Taiwan cities during 1989, 1996, and 1997, the authors aim to provide a vivid picture of the contemporary craft

of paper construction as it is practiced in the current era. As stated in the introduction, the book's foci are "the artisans themselves, the craft of paper sculptures as a business, and the materials and techniques used to construct paper objects" (p. 4). Chapters 3 and 5 provide an excellent and informative illustration of the various types of paper objects produced and their relevant ritual and festival functions, while also describing the required materials, tools, and techniques used to make them. Coupled with firsthand photographs, special and nuanced skills of the ancient handicraft are captured and represented through their meticulous examination. For the first time, this ephemeral craft is unveiled in great detail. In order to present personal styles of folk artisans and the business of paper construction, seasoned with tactile detail of interviews, chapter 4 tells life stories and daily routines of five craftsmen and two suppliers, narrating their apprenticeship, specialty, and current state of business. Chapter 6 offers a careful examination of the workmanship of three representative craftsmen, analyzing various levels of individual skill, taste, and subtlety, revealing the large space left for personal choice and creativity.

The authors are insightful to devote such a beautiful tribute to the seemingly negligible ritual paraphernalia, highlighting craftsmen as well as their artistic techniques and skills. Framing it as a kind of fine arts however, they might have gone a bit too far, largely detaching the artistic creation from contextual belief and the practice of tradition. As their fieldwork seems to have been based on short visits, limited to interviews in workshops and concrete examination of works, the discussion of ritual functions of paper objects relies mainly on artisans' descriptions or existing ethnographic accounts; thereby the authors seem to lack firsthand information on the actual handling of such objects in cultural performance.

More importantly though, although detailed, the portrayal of artisans failed to reveal their deeper attitudes and feelings toward the objects. Although the authors noted that "many paper artisans are committed to producing well-crafted and visually pleasing objects regardless of the fact that their creations are to be deliberately destroyed"(p. 5), they paid little attention to some craftsmen's

belief that “these objects are simply translated elsewhere and do not really disappear” (p. 164). Constructing and using paper sculpture, in effect, is not merely an art or craft. Rather, they are inherent parts of traditional Chinese religious practices. Under the guise of ritual and festival routines, for centuries, the craft has been maintained out of deep concern for respectfully communicating with the other world and supporting, materially, the envisaged afterlife. In a great sense, paper objects are not fake miniatures fashioned for an inspecting gaze seeking artistic beauty and creativity. They are made and burned, on the contrary, to soothe sorrow, to satisfy desire, and to fulfill longing. Underestimating such a backbone, the constructing and burning of spiritual objects would be meaningless, and one would never approach the core of Chinese paper sculpture.

It would be, of course, inaccurate to say that the authors have totally neglected these matters. In attempting to address the dynamics and future of paper sculpture through case studies, they conclude the volume with an artisan’s statement: “As long as there are believers, this craft will not die out” (p. 168). But who are the believers, and where are they? Religious tradition, as they presented it, seems merely to be a fading background located faraway. They failed to recognize, for instance, that what was going on right in front of them during their interviews was just a kind of religious practice. Except for mentioning the Taoist family tradition of several artisans, the book provides little information on artisans with regard to their beliefs or their inspirations beyond earning their living. Moreover, as the ethnographic data are largely limited to paper construction workshops and their suppliers, clients of paper objects are totally outside the authors’ concern. How is it possible, then, to consider the craft as a business without taking into account the motivations, needs, and tastes of those people who order and use such sculpture? It is true that in cities, this traditional craft seems to be restricted to bounded workshops on the surface; the network behind it, however, reaches out far beyond the small shops of artisans and suppliers. As the authors noticed, some paper artisans were also funeral directors and most of them played several other roles, such as fortuneteller or geomancer. It was quite possible that some of them were active in local popular religious practices.

In some places, *Up in Flames* hinted that paper sculptors had reservations and were unwilling to disclose detailed or secret information about their craft (pp. 79, 90, 140). Among several possible reasons, the more or less esoteric tradition of transmission should be taken into consideration. As a religious folk craft, paper sculpture is transmitted through long-term apprenticeship, a process that shapes a specially trained, nimble body and a sensitive mind. Understandably, fashioning objects intended for the supernatural realm demands extra care and devotion. Some knowledge, techniques, and feelings maintained are not only secret but also might be beyond language. Without extensive fieldwork, therefore, it is not easy to approach deep experiences.

All in all, *Up in Flames* provides a significant and revealing foundation for an in-depth study of the practice of constructing and using paper sculpture as a whole, making further comparison between Taiwan and Mainland China possible. It will definitely become a substantial reference for future works to come. As a kind of folk craft that has largely remained silent and veiled from the ears and eyes of scholarship for hundreds of years, the shortcomings of their work and the difficulties the authors’ encountered remind us clearly of the complexity and richness of this seemingly trivial tradition.

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***Pacific Voices: Keeping our Cultures Alive.* Miriam Khan and Erin Younger, eds. Seattle: University of Washington Press in Association with the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, 2005. 173 pp.**

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In 1997, the Burke Museum in Seattle opened its *Pacific Voices* exhibition, a permanent installa-