The Cut

Refiguring traditional Chinese paper-cutting

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MA&D 2011

This exegesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology

for the degree of Master of Art and Design.

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2011

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

Cheng-yi Fey

October 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. King Tong Ho,

Thank you for your inspiration, wisdom and never ending support. I deeply appreciate your guidance and encouragement throughout the research journey. It is a great pleasure to have met you and be your student.

To Dr. Alan Young,

Thank you for your time, knowledge and suggestions. Your critical comments have broadened my ideas and your creative insights have encouraged the diversity of my practice.

To my family and friends,

Thank you for your love, support and companionship.

I would like to express my gratitude to the School of Art and Design of AUT University for the research stipend and the campus facilities associated with the realisation of this project.

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ABSTRACT

The Cut: Refiguring traditional Chinese paper-cutting

This research investigates the possibilities of refiguring[1] the traditional art form of Chinese paper-cutting through the concept of kitsch in a contemporary setting.

This project aims to expand the creative scope of Chinese paper-cutting by using contemporary design methods and subject matter, suggesting that the craft should not be limited to its traditional material, hand-cut methods, and motifs. The Western concept of kitsch is employed as a guiding principle underpinning the contemporary aesthetics and significance of Chinese paper-cutting.

The project also deploys modern popular goods as the research content to address the current ideology of consumption. Using personal examples, I comment on the social phenomenon of excessive consumption of goods in modern everyday life.

The outcome is a series of wall pieces as an exploration of Chinese paper-cutting, supported by contemporary design methods and concepts. This project consists of 80 percent practice-based work, accompanied by 20 percent for this exegesis as a complement.

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[1] Refigure - to figure again or anew; to give new meaning or use to

INTRODUCTION

This practice-based research employs contemporary design methods to refigure the art form of traditional Chinese paper-cutting within a conceptual framework of the Westernized notion of kitsch. It extends this framework to address the social behavior of excessive consumption (Figure 1).
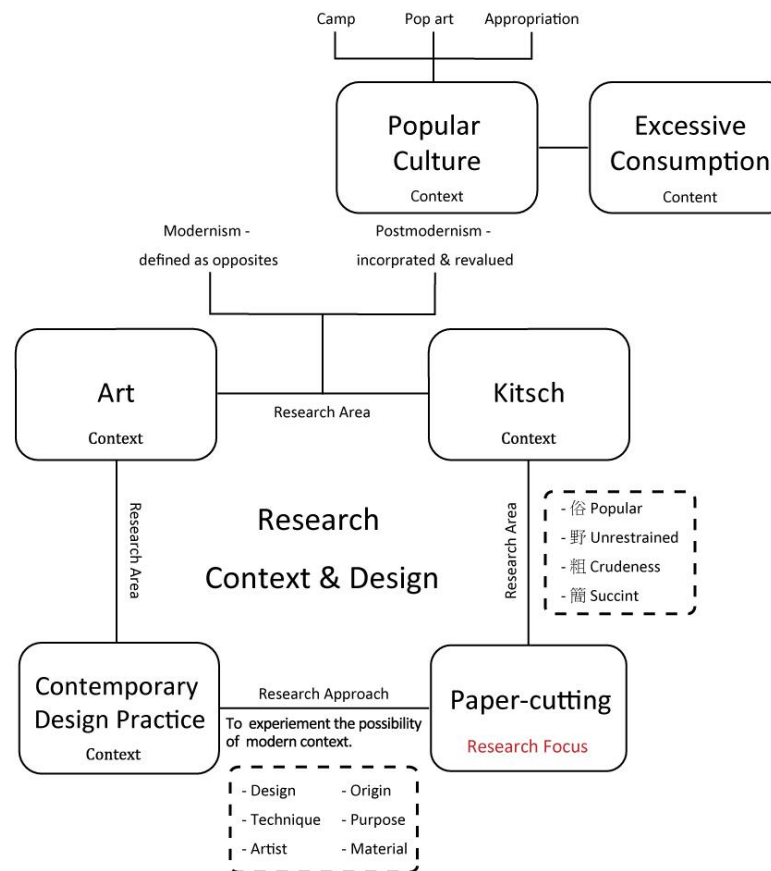
Figure 1. *Fey, C. (2011). Research Context & Design*

This exegesis is structured into two sections:

The first chapter contextualises the theoretical framework of the research. The origin and background of traditional Chinese paper-cutting is reviewed with a contemporary view to expand its potential. It also establishes my project position and design strategies to refigure Chinese paper-cutting. Furthermore, the Western concept of kitsch is investigated in terms of the interrelationship between Chinese paper-cutting and popular culture, and how it is applied as an art approach to revalue everyday life and objects.

The second chapter gives a thorough reflection on the creative developments of the practice. Concurrently, through the analysis, it also appraises the design structure of the research method. Therefore, this chapter intertwines research methods with critical commentary to justify the practice.

The third chapter discusses the findings and conclusions of this research project.

CHAPTER ONE

CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

TRADITIONAL CHINESE PAPER-CUTTING

Chinese paper-cutting originated in Northern China during the Han Dynasty (c. 206BC – 220AD), and was used as grave goods. Later, it spread to other regions of China, taking on different styles of the locals and bearing unique functions (Mao, 2004).

There are two common applications of paper-cutting which I use in this research to define as traditional Chinese paper-cutting: (1) for decoration, with propitious use of symbolism for celebrative occasions such as New Year, birthdays, weddings, and other special occasions; and (2) as an offering in rituals for religious beliefs. These paper-cuttings have historically been designed with fixed traditional motifs that are passed on and followed for many generations.

Chinese paper-cutting was well recognised as a peasant and woman's art, as workers and women were more skilled with scissors and knives, and no education was required for this art and craft. Paper-cutting was also considered as an essential skill for women along with embroidery and cooking. Paper-cutting was generally passed on from elder-women to younger girls who first learned the skill by imitating the paper-cuts done by elder-women. Once the skills of cutting and patterning had been mastered, they were able to improvise and cut their own designs.

Paper-cutting was a hobby, a tradition, and a part of the Chinese culture. However, the creative scope of Chinese paper-cutting is aesthetically and conceptually limited because its design and learning processes rely heavily on imitation. As technology advanced and the pace of modern life increased, paper-cutting began to fade out due to its time consuming and meticulous working processes. The value of paper-cutting has also changed significantly. It is no longer treated as a craft for the uneducated or to appraise a woman's worthiness as a potential wife.[2].

In contrast with the traditional relationship between women and Chinese paper-cutting, I position myself as a researcher in design to explore the contemporary application of the art of paper-cutting. This work is inspired by Kenya Hara's (2007) comment on contemporary design practices:

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[2] In the past, women were judged by the potential family in-laws on the achievement in quality and quantity of her embroidery and paper-cuts.

We hold a great accumulation of culture in our own hands, yet we remain unaware of its value. The ability to make use of these cultural assets as a virgin resource is no less creative than the ability to produce something out of nothing. (p. 434)

This research does not aim to negate the art of traditional Chinese paper-cutting, but rather to broaden the creative scope of it with new possibilities aesthetically and conceptually, and thereby allow the art form to traverse cultural differences and be utilized in contemporary art and design practice.

A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF CHINESE PAPER-CUTTING

Chinese paper-cutting is well acknowledged and appreciated for its distinguished aesthetics and need for meticulous skills, but is often considered as conceptually deficient due to its origin as peasant and women's art. However, contemporary Chinese scholar Jang Dauyi [張道一] proposes four significant concepts of folk art that also apply to Chinese paper-cutting (Wu, 1995, p. 21).
They are:

- Su   [俗]   Popular
- Ye   [野]   Unrestrained
- Tsu [粗]   Crude
- Jian [簡]   Succinct

Su [俗] means *popular* and *vulgar*. This concept is demonstrated in my practice through harnessing the aspects of the Western concept of kitsch which will be discussed later.

Ye [野] literally means *unrestrained*. Jang uses this concept to explain that folk art should not be emotionally restrained, but used as a means of self-expression.

Tsu [粗] could be considered as *crude*. It does not suggest poor quality of an art work or its nature. It is the primitive in ideas within all folk art, which strongly differs from being conceptually deficient.

Jian [簡] is *succinct*. Folk art is concise and direct in its ideas and purposes.

These aesthetic concepts are the conceptual repository that informs the refiguring of Chinese paper-cutting to enrich the creative scope of the design approaches of contemporary media.

REFIGURING CHINESE PAPER-CUTTING

To refigure paper-cutting in a contemporary context, I contend that the traditional aesthetic concepts of material (paper) and method (hand-cut process) should be expanded to become a creative and conceptual expression. Paper-cutting should not be restricted to its physicality of cutting into paper; it can also be applied to other media such as printing and drawing. 'Cutting' is a thinking process in terms of design and aesthetics and is not limited to 'hand' cutting.

The contemporary design workflow familiar and popular with today's art and design practitioners is the synergy that can instill new thoughts and aesthetics to refigure paper cutting. For example, working with computer technologies to design the cuts is a process that I call *virtual-cutting*. This method is similar to the actual paper-cutting process, but allows a wider range of design techniques and formats that enrich the workflow and creative resolutions, thus overcoming the restricted patterns and practices of the traditional hand-cutting method.

Hara (2007) states, *"taking something that we think we already know and making it unknown thrills us afresh with its reality and deepens our understanding of it"* (p.19). It is a process which allows designers to learn about a familiar subject through different ways of thinking and perceiving. Hara's (2007) concept of re-design is to give a familiar object a different form or a different function which guides the approach of this research.

RE-DESIGN IN FORM

Auspicious motifs and symbols have always been popular subjects for Chinese paper-cutting; however, themes are unrestrained; as such they have the potential to be employed by contemporary artists and designers for creative endeavours.

The Chinese contemporary artist Lu Shengzhong [呂勝中] is well known for his paper-cutting as an art form. His works are deeply rooted in the aesthetics and method of Chinese paper-cutting using traditional red craft paper, hand-cut process, and the figures of little red men (Figure 2) throughout most of his practice.

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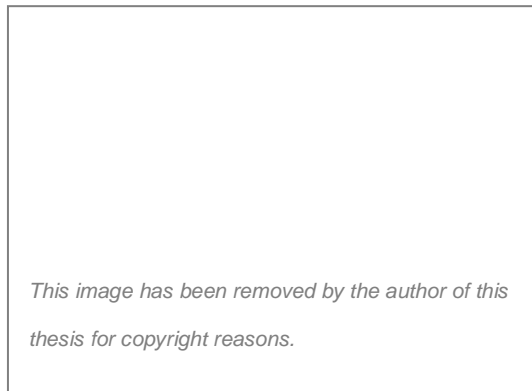
Figure 2. Lu, S. (2004). *Little Red Figure in Auspice from Above*.

Lu uses this traditional art as a conceptual means to comment on humanity in contemporary society, and employs the aesthetic modes in his book work and large scale installations. His work challenges the traditional usage of Chinese paper-cutting and opens up a new territory for this form, integrating both conceptual art and folk art. Lu's approach has refigured Chinese paper-cutting and reinforces Hara's (2007) concept of re-design.

Taiwanese designer Chen Yanting [陳彥廷] provides another example of re-designing the form of Chinese paper-cutting. Chen has created a series of designs (Figure 3) by applying the organic mode of 'fold and cut' to construct circular motifs through repetitive patterns. However, Chen employs Western signs and symbols such as letters of the English alphabet, Arabic numerals, and mass-cultural signs as the components of his designs; thus instilling a traditional aesthetic in the Western contents of his works.

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Figure 3. Chen, Y. (2008). *Letter Cutting*

Transforming his paper-cut works and presenting them in printed posters is compelling. And his abandoning the 'hand-cut' process and 'cut' output poses inspiring questions:

- What are the contemporary qualities of paper-cutting?
- What are the new potentials of its practicing modes?
- Is it mandatory to conform to the material (paper) and aesthetics (cut) for the finished work to be called paper-cutting?

Chen blends new methods, contents, and technologies to revitalize paper-cutting without producing the final work through 'cutting' of 'paper'. His approach has also addressed the labour-intensive and time consuming nature of paper-cutting, which are the obstacles to its survival in modern life.

As Hara (2007) suggests:

> *The conventional is not replaced by new technologies. The old accepts the new, resulting in more options. What we need for that to happen is not to cling to the new, but to rationally analyze the options we've got.* (p.435)

Chen and Lu employ paper-cutting differently. Lu keeps the traditional nature of paper-cutting and relocates the medium to an intellectual context to address conceptual arenas. Chen instills it with contemporary thoughts and methods. What is common between Chen and Lu is the re-design of paper-cutting both in form and application (function).

RE-DESIGN IN FUNCTION

Chinese paper-cutting is most commonly used for decoration. Paper-cuts are traditionally displayed around the house – hung from windows, doors, or ceilings, or attached to smaller objects such as candles and chopsticks. Thus the display environment is a primary factor that influences the design of shape and motif of the paper-cuts. Paper-cuts were also used as a way of expressing blessing wishes and used as a wrapping for gifts; which could be considered as the traditional counterpart of today's package design.

Figure 4. Fey, C. (2010). *Red Slippers*.

In my earlier practice (Figure 4), I applied the idea of 'cutting' onto slippers, aiming to instill the aesthetic sense of paper-cutting into modern everyday life objects. For durability, this was accomplished by engraving patterns onto the soles of slippers. Such designs enabled the shoe-print to produce a negative image that corresponds to the idea of positive and negative. This is a key feature of paper-cutting. The positive cutting is called Yang Jian [陽剪] which results in more cut-out space; the negative cut is called Ying Jian [陰剪] where the focus is on the interior of the design and there is less cut-out space. These two methods are usually chosen in relation to the design and purpose of the paper-cutting.

Through my process of refiguring Chinese paper-cutting, I narrowed the possible approaches down to its traditional function as decoration, and its

contemporary usage as a creative medium.

In this project, art works are produced using the modern technology of laser cutting: not only to expand the possibility of production method of traditional Chinese paper-cutting; but also to address the current ideology of consumption through the example of how traditional folk art can be turned into mass-produced products. In doing this, the art form of Chinese paper-cutting is also approached as a commentary on the modern social phenomenon of excessive consumption.

THE CONCEPT OF KITSCH

The word 'kitsch' is frequently used to refer to inferior art and bad-taste, and is perceived negatively in regards to both its aesthetic and economic value. The widespread derogatory use of kitsch began around 1939 and Clement Greenberg (1986) contends that 'avant-garde art' and 'kitsch' are to be defined as opposites. He suggests that kitsch cannot be a form of art as it is a copy of art that creates "vicarious experience and faked sensations," and is "the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our time" (p. 12).

Kitsch often refers to mass-produced objects made for commercial purposes and is designed to pander to popular demands. This opposes Modernism's belief in originality and artistic techniques. Thomas Kulka (1996) describes kitsch as a vicarious and vulgar product of mass culture that should not be aesthetically or artistically valued, and states:

Kitsch comes to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them…The aim of kitsch is not to create new needs or expectations, but to satisfy existing ones. Kitsch… breeds on universal images, the emotional charge of which appeals to everyone. (p. 27)

Kitsch is also known to borrow existing subjects and is designed to pander to the public as Kulka (1997) describes: *"Kitsch…breeds on universal images, the emotional charge of which appeals to everyone"* (p. 27). Thus, kitsch can be considered a representation of the popular taste through its theme, aesthetics, or function.

RE-SIGNIFICATION OF KITSCH

As postmodernism emerged, kitsch has been re-signified and appropriated by contemporary artists. Kitsch becomes a conceptual approach that artists apply to critique modern popular culture and the Modernist's classifications distinguishing between high-art and low-art.

This view is substantiated by the work of contemporary artist, Jeff Koons. He imitates ordinary trinkets by remaking them into a larger size using new material and placing them in a new context. His work emphasises the superficial appearance of the imitated objects and suggests that their only function is decorative with no hidden meaning. Figure 5 is a large sculpture of a balloon dog made of stainless steel from Koons' *Celebration* (1994-2004). The series contains oil paintings and large sculptures of objects from everyday life such as a party hat, an egg, cake, and plastic plates.

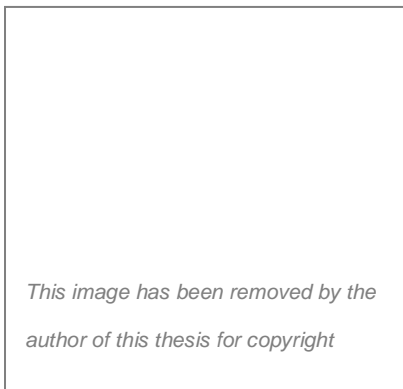*This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright*

Figure 5. Koons, J. (1994 - 2000). *Balloon Dog*.

Koons borrows visual aspects of kitsch that correspond to two conditions of kitsch suggested by Thomas Kulka (1996):

(i) *It depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.*

(ii) *The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable* (p. 37).

From my perspective, Koons' work appropriates kitsch as an effective art approach through suggesting and revaluing everyday life objects. This parallels the idea of 'new kitsch' suggested by Young (2000):

New kitsch is not a description of the object, but of its re-signification, the re-reading of the object and its appropriation, which makes visible the value judgments and ideological myths attached to the object. (p. 32)

Koons' use of kitsch as a creative mode also challenges the Modernist's discrimination against kitsch that is based on its form and context. His work draws equivalence between art and kitsch. Eleanor Heartney (2010) states that Koons' work is:

Suggesting that the only real difference between the working and middle classes who buy mass-produced kitsch and the cognoscenti of the art world who buy his work is the amount of money they are prepared to spend to outfit and decorate their homes. (p. 2)

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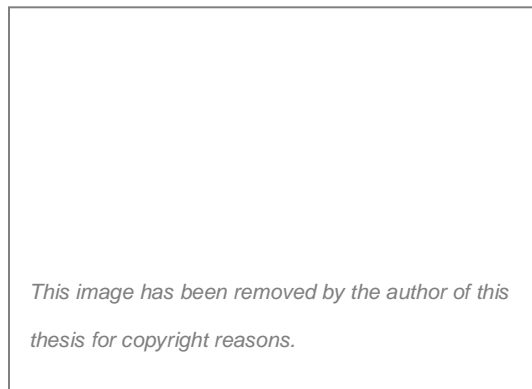
Figure 6. Murakami, T. (1996). *And Then, And Then And Then And Then And Then*.

Japanese artist Takashi Murakami challenges the conventional definition of high art through Japanese popular culture. Murakami creates the term 'superflat' to describe the shallowness of the aesthetic value, cultural value and graphic styles of contemporary Japanese pop culture and consumer

culture. Using popular style of animations and comics, Murakami creates characters, excessive patterns, and images with the theme of *kawaii* (cuteness) to address the superficial appearance that people pursue and the empty meaning that those objects hold. This idea is reinforced as Murakami describes his character, DOB (Figure 6), "DOB is a self portrait of the Japanese people. He is cute but has no meaning and understands nothing of life, sex, or reality" (Robertson, J, 2010, p.18).

Both Koons' and Murakami's works apply different forms, and context to:

Revalue kitsch in such a way as to disparage the elitist notions of high art and 'good' taste, while at the same time, disparaging with an air of superiority, the poor ignorant who actually like the stuff for what it is. (Young, 2000, p.29).

Moreover, to reinforce his idea, Murakami mass-produces cheaper copies of his art work at his studio and sells them in shops. By doing so, he is taking away the distinctions between unique objects (art) and mass-produced commodities (kitsch). In this research, I follow similar approach and produce my art work through laser-cutting rather than the traditional hand-cutting method. This mechanical approach does not only expand the possibility of applying traditional Chinese paper-cutting in a contemporary context but is also used to reflect on the mass production processes of modern popular culture.

Through their works, Koons and Murakami demonstrate how kitsch is used as an effective conceptual approach in contemporary art and design practice to emphasise and exaggerate the visual experience of sentimentality (stock emotion). It often reflects modern culture and lifestyle in an open and direct way, and is thus accessible to mass culture. Therefore, kitsch offers considerable value in its mockery and self-mockery — a critique that underlies its shallow and superficial appearance.

KITSCH AND FOLK ART

Greenberg (1986) posits that kitsch is a result of industrialisation that replaces the handmade process of folk art through mass-production for a cheaper production cost. However, regardless of their difference in production and output, kitsch and folk art share a similar nature that bears the identity, aesthetics, and cultural values of a specific community. They are a reflection of mass-culture within their context of everyday life objects, themes and aesthetics. It is also fair to maintain that everyday life is the root of their inspiration. As Walter Benjamin (2008) states, *"Folk art and kitsch allow us to see outward from within things"* (p. 209).

In this project, kitsch is a guiding concept that expands Chinese paper-cutting (folk art) to address the social phenomenon of excessive consumption in our modern daily life. Refiguring paper-cutting is a contemporary act of industrialisation of its creative process. Through this contemporary creative process, my work functions as an output encouraging the viewers to see beyond the traditional definition and design of Chinese paper-cutting and the concept of kitsch.

EXCESSIVE CONSUMPTION

This research also addresses the social phenomenon of excessive consumption of popular goods in modern everyday life. This is actualised by using personal examples; thus, the choice of objects is mostly based on my personal interests. Using modern objects as subjects is also one of the research approaches in refiguring Chinese paper-cutting. Modern objects are self-assertive of contemporary life styles and serve as parallel visual means of applying traditional Chinese paper-cutting that reflect on culture and social values of the past.

Figure 7. Fey, C. (2011). *Accessories*.

Figure 8. Fey, C. (2011). *Bags*.

Figures 7 and 8 are examples of excessive consumption taken from my personal items that demonstrate the unnecessary consumption of exceeding one's personal needs. They are used as inspiration and subjects of my further experiments.

This research does not intend to investigate the causes and justification of excessive consuming behaviour. It is a personal statement as a designer making a critical comment on the social phenomenon. However, considering Abraham Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs one might argue excessive consumption is caused by human psychological needs rather than by physical needs.
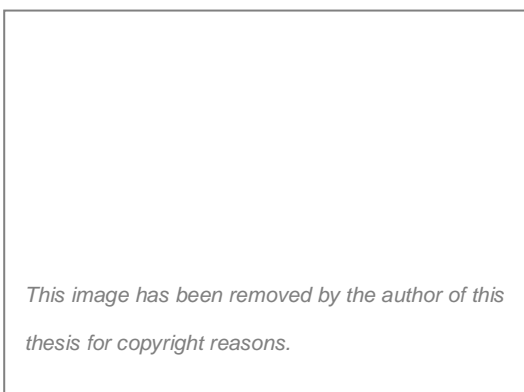
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Figure 9. Pride, W. M., Hughes, R. J., & Kapoor, J. R. (2011). *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

Maslow suggested five levels of human needs:[3] physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs (Figure 9). Each level of need must be reached for one to attempt to satisfy the next. As I contend, excessive consumption is not based on physical need: for example, the need of footwear (physical need) can be fulfilled simply by one pair of shoes. However, excessive consumption of shoes may occur with one seeking variety, conformity, uniqueness, attraction, self-confidence or excitement, which in Maslow's theory are considered as the social needs and esteem needs.

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[3] Pride, W. M., Hughes, R. J., & Kapoor, J. R., &. (2011, p. 282)
Physiological needs - things we require for survival
Safety needs – things we require for physical and emotional security
Social needs – the need for love, affection, and a sense of belonging
Esteem needs – the need for respect, recognition, a sense of accomplishment, and worth
Self-actualisation needs – the need to grow and develop

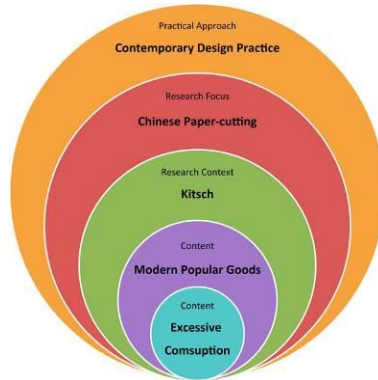# CHAPTER TWO

METHODS AND PROCESSES

METHODS

Figure 10. Fey, C. (2011). *Research Framework*.

The concept of kitsch and excessive consumption are core components of the research framework. They are the contexts throughout the process of refiguring Chinese paper-cutting in a contemporary setting.

I have employed a heuristic methodology in the creative aspect, it is "a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 15). I usually work in an intuitive manner; experimenting, discovering, and problem-solving through a trial and error process. This method allows me to gain knowledge and inspiration from experience, and refine the practice through reflection on ideas and new tests. This is supported by Stephen Scrivener (2000), who suggests that the process of creative projects should be carried out by designers performing as reflective creators being self-conscious and systematic.

The overarching approach uses reflection on action and practice (ROAP) which, as Scrivener (2000) defines: *"is not driven by the unexpected per se, but by the desire to learn from experience: it is a discipline rather than a necessity for further action."*

This is constructed by the repetitive and systematic process of reflection in action and practice (RIAP), where each experiment runs to individually test new ideas and reflect on previous experience (Figure 11).

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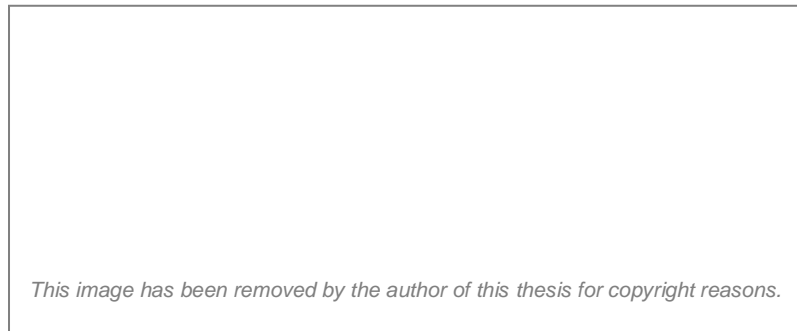

Figure 11. Scrivener, S. (2000). *Reflection in and on design episodes and projects*
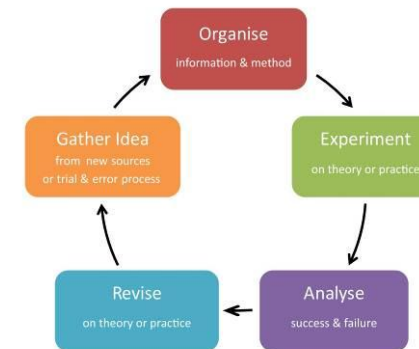
Figure 12. Fey, C. (2011). *Reflective Process*.

The process of reflection in action and practice, as Scrivener (2000) suggests, *"forces the practitioner to reconsider the theory and knowledge informing the work in progress"*. It is a self-critical system that widens and deepens my research subject and allows me to accumulate experience and knowledge through the process.

Each individual experiment is carried out by following a cyclic five-step process to gather, organise, experiment, analyse, and revise (Figure 12).

Firstly, 'gathering' is the process of raising an issue or idea to be experimented with, or defining a problem that needs to be solved. The question or idea can be theoretical or practical, and it is usually inspired through research presented in literature, artists' examples, or knowledge gained from previous experiments.

The second step requires organisation of ideas, brainstorming possible approaches for an experiment to be performed, and evaluation of both positive and negative potential outcomes. Thirdly, an experiment is executed to test out ideas or material through drawing or making mock-ups. Fourthly, critical analysis addresses both positive and negative aspects of the experiment. This is performed through self-reflection and feedback

from supervisors and colleagues, and documentation of responses is essential to provide material for further research.

Personally, I adopted the habit of using a visual diary (Figure 13) to record images of my experiments along with my commentary, ideas, and suggestions from others which provide an overview of the transformation process and the project in progress.

Finally, it is important to revise the action or idea from the experiment, re-position my view, and/or re-design creative possibilities for further investigation. This usually leads to a new experiment.
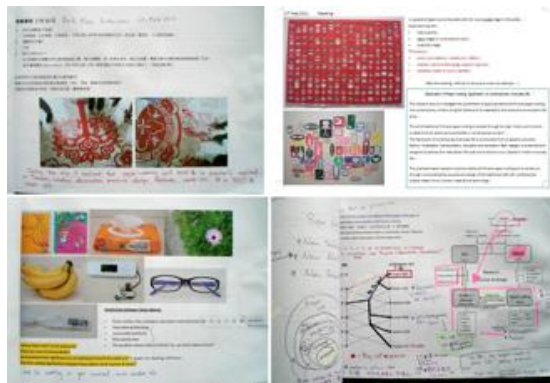

Figure 13. Fey, C. (2011). *Visual Diary*.

MEDIA AND MATERIALS

To re-figure traditional Chinese paper-cutting, one of the essential approaches is to investigate the possibility of applying this art form to new materials with new media. In my earlier practice, I experimented with some new materials that are not commonly used in Chinese paper-cutting such as wood (Figure 14), plastic (Figure 15), vinyl (Figure 16), canvas (Figure 17) and some others.

Figure 14. Fey, C. (2010). *Window Flowers*.

Figure 15. Fey, C. (2010). *Glasses*.

Figure 16. Fey, C. (2010). *Umbrella*

Figure 17. Fey, C. (2010). *Money Tree*.

Figures 15 and 16 were my early experiments with the relationship between kitsch and materials. In these examples, I have used ordinary and cheap mass-produced commodities to draw an association with the concept of kitsch. I have learnt that the selection of materials can be an essential part of the approach to addressing kitsch. As Gabriela Arredondo (2003) states: *"kitsch materials can be seen as a relationship with a class experience or*

sentimentality" (p. 299).

One may argue that not using paper and the hand-cut method could take away the essence of the hand-craft of paper-cutting. However, I believe Chinese paper-cutting should not be limited to its traditional material and methods, and the craft should be advanced by technology in response to current social needs and values.

For my experiments, I have employed the traditional hand-cut process for all paper-based materials, while the modern technologies of vinyl-cutting and laser-cutting are used for other materials. Knowing both processes enables me to find a balance between traditional craft and contemporary technology. This idea is supported by Hara (2007) as he states, "*Design is the vocation of taking both old and new media, favoring neither, putting them into a cross-disciplinary perspective, and making full use of all"* (p. 435).

In the following section, I demonstrate some of my visual experiments that I have completed. While these projects may not represent the best of my art works, they aim to reflect my exploration to reconfigure Chinese paper-cutting with four key design aspects: illustration, decoration, silhouette, and repetition. The experiments are also put forward to advance the four concepts of Chinese folk art (which are popular, unrestrained, crude and succinct) in a contemporary context.

Figure 18. Fey, C. (2011). *Modern Recreation*.

Figure 18 is a paper-cutting that illustrates a popular modern recreation of video games. Paper-cutting was once a craft for leisure, and inspiration usually came from everyday life. The image of playing a video game is a contemporary reflection expressed through a traditional craft. This was an earlier example that led to my later research content and direction to reflect on the ideology of modern consumption.

The traditional motif is a significant design element in this work. This experiment tests the aesthetic significance of a traditional Chinese motif for a contemporary subject. The complexity of the content (TV monitor, player, wire and 'wireless' connectivity, and motif-flower) is displayed in its most simplistic form (positive and negative space and colour). It is unusual in its visual resolution; however, the extensive use of motif has compromised

its contemporary reception.

Figure 19. Fey, C. (2011). *Commodities 1*.

Figure 20. Fey, C. (2011). *Commodities 2*.

In Figures 19 and 20, I have used personal everyday life objects as the subject matter.

Learning from the previous outcome, I experimented with silhouette-cutting in which the use of a traditional motif is rare. While Chinese paper-cutting focuses on the detailed decoration of a recognisable outline of the subject, silhouette-cutting considers its origin as portrait cutting, and focuses on the accuracy of the outline, with no decorative elements inside the subject. I have considered both positive (Figure 20) and negative (Figure 19) outcomes of the silhouettes. In Chinese paper-cutting, the positive cut Yang Jian [陽剪] has more cut-out space, while the negative cut Ying Jian [陰剪] is the opposite. They suit specific design, purpose, and content. Personally, I prefer to use a moderate amount of both positive and negative space for a balanced visual outcome. However, in this experiment, Figure 19 is a more appropriate reflection of my view of excessive consumable goods in our everyday life, while Figure 20 draws more attention to subject identity.

This experiment has also tested the use of various colours, shapes, and sizes; however, this approach draws unnecessary attention to these qualities,

so they were withdrawn from later experiments. I have also learnt that using a diverse range of everyday commodities is insufficient to address excessive consumption, because the individual consumer has a personal disposition to judge which daily object is for personal need or for luxury.

Figure 21. Wu, M. (1995). *Axis Point & Line*

Figure 22. Fey, C. (2011). *Axis Point Experiment*.

In the above experiment, I have applied the aesthetics of the fold and cut method of Chinese paper-cutting. This method enables the paper-cut to obtain symmetrical and repetitive design elements with either an axis point (Figure 21) or an axis line produced; depending on the way the paper is folded. Circular paper-cuts are also designed in round panels that expand from the axis point outward. Each section is filled with a different pattern and usually has a decorative function in design. In this experiment, I also aimed to illustrate the idea of consuming more than one's need.

Showing a substantial amount of shoes (Figure 22) is a representation of the habit of consumption that exceeds one's needs. After all, we only have one pair of feet. This experiment was successful as it contains balanced aesthetic functions between tradition and contemporary, narration and ornamentation, symmetry and asymmetry, and silhouette and details.
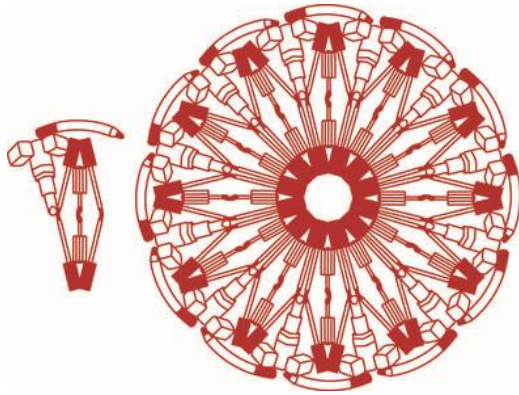
Figure 23. Fey, C. (2011). *Lip Products 1*.

Figure 24. Fey, C. (2011). *Lip Products 2*.

In this experiment I used a range of lip products as my subject matter. Considering the fold and cut method to construct a circular motif, I first designed a section of the design component, then repeated and rotated it to form one image (Figure 23). I believe that within design process, this method is similar to the actual fold and cut approach as it also requires cutting a small section of the design, and when it is unfolded, the single section is repeated and turned into one image. A key difference between the traditional method and mine is that I am able to foresee and alter my design anytime before the cutting proceeds which cannot be done using the traditional method. This method is also effective as it uses the repetition of the objects to connote the idea of excessive consumption.

To further the experiment, I incorporated the method of layering panels consisting of different designs and composed them to become one work (Figure 24). In this work, the way in which the frame is able to hold (connect) the panels inside to form one piece of work is the explorative focus. This experiment also solves the problem of restriction in the number or form of axis points or axis lines.
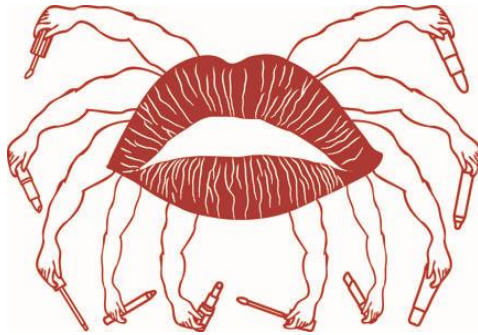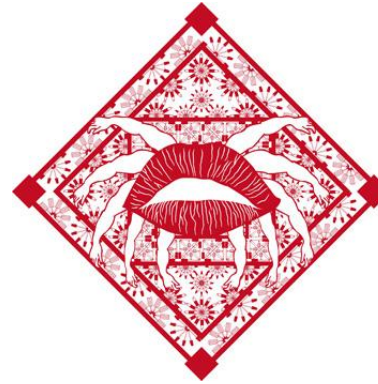
Figure 25. Fey, C. (2011). *Lip*.

Figure 26. Fey, C. (2011). *Greedy Lip*.

Figure 25 was further extended to address the idea of excessive consumption. In this work, the self (lip) owns and holds onto an unnecessary amount of lip products that exceeds personal need. Figure 26 is a composite design of Figures 24 and 25 to actualize both decorative and illustrative aesthetic functions of paper-cutting. This experiment is considered as the final practical experiment incorporating the approach of using modern mass-produced material to address the concept of kitsch and my personal statement on our daily excessive consumption.

Figure 27. Fey, C. (2011). *Exhibition.*   Figure 28. Fey, C. (2011). *Hand-cut Portfolio and Exhibition Commentary.*

The exhibition shown in Figure 27 displays a selection of art works to represent the exploration and practical resolutions of my research in concepts and designs. There are two complementary components in the exhibit works: four pieces of wall displayed art works and a selected portfolio of paper-cutting works (Figure 28).

In the displayed art works, the four aesthetic concepts of Chinese folk art are applied as my inspiration and way of evaluation. Su [俗] (popular), which is also a traditional aesthetic counterpart of kitsch, justifies the accessibility of my subject matter in contemporary mass culture. Ye [野] (unrestrained) is the core aesthetic that underpins the self-expression of my statement on consuming behaviour, and represented by the physicality of my final work. Tsu [粗] (crude) reflects the mental state of today's excessive consumption; and while the contemporary design and production of goods are seemingly complicated in the workflow, they are Jian [簡] (succinct) in their physicality.

The art works have also incorporated the visual aspects of illustration, decoration, silhouette, and repetition as my design approaches. And use popular goods as my design components to address the social phenomenon of excessive consumption in modern everyday life.

Figure 29. Fey, C. (2011). *Exhibition 2.*

Figure 30. Fey, C. (2011). *Hand-cut Portfolio*

The wall-displayed art works were produced by using the modern technology of laser cut on reflective acrylic mirrors. They are displayed on the wall to create a dynamic interaction by reflecting the environment and the viewer on the mirror surface (Figure 29). They encourage the revaluation of the concept of kitsch through accentuating the decorative purpose and visual sensation of the art works. This idea is also reinforced by the choice of the colours of gold and silver.

The visual contents of the displayed art works are formed with human body parts (eyes, lip, hands and feet) and consumable goods (lip products, eye make-up, shoes and bags). This addresses my view of excessive consumption in mass culture through modern material (acrylic), process (laser cut), visual content (human and consumables) and mode of display.

The selected portfolio of paper-cutting works (Figure 30) was produced by using traditional hand-cut methods and the material of paper to complement the displayed art works. Together they demonstrate the potential of my research explorations in refiguring Chinese paper-cutting in both contemporary and traditional forms.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

This research explored the art form of traditional Chinese paper-cutting in a contemporary setting. My intention was to suggest a broader range of possibilities that are informed by the Western concept of kitsch and modern design methods. The concept of kitsch has also been appropriated and re-signified through this research. Kitsch has been adopted as it has become an art approach emphasising the visual experience of sentimentality and is used here to reflect on modern culture and to encourage the revaluation of objects and ideas.

Through the research journey, I have learned that the creative territory of Chinese paper-cutting should not be restrained to traditional hand-cut methods, material or subject matter. It is an art that is both decorative and functional and is made according to our needs, cultural preferences, and technological advancement. Thus its work processes and the resulting physicality are ever changeable. In this project it is the process of applying the inspiration of Chinese paper-cutting into my art work to reflect on life and society, in an open and self-expressive way, that is essential.

I have also come to realise that the design of axis point and panel are significant aesthetic components for a paper-cutting to be culturally considered as Chinese. It also can be used as a universal conceptual means to make social commentary.

Using alternative conceptual and practical methods I have explored refiguring Chinese paper-cutting through the experiments with contemporary advances in technologies and with new materials. Through my practice, I have redesigned three key visual aspects of Chinese paper-cutting: illustration, decoration, and repetition; and have integrated Western silhouette-cutting into the design process. These ideas were manifested through incorporating the Western concept of kitsch and Eastern concept of folk art.

It is my hope that the research provides a robust argument for the potential to expand contemporary design modes and aesthetics through refiguring Chinese paper-cutting. The final work as the research outcome is only a temporal representation of the expanded possibilities; while it also functions to make manifest my personal statement on our unnecessary daily consumption.

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