

The Evolution of the Technique to Carve and Stick Gold and on Chinese Fans

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the historical evolution and modern development of the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans. Based on the development of Chinese fans with gold and silver foil carved and stuck on in Shaoxing, China, comparing the gold fans unearthed as cultural relics from Ming Dynasty, and deeply analyzing the materials, techniques and existing cultural relics, we finally reveal their evolution process. This article uses various methods such as documentary materials, physical research, and interviews with skill inheritors to comprehensively analyze the inheritance and development of the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans and explore its impact on social economy and culture.

Keywords: gold and silver foil; Chinese fans with carving and sticking technology; craftsmanship; historical evolution

Introduction

Wu Xueshan recorded in "The Golden Fan: Ming Dynasty Tombs and Exchanges between China and Japan" that this kind of fan decorated with stuck gold or pasted gold in diamond pattern was called "Gold Fan", also known as Gold-stuck Fan. After the author's research, I found that fans decorated with gold foil are now called Chinese fan with gold and silver foil carved and stuck on. They have a long history, and their origin time needs a further research. This technique uses gold and silver foil as raw materials to carve into various patterns, and then sticks them on high-grade black paper fans, forming a unique decorative effect. It is the perfect combination of fan culture and cutting (engraving) skills, called a Craft Treasure. Wu Xueshan believes that this type of gold stuck folding fans is mainly concentrated in southern China. Judging from the existing objects, it began to appear in the mid-16th century, spread for about a hundred years, and was not easy to see after the mid-17th century. It is a quite unique type in the development history of Chinese folding fans.

The research shows that the rise and fall, and the circulation of this kind of fans depend on market demand. Possibly due to the confidentiality of inheritance, the lack of historical records and physical data, in addition, the difficulty of production skills, high cost and time-consuming, the influence of

industry competition, most of them are passed down from father to son, and there are only a few people who are proficient in this technology. Society's low awareness of this handicraft has led to a worrying state of inheritance. There are really only a few surviving works and it is difficult to collect relevant information. Currently, Mr. Wang Guanfu from Keqiao District, Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province is the inheritor of this technique. Mr. Wang's works are mainly based on opera themes, with vivid characters, detailed patterns and exquisite craftsmanship. As he grows older and his eyesight deteriorates, Mr. Wang has been unable to engage in relevant work for many years.

In order to inherit the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans, the author visited the old man Wang Guanfu many times to ask for advice on the inheritance and production characteristics of the technique. After consulting various books and materials, I found a lot of information about the production of gold and silver foil. For example, Chen Yundun and Li Guoqing introduced the development of China's thin gold handicraft and the production technology of gold foil as well as the development of gold foil technology in domestic and abroad in "Traditional Thin Gold Craftsmanship and Exchanges between China and Foreign Countries". But there is less information on the use of gold foil on fans after cutting and carving. There are some related research articles on the cultural relics of folding fans unearthed in the Ming Dynasty on CNKI. Wu Xueshan's "The Golden Fan: Ming Dynasty Tombs and Sino-Japanese Exchanges" and Xia Han's "Discussion On the Folding Fans Unearthed in the Ming Tombs in Jiangnan" put forward the view that Chinese "golden fans" may have started by imitating Japanese folding fans, and gradually developed its own characteristics based on the golden fans unearthed in Ming Dynasty. It was a very rare technique in the history of decoration. But the production process of the craftsmanship was still not introduced in detail. There are sporadic records rather than elaborate introduction in books such as "Shaoxing Culture- Shaoxing Intangible Cultural Heritage List", "History of Chinese Folk Paper-cutting" by Wang Bomin , "Pictures and Documents of Cultural Relics Exhibition", and "Chinese Paper-cutting" by Li Qiang.

After years of hard work, the author has collected a large amount of information. This article aims to sort out the historical changes and inheritance status of the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans, elaborate on its inherent cultural value, provide a reference for the rescue and protection of the technique, and finally drive the development of Chinese fan culture.

Xia Han and Wu Xueshan mentioned the historical evolution of the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans in their paper, and believed that the Chinese "golden fan" may have begun by imitating Japanese folding fans, and gradually developed its own characteristics. The author believes that to explore the development trajectory of the techniques, we can first review the history of gold and silver foil cutting and carving technique, then trace the development process of fans, and finally sort out the historical context of the integration of the two.

Gold and silver foil cutting and carving, commonly known as "gold engraving" or "gold leaf cutting", is a technique of thinning gold sheets and then engraving them. According to what Wang Bomin quoted from others in "The History of Chinese Folk Paper-cutting": "Historically, gold foil cutting transitioned to paper cutting." This illustrates the origin relationship between gold foil cutting and paper cutting, and the origin can be traced back to Shang Dynasty. For example, the sun bird gold ornaments from Shang and Zhou dynasties, and the silver foil carvings from the Warring States Period

site in Guwei Village, Hui District, Henan Province (picture 1), are both examples of gold and silver foil cutting and carving technique. By Han Dynasty, the technology of hitting (hammering) gold sheets improved. During the Yuanhe reign of Emperor Zhang of Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 84-89), there was a description of "flying of cut birds in Yuanhe" in the poem, reflecting that during the festival at that time, women cut gold and silver foil for decoration. Until the Taikang period of Emperor Wu of Western Jin Dynasty, this trend continued, which showed the historical heritage of gold foil cutting skills. During Tang Dynasty, the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans had reached maturity. According to Shen Zhiyu's "Paper-cut Research", the Shosōin in Nara, Japan, has a collection of "Figure Paper-cut" from Tang Dynasty in China (AD 756-757). Its edge pattern and sixteen characters are all cut from gold foil. This human-shaped decoration fragment is enough to prove that the gold and silver foil paper-cutting skill of Tang Dynasty was quite mature. We can clearly see the in-depth exchanges between Tang Dynasty and Japan and our technology's profound influence on Japanese culture. The gold and silver foil cutting technique that emerged in Japan in the 12th century may also be influenced by those figure paper-cutting. The research object of this article is the production of the technique in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. The literature review shows that Shaoxing has a long history of gold and silver foil production, which provides strong supporting material for research. During Southern Dynasties, there were records of the production of gold and silver foil and the establishment of brocade offices in the Shaoxing Culture- Shaoxing Intangible Cultural Heritage List. During Yuan Dynasty, the scale of gold foil production gradually expanded, and further development was achieved during Ming and Qing dynasties. "Little Knowledge of Physics" published during the period of Emperor Kangxi of Qing Dynasty states: "Separate the gold fragment with medicine paper (black gold paper), and beat it with a giant axe" to complete it. Yangjialong, Jiahui in Shaoxing had a gold and silver foil workshop in Qing Dynasty, which was mostly passed down from father to son. It can be seen that the gold and silver foil production technology was quite mature in the Shaoxing area during Qing Dynasty. Convenient access to materials is also a prerequisite for the development of the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans.



Figure 1 "Silver foil carving" (Qian Haiqin carved)

Material: silver

Dimension: 8.2*3.7cm

The production of gold and silver foil has a long history in Shaoxing, and the fan as a carrier of research objects, according to historical records, also has an long manufacturing history. Since ancient times, Shaoxing has been known as a famous fan-making city. "Book of Jin. Biography of Wang Xizhi" contains an anecdote about Wang Xizhi's inscription on a fan: "I once saw an old grandma in Ji Mountain selling a hexagonal bamboo fan. Wang Xizhi wrote five characters on each of the fans. At the beginning, the old grandma looked angry. But later he told the grandma, "You can tell others that they are written by Wang Youjun, and then they're worth a hundred coins." The grandma did so, and people were all rushing to buy them. Today, there is still a "Fan-Inscribed Bridge" in Shaoxing, which is said to be the place where Wang Xizhi inscribed the fan. This legend is still talked about by the people in Shaoxing. During Ming and Qing Dynasties, Shaoxing's fan-making industry was already a quite large-scale, mainly concentrated in Shaoxing downtown, Xingpu Jiahui, Zhoujia Bridge, Zhoushan, Meishan, Xiaoguan and other places. Especially the Zhoujia Bridge, it was the most

prosperous area and was known as the "Fan Nest" during the peak period of the fan-making industry, having as many as four to five hundred fan workshops. Among them, Wang Xingji Fan Factory is famous for its excellent production. Zhoujia bridge and Jiahui are two adjacent villages in Keqiao District. Zhoujia bridge's fans, Jiahui's gold and silver foil, as well as the gold foil cutting skill that is said to have existed since Shang Dynasty, it is an inevitable trend that the gold and silver foil and black paper fans were combined in Keqiao, Shaoxing.

It needs further verification when gold and silver foil cutting technique was combined with black paper fans, who pioneered it, and how to inherit and develop. This kind of fan has been recorded since the 12th century. In the poetry collection of Yang Chengzhai of Song Dynasty, the preface to the poem "Gift to the Taoist for Cutting Words" reads: "The Taoist took Li Yishan's poems, cut the words with green paper, and made them into Miyuan Zhang style, which were really realistic. This technique is passed down to till today. Cut with gold paper, decorate with feathers and flowers, stick to the black oil paper fan. The design looks as if the design was written on the fan, and you know its origin is far away." As this Taoist was good at cutting words, he won the title of "Taoist who cuts words". Since he could cut words, he must also can cut flowers. These flowers, birds, fonts and other patterns cut out of gold paper were stuck on the black paper fan, which was undoubtedly the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans. The last sentence mentioned "the origin is far away", which showed that this skill had arisen long time before Song Dynasty, but we just don't know how far back it was. However, Yang Chengzhai was a Jinshi during the Shaoxing period of Southern Song Dynasty (1131-1161 AD), it is far older than Song Dynasty. This record is also confirmed in Wu Yangxian's "Xiaopao Nunnery's Poetry" that this kind of black paper fan with gold foil stock on did exist in Song Dynasty. Through the promotion and spread by the Yongle period of Ming Dynasty in the 15th century (because Zhu Di, the founder of Ming Dynasty, favored the folding fan), fans with golden surfaces became widely popular among nobles and literati.

The origin of Japanese gold fans can be traced back to the 12th century. Wu Xueshan mentioned in "The Golden Fan: Ming Dynasty Tombs and Sino-Japanese Exchanges": In the 12th century, the imperial fan of Emperor Takakura (reigned 1161-1181) stored in Itsukushima Shrine in Japan was decorated with diamond-shaped gold foil. It is the earliest example of sticking diamond-shaped gold foil on a folding fan that we have known. The article also cited a 14th-century "Military Fan with Sun and Moon Picture" stored in the collection of the Kyushu National Museum. One side has a sun with gold foil, and another side has a moon with silver foil. The Tokugawa Museum has a folding fan originated from the 16th to 17th centuries, with an old pine tree painted on gold background, and a silver circle placed in the middle of the fan. The Tokugawa Museum of Art has a set of "Hundred pieces of Ballads" originated from the 17th century. The artist painted a folding fan with gold on a dark background, and stuck diamond-shaped gold foil on the area of fan's surface. Between the 12th and 17th centuries, this kind of "paper" decorated with gold and silver foil, mica and other material has been used in Japan, which made Japanese believe that the "golden fans" unearthed in tombs of Ming Dynasty in China were "transformed" and "invented" by Chinese craftsmen based on Japanese folding fan. Later, they noticed that more and more factors were "invented" by Chinese. The actual fans with gold stuck from Ming Dynasty have been unearthed. As shown in Figure 2, it is a fan stuck with gold foil of Ming Dynasty collected by the Shanghai Museum. Although it is not cut into complex patterns for decoration, we still can know that Ming Dynasty has mastered the technology of gold foil carving and sticking. Moreover, this kind of fan was very popular among scholar-bureaucrats. Wang Yong

recorded a phenomenon in "The Origin of Japanese Folding Fan and Its Spread in China": Hangzhou's skilled craftsmen cut gold foil into patterns such as feathers, flowers, mahogany, running script, as well as colorful paintings of figures, and stuck on two sides of oil fans. This kind of fan suddenly became a popular fashion among the scholar-bureaucrats during the Tongguang period of Ming Dynasty. Officials selected such fans as their first choice for gifts and regarded them as the most noble etiquette.



Figure 2: geometric gold foil sprinkled with gold lacquer bamboo bone folding fan

Collection: Shanghai Museum

Age: Ming

Dimension: it is 31.8 cm long

texture: bamboo

Label: geometric pattern, gold foil, sprinkled gold lacquer, bamboo bone, folding fan, Wu Fan, the tomb of Zhu Shoucheng couple in Baoshan Minggu Village

By Qing Dynasty, the craftsmanship of fans stuck gold was already very sophisticated and varied. Master Li Qiang mentioned that gold fans in Qing Dynasty, were widely applied with the decorative technologies, such as characters cutting, flower sticking, half painting and half cutting. Wu Yangxian recorded gold-cut calligraphy artists in "Xiaopao Nunnery's Poetry" (refer to Yu Quyu's "Note Written in Tea Room" for records of gold-cut calligraphy). Wang Xingji Fan Factory, established in the first year (in 1875) of GuangXu period of Qing Dynasty, records in detail its development and the inheritance of gold fan skills from Qing Dynasty to the present. Wang Xingzhai was originally an ancestral fan maker, especially skilled in black paper fans, so the factory is also called Wang Xingzhai Fan Factory. The workshop was located in Zhoujia bridge, Keqiao District, Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. His wife Chen Ying was a skilled craftsman of gold fans. As shown in Figure 3, Chen Ying's works reflect her exquisite skills.



Fig.3: 27cm brown black paper fan double-sided stuck gold (the Republic of China)

Photographed by Chen Ying in Hangzhou Wangxingji Fan Factory

In 1929, Zhang Jinmu opened a fan-making workshop in Keqiao, Shaoxing. Today, the Keqiao Wangxingji Fan Factory still collects the Chinese fans with gold and silver foil carved and stuck on made by the masters. Although their skills are slightly inferior to Chen Ying's, they are still loved by foreign people. According to Master Li Qiang, there are many collections of this kind of fans in Japan. Master Wang Guanfu also said that a large number of such fans were exported to Japan.

After research, the author infers that the Chinese fans with gold and silver foil carved and stuck on may originate in China. After being innovated by Japan, it was spread to China in Ming Dynasty. Based on Japanese skill, Chinese craftsmen continued to optimize and innovate, making the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans reach the current height. As shown in Figure 4, a representative work of Wang Guanfu, the work selected the material of pure gold foil, and engraved lines corrected by millimeters. It can be seen that with the passage of history and the unremitting efforts of craftsmen, the decoration of the fan surface has become increasingly elegant, and the technology has become more and more exquisite.



Fig 4: Chinese fan with gold and silver foil carved and stuck on provided by Wang Guanfu

As time goes by, the technique to carve and stick gold and silver foil on Chinese fans continues to develop and evolve. It is not only a traditional handicraft, but also a cultural inheritance and artistic display. However, in the context of modern society, its high difficulty and use of luxurious materials have daunted its inheritors, causing this skill to drift away. In order to ensure the inheritance and development of the technique, it requires the efforts and attention of people with aspiration. Through the rescue, protection, inheritance and innovation of professionals, the technology can regain its glory in the new era and bring a feast of art and culture to the world.

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