

Functionality to Fine Art: Analyzing the Balance of Tradition and Innovation in Dongyang Woodcarving

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Abstract

This paper speaks to the delicate balance between how an artist navigates the potential limitations and the potential depth of inspiration that comes from an inherited artistic tradition. One instance of this exchange between innovation and tradition is documented in the architecture and artwork of the woodcarvers of Dongyang county in Zhejiang province China. To understand shared stylistic conventions, and the references contemporary artists make to both form and motif, this research will examine the bracket scenes from the Lu Residential Complex and compare them to the carvings of contemporary artists. Huang Xiaoming and Zheng Chunhui are two contemporary masters of Dongyang woodcarving known for incorporating elements of this over one thousand year old tradition into their artwork. Chunhui's *Along the River During Qingming Festival* (2013) is a recreation of a Song dynasty painting of the same title that is almost as old as Dongyang carving tradition itself. Upon closer inspection, Chunhui's massive carving contains details that challenge the historically practical nature of Dongyang carving. Xiaoming crafted his *Golden Dragon Treasure* (2008) using several different carving techniques associated with Dongyang woodcarving and references the history of the carving practice through form and motif. This sculpture also utilizes scale to symbolically transverse the boundaries of the object decoration that once defined Dongyang woodcarving. The artists discussed in this paper contribute a modern, tangible connection to the cultural identity of China while promoting innovation, creativity, and respect for the history of Dongyang woodcarving.

1. Introduction

Operating at the intersection of artistic potential, strength and versatility, hardwood carving has led to several distinguished woodworking traditions on a global scale that pride themselves on intricacy, lavish ornamentation and uniqueness. A prominent example of this principle can be observed in the Dongyang wood carvings, better known as White Woodcarving, that originated in Dongyang county in Zhejiang province of China. This particular carving style is utilized in decorative sculpture, religiously affiliated carvings, functional housewares, murals, and architecture throughout three prominent Chinese dynasties (Song 960-1279, Ming: 1368-1644, and Qing 1644-1912) into the present day.¹

The art produced by contemporary masters of Dongyang carving still relies on some of the core stylistic conventions and techniques of ancient predecessors while also elevating the craft to become more adaptive and thus more receptive to a contemporary audience. In an effort to provide a basis for understanding common stylistic conventions and references to both form and motif made by contemporary Dongyang artists, this research will examine the carved support beams and the underside of the courtyard building roofs at the Lu Residential Complex (1456-present) in Dongyang county and compare the motifs and techniques to the carvings of contemporary artists. Huang Xiaoming (b. 1965) and Zheng Chunhui (b. 1958) are two artists that incorporate elements into their work that connect to traditional Dongyang carving while striving for improvement on the basis of innovation.

This incorporation is visibly demonstrated in Chunhui's *Along the River During Qingming Festival* (2013) (Fig. 1) because it references an ancient Song dynasty painting of the same title. Upon closer inspection, this massive carving

contains details that challenge the historically practical nature of the Dongyang carving tradition. One of the main themes that Xiaoming sought to explore in his *Golden Dragon Treasure* (2008) (Fig. 2) is the contrast between art and function. Choices made in the conceptualization of this sculpture deviate from utilitarian conventions that relates to the history of Dongyang woodcarving. Along with many other artists and workshops, the artists discussed in this paper contribute a modern, tangible connection to the cultural identity of China while promoting innovation and individual creativity of the artist as well as respect for the history of Dongyang woodcarving.



(Fig. 1) *Along the River During Qingming Festival*, Zheng Chunhui, (2013) Whole camphor log
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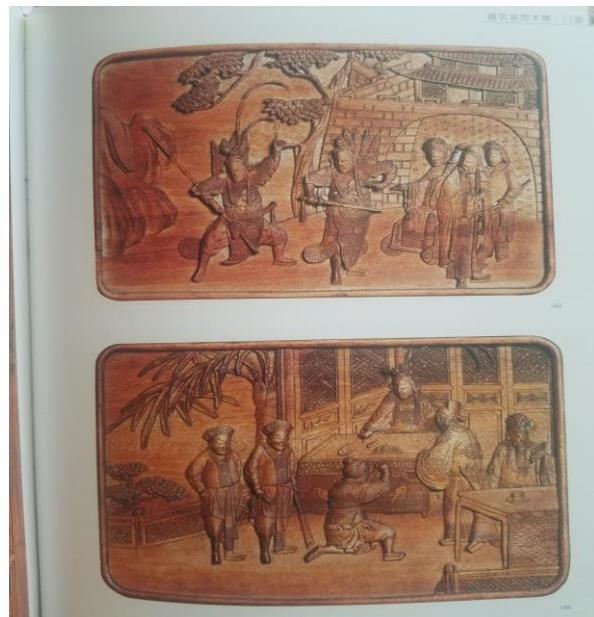
(Fig. 2) *Golden Dragon Treasure*, Huang Xiaoming, (2008), Basswood, Red Sandalwood, Gold Leaf, and Natural Lacquer. http://www.xdymd.cn/m/news_details.aspx?id=1275

2. Symbolism and Style

The area we now know as Dongyang county was founded in 195 AD and was at the time referred to as "Wuning." The name "Dongyang" was not adopted until 688 AD.² Dongyang means "Eastern Sun," which according to Chinese Buddhism, is partially based on "seeing that there is a natural source of radiance and brilliance in this world."³ Dongyang woodcarving can be related to this principle literally and philosophically: literally in terms of the subject matter and natural finish of the wood, and philosophically by utilizing metaphor and ecological symbolism to promote respect and admiration for the natural world.

Additionally, the notion of promoting beauty found in the natural world and civilization is reflected in the motifs that have become standard in Dongyang woodcarving. The subject matter of Dongyang sculptures varies from intricate scenes of nature and decoratively abstracted plant life, to figural scenes of humans and landscape settings. A typical setting for a scene depicting a village would be a time of celebration or historical significance. Each individual motif has symbolic representation that resonates beyond the figure, to incorporate metaphor into seemingly minute details. Even the animals in Dongyang wood carvings are represented in a way that celebrates the powerful and majestic traits of the animal. Within Chinese culture, there is often a common understanding of what traits an individual animal represents. For example, an elephant is known to symbolize good luck and renewal, a deer is symbolic of longevity and wealth, and a lion symbolizes safety and protection.⁴ Conversely, most domesticated animals are related to obedience.⁵

Most human figural representations in Dongyang carvings reference prominent historical figures, characters from a popular folk story or opera, and poetry. In the Qing dynasty carving *Three Kingdoms Story, Back to Jingzhou* (Fig. 3) we are shown a low relief carving from a window panel that details a scene from the popular Chinese novel called “The Romance of the Three Kingdoms.” (1522) The novel itself is a romanticized account of a historical narrative, framed in the Three Kingdoms period of China.⁶ The story follows the lives of the rulers and kingdoms during the extensively violent tripartite division of China.



(Fig. 3) *The Story of the Three Kingdoms* plates from a lattice fan window with openwork bats, Qing dynasty (1644-1912), Hardwood Carving.

Hua, Dehan. *Dongyang Woodcarving of China*. Zhejiang Photography Publishing House, 2001. pg. 107

The composition of *Three Kingdoms Story, Back to Jingzhou* features several men in a neutral setting outside of fortified city walls, and within a building that features extensive carving work. The leftmost figure in the outdoor scene could be identified as the one of the story’s main characters; a general named Guan Yu, because he is holding a weapon called the Guan Dao (a Chinese pole-weapon headed by a heavy blade - the weapon’s name literally translates to “blade of Guan Yu”).⁷ Other figures in this depiction are highly ceremonial in appearance as exemplified by some of their ornate clothing garments with different calligraphic emblems, intricate headdresses with emblematic designs, and attentive body posture. Representation of prosperity is articulated through the iconography of the setting that the figures are depicted in. Details of the outer view of the city shows the natural beauty of the landscape as well as the protective armored walls of the city entrance behind the onlookers. The numerous pieces of carved furniture and decorated architectural components within the building of the interior scene would be common to Imperial buildings or the residence of a wealthy family. There is also iconography associated with wealth and prestige within the furniture: carved fish and abstracted wave patterns on the tables paired with the minimally rendered plant images carved into screen windows. These details function to indicate the status of the people that resides in this building.

3. Dongyang Carving Subject Matter and Motifs

Traditional Dongyang woodcarving utilizes written/textual inspiration as well as nature for subject matter. The subject matter used in Dongyang woodcarving are typically reflective of prosperity in life and evoke an atmosphere of celebration. After examining hundreds of Dongyang woodcarvings, the viewer will detect a tendency for artists to use common motifs that reflect scenes of village life, religious figures, nature, well known proverbs and celebration, however, some contemporary examples directly confront and defy the notion of portraying an idealized view of the world. While certain conventions from the collective history of carved Dongyang artworks — such as the obligation to depict people and animals in a formal/idealized manner and the adherence to preconceived themes and stories for subject matter — have become less relevant over time, many of the fundamental conventions of Dongyang carving are either referenced, or used as a point of inspiration by the contemporary woodcarving artists of Dongyang county.

4. Materials

What is it that specifically defines Dongyang or “White-Wood” carving? The term “White-Wood” is derived from the pale coloration of the primary woods associated with the aesthetic of Dongyang carving: basswood, white peach wood, and ginkgo wood.⁸ Other local woods utilized in more architectural pieces include: cypress, ash, and camphor. Each of these woods were valued for their strength and resistance to deformation. More prestigious pieces used imported woods such as: red sandalwood, phoebe, and rosewood. Dongyang carvers also incorporate bamboo into their carvings, though this practice is considered separate from White-Wood carving. Most of these woods chosen for carving are available locally to Dongyang woodworkers and have favorable characteristics, ranging from malleability to wood-grain structure. Each material has a different purpose relating to the aesthetics of the wood’s surface, texture, and hardness.

Basswood is one of the softest hardwoods available, and while this makes it ideal for fine carving, it results in a weaker structure for furniture and architectural applications.⁹ White peach is harder than basswood and is valued for its beautiful light colored wood.¹⁰ Ginkgo wood is known for its colors ranging from a darker caramel to a pale yellow, occasionally accompanied by streaks of black along the grain.¹¹ One of the more interesting species of tree used by Dongyang carpenters is the ginkgo tree. It is generally regarded as a very valuable material for wood work, and for good reason. The ginkgo tree wood is soft, yet has a consistent texture which is preferable for carving.¹² This particular species of tree is regarded as the oldest living species of tree in the world.¹³ Though it has survived for over 200-million years and is common today, the ginkgo tree has endured a near extinction due to changing global temperatures that resulted in isolation of the species to the mountainous regions of China.¹⁴ The ginkgo tree has since undergone a resurgence and as of the mid-twentieth century, has become a popular street tree in major cities across the world.¹⁵ Reverence for the uniqueness and rarity of ginkgo could be crucial factors in the process that resulted in its desirable status as a carving material. Gingko was available to workers in Zhejiang province at the time that Dongyang carving and other similar carving practices were developing.

Familiarity with the appearance, workability, and value of the different woods used in Dongyang sculpture is important to understand the significance of individual carvings and what it is that distinguishes them from others. Knowledge of the value and story of each material deepens understanding of the symbolism in the artwork.

5. Lu Residential Complex

Although not all pieces of Dongyang woodcarving are functional/architectural objects, functionality and object decoration have played a crucial role in the origins and continuation of the technical practice of Dongyang woodcarving throughout its existence. Functionality is a practical starting point for a decorative carving practice as most carpenters were specialized in architecture or furniture and other home items. Adorning objects for daily use with decoration made them prestigious and more valuable. Since the origins of Dongyang sculpture, there has been a practical union of art and function. As the Dongyang woodcarving style developed, the ability to regularly interact with the art became a highly valued convention of the craft.¹⁶ This interactive component of the artwork is still valued today and is often referenced in contemporary works as a stylistic choice.

Taking an in-depth look at some of the figural scenes on the brackets of the vertical support columns from the Lu Residential Complex (Figs. 4, 5 and 6) provides the framework for a perspective to properly view and appreciate

contemporary works. Analysis of the artwork contained within the brackets establishes an understanding of what common motifs Dongyang woodcarvers used in architectural applications of their carving art.



(Fig. 4) *Underside of Courtyard Roof*, Lu Residential Complex, (1421-Present), Hardwood Carving

https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-details-of-exquisitely-carved-roof-structure-lus-residence-dongyang-29827803.html?pv=1&stamp=2&imageid=E53875CF-F068-47D6-B8D1-26795BD2AE45&p=81486&n=0&orientation=0&pn=1&searchtype=0&IsFromSearch=1&srch=foo%3dbar%26st%3d0%26pn%3d1%26ps%3d100%26sortby%3d2%26resultview%3dsortbyPopular%26npgs%3d0%26qt%3dlu%27s%2520residence%26qt_raw%3dlu%27s%2520residence%26lic%3d3%26mr%3d0%26pr%3d0%26ot%3d0%26creative%3d%26ag%3d0%26hc%3d0%26pc%3d%26blackwhite%3d%26cutout%3d%26tbar%3d1%26et%3d0x0000000000000000%26vp%3d0%26loc%3d0%26imgt%3d0%26dtfr%3d%26dtto%3d%26size%3d0xFF%26archive%3d1%26groupid%3d%26pseudoid%3d81486%26a%3d%26cdid%3d%26cdsrt%3d%26name%3d%26qn%3d%26apalib%3d%26apalic%3d%26lightbox%3d%26gname%3d%26gtype%3d%26xstx%3d0%26simid%3d%26saveQry%3d%26editorial%3d1%26nu%3d%26t%3d%26edoptin%3d%26customgeoip%3d%26cap%3d1%26cbstore%3d1%26vd%3d0%26lb%3d%26fi%3d2%26edrf%3d0%26ispremium%3d1%26flip%3d0%26pl%3d"/>



(Fig. 5) *Geometric Patterned Screen Door*, Lu Residential Complex, (1421- Present), Hardwood Carving

[https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-lus-residence-dongyang-jinhua-city-zhejiang-province-china-29827812.html?pv=1&stamp=2&imageid=E7F10D73-2B24-44EE-9FE2-7DF9BE5838BE&p=81486&n=3&orientation=0&pn=1&searchtype=9&IsFromSearch=1&srch=foo%3Dbar%26st%3D9%26sortby%3D2%26qt%3Ddongyang%2520carving%26qt_raw%3Ddongyang%2520carving%26qn%3D%26lic%3D3%26edrf%3D0%26mr%3D0%26pr%3D0%26aoa%3D1%26creative%3D%26videos%3D%26nu%3D%26ccc"/>](https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-lus-residence-dongyang-jinhua-city-zhejiang-province-china-29827812.html?pv=1&stamp=2&imageid=E7F10D73-2B24-44EE-9FE2-7DF9BE5838BE&p=81486&n=3&orientation=0&pn=1&searchtype=9&IsFromSearch=1&srch=foo%3Dbar%26st%3D9%26sortby%3D2%26qt%3Ddongyang%2520carving%26qt_raw%3Ddongyang%2520carving%26qn%3D%26lic%3D3%26edrf%3D0%26mr%3D0%26pr%3D0%26aoa%3D1%26creative%3D%26videos%3D%26nu%3D%26ccc)

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(Fig. 6) *Phoenix and Peony*, Lu Residential Complex, (1421- Present), Hardwood Carving
<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-exquisitely-carved-wooden-beam-with-phoenix-and-peony-lus-residence-29827962.html?pv=1&stamp=2&imageid=ABC06138-EF41-429D-BA94-E2BBCE9EFCF&p=81486&n=36&orientation=0&pn=1&searchtype=9&IsFromSearch=1&srch=foo%3Dbar%26st%3D9%26sortby%3D2%26qt%3Ddongyang%2520carving%26qt%3Ddongyang%2520carving%26qn%3D%26lic%3D3%26edrf%3D0%26mr%3D0%26pr%3D0%26aoa%3D1%26creative%3D%26videos%3D%26nu%3D%26cc%3D%26bespoke%3D%26apalib%3D%26ag%3D0%26hc%3D0%26et%3D0x000000000000000000000000%26vp%3D0%26loc%3D0%26ot%3D0%26imgt%3D0%26dtfr%3D%26dtto%3D%26size%3D0xFF%26blackwhite%3D%26cutout%3D%26archive%3D1%26name%3D%26groupid%3D%26pseudoid%3D81486%26userid%3D%26id%3D%26a%3D%26xstx%3D0%26cbstore%3D1%26resultview%3DsortbyPopular%26lightbox%3D%26gname%3D%26gtype%3D%26apalic%3D%26bar%3D0%26pc%3D%26simid%3D%26cap%3D1%26customgeoip%3D%26vd%3D0%26cid%3D%26pe%3D%26so%3D%26lb%3D%26pl%3D0%26plno%3D%26fi%3D0%26langcode%3Den%26upl%3D0%26cufr%3D%26cuto%3D%26howler%3D%26cvrem%3D0%26cvtype%3D0%26cvloc%3D0%26cl%3D0%26upfr%3D%26upto%3D%26primcat%3D%26seccat%3D%26cvcategory%3D%26restriction%3D%26random%3D%26ispremium%3D1%26flip%3D0%26contributorqt%3D%26plgalleryno%3D%26plpublic%3D0%26viewaspuclic%3D0%26isplcurate%3D0%26imageurl%3D%26saveQry%3D%26editorial%3D1%26t%3D0%26filters%3D0>

The Lu family built and inhabited the Lu Residential Complex in Dongyang county sometime in the twelfth century, though the bulk of the construction was completed during the Ming dynasty (1369-1644).¹⁷ To this day, the family has maintained ownership of parts of the complex that remain after extensive destruction during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).¹⁸

The Lu Residential complex features a wealth of stone carving, brick carving, and tilework along the axis of the main complex called Suyong Hall. However, this paper will focus on a sampling of the carved, wooden architectural features within the courtyard buildings. The techniques employed include etching/line-carving, counter relief, bas relief, high relief, round carving, and openwork carving.¹⁹ Bas relief indicates the slight projection of an image from its surrounding surface. High relief indicates that more than half of the mass of the image protrudes from the surrounding background. Openwork carving is most utilized in partitions as well as window decoration and involves the making of holes or removal of material all the way through an object to create an image. Lastly, carving in the round is sculptural work that has no background and is intended to be viewed from many or all sides. Each of these carving techniques are individually complex, and each sculpture contains a variety of applications of these techniques.

6. Visual Analysis of Works From Lu Residential Complex

The underside of the courtyard buildings' roof of the Lu Residential Complex (Fig. 4) features horizontal beams that are adorned with abstracted plant life and a ceiling that is covered with geometric patterns, both of which are carved in bas relief.²⁰



(Fig. 4) *Underside of Courtyard Roof, Lu Residential Complex, (1421-Present), Hardwood Carving*

The collection of shapes used in the vegetal design on the horizontal beams are symmetrical from the center of the beam to the point that the beam meets a support column on either side. This design consists of vines and stems that radiate outward from a group of flowers in the center. The vines twist to form tight curls and delicate lines which function to divide space and to point the viewer's eye to a destination of greater importance, while also eliminating the existence of blank space in the aesthetics of the architecture. The ceiling is thoroughly decorated with several panels of line carvings that mostly consist of rectangular and L-shaped forms, though some panels incorporate organic lines with rounded edges to contrast the angularity of the bulk of the carving work on the ceiling. While there is some variety of shape amongst each panel on the ceiling, the patterns are essentially all symmetrical from the center, and consist of angular linework surrounding a circular focal point containing smaller geometric patterns and figural scenes of decorative plant-life. These figural and non-representational expressions of artistic principles like balance, economy, and symmetry are similar to the style of carving that was utilized in openwork format for partitions, windows, doors and screens (Fig. 5).



(Fig. 5) *Geometric Patterned Screen Door*, Lu Residential Complex, (1421- Present), Hardwood Carving

To contrast the simple yet intricate decoration of the ceiling and horizontal beams within the courtyard buildings are the figural scenes on the support columns that the vegetal patterns lead to. The bracket scenes carved into several of the vertical support columns in the Lu Mansion depict a range of subjects, including; village life, flowers, figures of myth or poetry, animals, fish and other standard muses. These features are specifically visible in two of the support columns from the Lu Residential Complex, *Phoenix and Peony* (Fig. 6) and the *Lion Column* (Fig. 7).



(Fig. 6) *Phoenix and Peony*, Lu Residential Complex, (1421- Present), Hardwood Carving



(Fig. 7) *Lion Column*, Lu Residential Complex, (1421-Present), Hardwood Carving

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The *Lion Column* taps into the significance of the lion's symbolism as a protector and guardian. Utilizing a large size for the lion (in relation to the size of the upper bracket scenes on the column) communicates the importance of its function. In Chinese culture, the status of the lion is elevated to that of a divine beast rather than that of a real/earthly animal.²¹ As a spiritual being, the lion is believed to be able to drive away evil spirits and prevent negative influence from invading the home of those under the lion's protection.²² The carved lion on the *Lion Column* is constructed in a style that accentuates the necessary ferocity of its purpose as a ward against bad spirits. The open mouth, sharp teeth, curling of the claws, and the body posture of a hunter about to pounce on its prey, illustrate the power of and reverence for the lion as a spiritual guardian. Predatory body positioning of the carving projects the role of prey onto the viewer as they look upward to meet the lion's gaze. A decorative lion placed on or around a house would function as a spiritual guardian for the owner and any guests residing in the dwelling and double as a reminder for any who enter not to betray the hospitality of their host.

The *Phoenix and Peony* column embodies a common combination of symbolism in China. Individually, the phoenix in Chinese culture is considered the “immortal king of birds” symbolizing harmony and, in some instances, the ascension of a new emperor to the throne.²³ The peony is referred to as the “king of flowers”, and symbolizes wealth and prestige.²⁴ The phoenix and peony flowers within the composition occupy about the same amount of space. The phoenix is situated on the inner side of the carving from the hanging tail-feathers at the bottom, continuing along the

curve of the back and up to the head which protrudes outward from the edge of the scene. The peony flowers surround the phoenix and fill the space below it to balance the composition. The motif of phoenix and peony occurs throughout Chinese art history and the combination of the two figures represents natural happiness, prosperous future, and celebration of the natural world.²⁵ A sense of unification between the beauty of the sky with the beauty of the earth is achieved through the phoenix's association with birds and flight united with the peony's embodiment of earthly life.

The phoenix and peony iconography in art is common across many different media and regions through Chinese history. The *Embroidered Red Hall Curtain with Phoenix and Peony Design* (Fig. 8) from a Qing Dynasty residential hall features the phoenix, peony, and even the same pomegranates and lotus flowers shown in the support column at Lu residential complex.²⁶



(Fig. 8) *Embroidered Red Hall Curtain with Phoenix and Peony Design*, Qing Dynasty (1636—1912AD),
Embroidery on silk curtain

<http://www.hnmuseum.com/en/zuixintuijie/embroidered-red-hall-curtain-phoenix-and-peony-design>

The scene in this curtain also illustrates storks and other birds accompanying the phoenix in settings of water and grass minimally illustrated by water-like ripples and small patches of growth indicated by embroidered linework. All of the birds are subtly colored with neutral tones, blues, and red outlines while the lotus and peony flowers are filled in with vibrant shades of pink on the petals to contrast the surrounding green leaves and brown of the stem. The bottom of the curtain is framed with a Panchang and peony pattern, which symbolizes prosperity for years to come.²⁷

Many of the decorative carvings in Ming and Qing dynasty architecture favor stories and images from opera.²⁸ Operas were performed to commemorate public times of celebration such as the completion of a construction project, male birth, birthdays, New Year's celebration, seasonal fairs, and many other festivals observed throughout the year.²⁹ Not all operas had to be Chinese originals. Adaptations or re-telling of stories from other cultures was common. Operas often functioned to affirm social values or norms, as well as communicated educational lessons, although the primary function was of course entertainment.³⁰ The promotion of social values and proverbs through operatic imagery is exemplified by the bracket figural scenes of the support columns at Lu Residential Complex.

The top register of *Phoenix and Peony* (Fig. 6) from Lu Residential Complex illustrates a scene of a young and old man standing with a donkey by a bridge.



(Fig. 6) *Phoenix and Peony*, Lu Residential Complex, (1421- Present), Hardwood Carving

The younger man has short, tight hair and is clean shaven while the older man has long hair tied back on his head with a lengthy beard hanging down his neck. Both men are looking towards the donkey which is equipped with a riding saddle and is facing away from them. The body position of the donkey paired with the men staring at it could suggest that there is some issue related to the donkey and the environment that the two must solve. Based on analysis of the scene, it can be argued that this carving might be representative of a Chinese adaptation of an ancient Greek fable by Aesop, the classic Greek fabulist believed to have lived between 620-564 BCE.³¹ Although this is not an original Chinese writing, there are records of translations of Aesops' Fables in China dated between the eighth and twelfth centuries.³²

The fable is called *The Man the Boy and the Donkey*, and as the title suggests involves a father, his son and their donkey as they walk along a busy path. As people pass them they are met with criticism for how they walk with the donkey. If the son rides the donkey then he is ridiculed for making his father walk. Same for the father if he rides the donkey. When they both ride the donkey, they are shamed for overloading it. Finally they decide to tie up the donkey and carry it. But while crossing a bridge, the son loses his grip and the donkey falls in and drowns due to its being tied to a pole. The moral of the story being: try to please all and you will likely please none.³³ Based on the context of the scene being placed within a courtyard where one would welcome or entertain guests, it can be contended that the virtue of this scene relates to the role of the host catering to guests in their home. The likeness of the carving to the elements of the story in relation to its placement in a residential setting establish substantial evidence to support this interpretation.

7. Contemporary Practices of Dongyang Woodcarving

Dongyang carving in the contemporary period has less to do with functionality in art. Unlike the artists of the preceding generations of Dongyang wood carvers, contemporary sculptors are commonly able to establish a career based on artistic sculpture and are not as limited by the constraints of architectural ornamentation or decoration of objects and household wares. As such, the art produced by contemporary Dongyang woodcarving masters like Huang Xiaoming (b. 1965) and Zheng Chunhui (b. 1983) embrace this new artistic freedom in ways that often directly reference the past convention of functionality in their craft while questioning the necessity of its continuation. In the contemporary context of Dongyang carving, it is also important to address the inheritance of this craft.

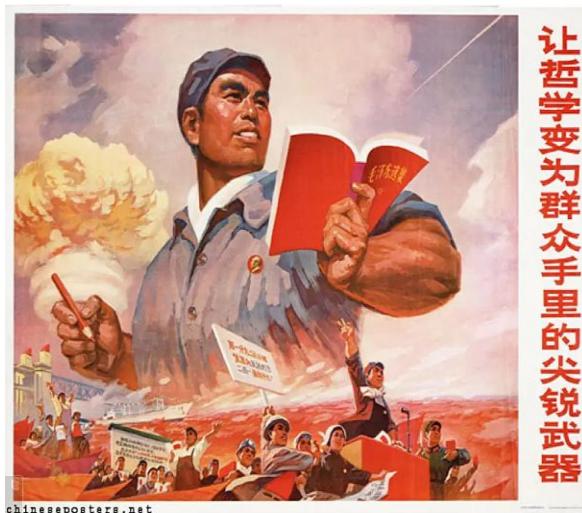
From its founding over 1000 years ago into very recent history, Dongyang carving has relied on a system of apprenticeship to pass down knowledge of the craft. The carving technique was usually passed down from father to son, although in more recent instances an open apprenticeship system for non-familial students has become more

common.³⁴ One drawback of the open apprenticeship system is that the masters commonly hold back the full extent of their knowledge in order to ensure that they would not be edged out by a younger generation of carvers.³⁵

The Chinese government has played an integral role in the management of cultural heritage since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. At this time the industry of culturally affiliated practices was deemed to require government regulation, to ensure protection against what was perceived as invasive outside influences.³⁶ The Five-Year Plan was a social movement initiated by former President of the PRC Mao Zedong in 1958 that aimed to create a communist model of government for China.³⁷

The economic impact of the Five-Year Plan was a split of increased industrial production in some heavily populated areas with strong infrastructure, and economic disaster for the more rural communities of China.³⁸ With this economic failure, Mao stepped down as president of the PRC in 1959. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, the policies enacted by then Chairman of the PRC Mao Zedong essentially isolated China from the rest of the world in terms of cultural import and export. Mao's Cultural Revolution aimed to function as a purging movement to rid Chinese government, society, and culture of Western/capitalist influences that interfered with his communist ideology.³⁹ Mao's Cultural Revolution ended with his death in 1976, and China once again began to "open up" to the rest of the world throughout the 1980s.⁴⁰

The impact of politics on the arts shifted dramatically with China's opening up after the Cultural Revolution. From the founding of the PRC in 1949, artists were required to make propaganda art for the government to perpetuate communist values.⁴¹ During the Cultural Revolution this was pushed even further as artists were required to make works of "revolutionary romanticism" which were intended to idealize the role of a supporter of the revolution as an intellectual safeguard of society and shift focus from the horrors of war to the glory of the leader and to sustain the narrative of undying support for Mao and his communist regime.⁴² In one propaganda poster from 1971 (Fig. 9) we see a muscular blue-collar man thoughtfully clutching Mao's "Little Red Book" (a collection of quotes from Mao that promoted his politics) as he towers over a crowd of uniformed hard-hat workers. The text on the poster reads: "philosophy can become a sharp weapon in the hands of the masses."⁴³



(Fig. 9) Maoist Propaganda Poster, (1971)

<https://www.businessinsider.com/chinese-propaganda-posters-2012-9#chinese-propaganda-argued-that-philosophy-could-become-a-sharp-weapon-in-the-hands-of-the-masses-1971-16>

This poster is meant to convince the peasants, soldiers and workers that Mao's revolution is their revolution. After Mao's death and the prosecution of remaining leaders of the Cultural Revolution, artists began to reclaim personally expressive practices in art. As a result of this, many artists began to seek out new avenues of artistic expression and also revive traditional folk practices that had been denounced by Mao during the preceding decade.⁴⁴

Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, however, did not end the role of Chinese government in arts and culture. Cultural industries are still regulated by government management in terms of preservation, representation, and promotion on the basis of cultural significance and the perceived social impact of the artwork.⁴⁵ There is still immense censorship and a plethora of deterrents for Chinese artists to challenge this censorship such as jail time, loss of livelihood, and refusal to exhibit with the possibility of confiscation if the artwork is deemed controversial.⁴⁶ Most

of these restrictions and punishments are correlated with artworks that critique politics and religion as well as any art that is decided to be “too sexual” in nature.⁴⁷ These restrictions are not necessarily relevant to Dongyang woodcarving as the motifs and stylistic conventions of Dongyang carvings are often modest, formal, idealized, and traditional in nature.

Dongyang woodcarving as an artistic practice is essentially perceived as non-threatening by the PRC and is thus permitted to exist in the fine art sphere due to its status as a positive symbol of Chinese history and culture. It is important to stress that this art is “allowed” by the government to exist in what otherwise would function as a self regulated market that manufactures its own standards based on the global market rather than catering to what the government determines to be acceptable imagery. When a museum intends to host an exhibition they must seek individual approval for each artwork by their city’s Cultural Bureau, and in the case of imported artworks, the artwork must also be approved by customs upon arrival.⁴⁸ Any artworks rejected by customs can be impounded.⁴⁹ So there is an issue of genuineness when attempting to understand an artist’s reception in the Chinese art world, as there is a reluctance for artists who wish to make a living to create anything outside of what is deemed objectively acceptable.

The manipulation of the Chinese art market by the PRC rightfully warrants a degree of hesitation when analysing contemporary Dongyang woodcarving in a fine art context because the artworks might seem as though they unintentionally contribute to a more subtle brand of propaganda achieved through selective censorship. Although contemporary artists of Dongyang woodcarving are not known to challenge societal norms with their artwork, there is a subtle dialogue of discourse in challenging artistic style and convention within their own history. Contemporary Dongyang carving as an artistic style exists almost exclusively as an industry in which the cultural significance lies within the history of the carving practice as a whole rather than the meaning of individual carvings.⁵⁰

As the treatment of cultural industries began to change with the opening up, Dongyang woodcarving was forced to adapt to the industrialization of the market. This effectively created two broad categories of intention for Dongyang carving; the first being production level items intended to be sold for the global market, and the second being the more unique carvings intended to be viewed as fine art. Some scholars have argued that this mass marketization as well as the greater integration of mechanized tools and process in creating Dongyang woodcarving has led to homogenization of quality or a diminished value of contemporary works based on lack of uniqueness and then ease of repeatability of the product.⁵¹ While this analysis may be applicable to some of the thousands of specialized woodcarving workshops in Dongyang today, it fails to account for both the function of this industrialized market as well as the artists and workshops who engage with Dongyang sculpture in the context of contemporary fine art.

There is an issue with the kind of comparison used in establishing what artistic standard contemporary workshops in Dongyang are expected to uphold. It is important to consider the context of production and to understand that surviving ancient works, like those at Lu Residential Complex, were not created in a factory comparable to those that make up the bulk of the global-minded market today. They were commissioned by local patrons in Zhejiang province who could afford to pay for the extensive time and effort that went into creating more intricate sculptures. At this time, Dongyang carving was not widely available to or specifically demanded by the general public, and such carvings were mostly exclusive to the wealthy.

There are highly favored modern workshops, such as the New Dongyang Woodcarving Workshop, that exclusively strive to produce dynastic quality sculptural work, but this standard is not applicable to the demand that makes up the bulk of the market. There simply is no practical way to achieve the intimate, handmade, and unique quality of historical Dongyang carving on a mass scale in a way that is profitable to sell in our modern, industrialized society. Therefore, the highly replicable artworks produced on a large scale by some of today’s workshops function as a vehicle of cultural preservation by means of cultivating and sustaining global interest in the stylistic conventions as well as the traditional motifs of Dongyang carving history. Ultimately, these highly criticized works render appreciation for Dongyang sculpture more accessible to the world.

Today, Dongyang woodcarving (both contemporary and preserved ancient works) is acknowledged by UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This recognition of Intangible Cultural Heritage status signifies that the skills, history, materials, artifacts, and architecture of Dongyang carving are officially recognized to be aspects of the community’s cultural heritage (and contribute to the national identity of heritage).⁵² The benefits of this recognition include efforts to document, identify, preserve, and research cultural artifacts, as well as increase promotion of the tradition through education aimed to revitalize the industry and practice for future generations.⁵³

The modern inheritance of the Dongyang carving tradition is significantly more accessible today than it would have been to previous generations of aspiring carpenters. Originally the knowledge of Dongyang carving tradition was exclusively passed from father to son.⁵⁴ Today there are many woodcarving workshops, individual masters, and various learning institutions that offer apprenticeship programs and classes to anyone willing to devote their time to learning the craft.⁵⁵ Where previously the art and architectural pieces of Dongyang carving would have

one to three carpenters working on a single sculpture, today there is a high regard for specialization. This means that anywhere from five to fifty (and beyond) workers will contribute their specific area of focus to a single artwork.⁵⁶

8. Huang Xiaoming

Huang Xiaoming began learning the practice of Dongyang woodcarving from his father when he was sixteen years-old and is the third generation heir of Mr. Huang Zijin, who is known as the "woodcarving prime minister" in China.⁵⁷ Xiaoming has been making art professionally for over forty years.⁵⁸ His work has been displayed at the National Museum of China, and he has received the official titles of "Chinese Master of Art and Craft" and "Representative of Intangible Cultural Heritage" for Dongyang woodcarving (among many other official titles and recognitions).⁵⁹ His work is considered the pinnacle of contemporary Dongyang wood art. His retrospective exhibition at the National Museum of China in 2017 contained his entire career's worth of sculpture, totaling at about seventy different sculptures of varying scale. These sculptures incorporate traditional elements of Dongyang carving with an emphasis on innovation in regards to the finished form.

Golden Dragon Treasure c. 2008 (Fig. 2) is made up of layers of golden, schooling fish, a geometricized abstraction of the ocean waves below and an upper rim containing a continuous geometric line-pattern with an obsidian-black color contrasting the metallic glimmer of the fish below.



(Fig.2) *Golden Dragon Treasure*, Huang Xiaoming, (2008), Basswood, Red Sandalwood, Gold Leaf, and Natural Lacquer.

The fish follow the form of the rim to complete the shape of a giant krater or pot. This form is significant because the carving mimics the shape of a functional object, yet it is far too large to eat or cook with and could not contain liquid due to open spaces between the golden fish that comprise the body of the krater. There is precedent of Dongyang carpenters carving fish in the openwork style, as seen in the *Rolled Grass Carp and Shrimp Crab* (Fig. 10).



(Fig. 10) *Rolled Grass, Carp and Shrimp Crab*, Ming Dynasty (1368 -1644 A.D.), Hardwood Panels for a screen door

Hua, Dehan. *Dongyang Woodcarving of China*. Zhejiang Photography Publishing House, 2001. pg. 37

In this context, however, the openwork style carving is a functional decorative element of the door whereas Xiaoming's use of openwork carving eliminates the function of the object. The shape of the work suggests Xiaoming's reference to the inherited legacy of functionality within the history of the Dongyang carving tradition. Xiaoming has addressed this idea in an interview in which he said that "Inheritance is a must and innovation is also inevitable. It is necessary to innovate better on the basis of inheritance and create works that meet the aesthetic appeal of the moment."⁶⁰

Classic Dongyang carving conventions are also referenced through the motif of *Golden Dragon Treasure*. The abundance of fish is a symbol of prosperity, and the golden color adds notions of wealth or prestige to the narrative. Abstract wave patterns reference the environment associated with the fish itself while also working as a parallel to the upper section with the geometric border in a decorative and unified manner. Below the vessel is an intricately carved octagonal stand echoing the aquatic iconography and style of the sculpture that it supports. Imagery of schooling fish is repeated in low-relief atop a familiar geometric pattern that decorates the edge of the table. Round carved fish act as brackets to unite the lower section of the table with the upper. Below the pedestal surface, the lower screen and platform feature the abstract wave patterns from the bottom of the krater, this time in openwork style. This design element demonstrates a manipulation of contrast and perspective by showing both the water and school of fish simultaneously in solid and open form. The great care Xiaoming has taken to unite an object with function (the sculpted pedestal) and an object without function (the sculpture) forces into question the significance of traditional motifs and design by literally placing importance of art over function, as an analogy for modern innovation. However, by utilizing traditional stylistic conventions of Dongyang carving and creating a traditionally functional form to accompany and merge with his sculpture, Xiaoming has transgressed the constraints of tradition in craftsmanship to expand its application.

One example of literally integrating traditional motifs into a modern perspective is Xiaoming's carving titled *Recalling the South of the Yangtze River* (2016) (Fig. 11). In this piece the artist has created a conventional landscape style sculpture - a technique which is frequently referred to as "painting with wood" due to the two-dimensional effect created by the layout of the composition.⁶¹ Though the sculpture is oriented flat in the manner of a two-dimensional painting, there are several layers of wooden sculpture comprising the finished image. In *Recalling the South of the Yangtze River*, we can see the natural wood finish that is typical of a White Wood carving. The scale of the artwork is massive, and the scene is extensively detailed.



(Fig. 11) *Recalling South of the Yangtze River*, Huang Xiaoming, (2016), Basswood
http://www.xdymd.cn/m/news_details.aspx?id=1177

The subject of the artwork is one of Xiaoming's own memories, from when he took a ferry trip with some of his friends.⁶² Even though *Recalling the South of the Yangtze River* is a motif and memory that is unique to Huang Xiaoming, the conventional influence of traditional Dongyang woodcarving exists in the details of the composition. This carving is made of basswood, so the grain is subtle and neither directs or interferes with the carved forms. The scene features Xiaoming's recollection of the view of the river city from a boat while traveling with friends along the Yangtze River.⁶³ This mural is framed by willow tree branches and birds flying amongst the foliage of the foreground. Although Xiaoming's memory is from the view of the water, the sculpture establishes an aerial point of view that allows us to see the detail of the textured roofs on each of the buildings as well as the trees and pathways that stand behind them. The river winds from the bottom left of the frame, under the center bridge and out towards the upper right side into the horizon. Trees, rough water, and the boats are rendered darker than other elements of the composition to accentuate their movement and prominence in the experience of Xiaoming's narrative.

9. Zheng Chunhui

Zheng Chunhui is the director of the Chinese Ethnic and Folk Arts and Crafts Association.⁶⁴ He is well known for his forty-foot long, world record breaking sculpture *Along the River During Qingming Festival* (2014) (Fig. 1).



(Fig. 1) *Along the River During Qingming Festival*, Zheng Chunhui, (2013) Whole camphor log

The sculpture is a carved recreation and expansion of a Song dynasty-era painting of the same title: *Along the River During Qingming Festival* (1085–1145) (Fig. 12) by the artist Zhang Zeduan.⁶⁵ Chunhui's sculpture features over 550 individually sculpted human figures and is oriented in the layered fashion of a traditional Dongyang landscape sculpture, but utilizes the three-dimensionality of the tree it is cut from to create additional depth within the composition. The scene in this sculpture represents a time of prosperity, yet Chunhui has chosen to replicate this specific artwork because it provides an unconventionally complex perspective of a common narrative. What makes *Along the River During Qingming Festival* unique is how it details the lives of both upper class and lower class residents of the city going about their day.⁶⁶ This contrasts the typical theme of projecting a romanticized view of social life onto the carving motif and calls for the same attention to be paid to the often excluded details, by elevating them to the same level of visual intricacy and craftsmanship.



(Fig. 12) *Along the River During Qingming Festival*, Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145), Painting on scroll,
https://www.comuseum.com/painting/famous-chinese-paintings/along-the-river-during-the-qingming-festival/#qingming-shanghe-tu_part

A direct comparison of certain details within each composition of *Along the River During Qingming Festival* by the original artist allows for a better understanding of how Chunhui has established his own interpretation of the scene in the original painting. In the original painting there is a significant amount of open space and minimal crowding of the composition with people and buildings. The people within the painting are not as dynamic as those in Chunhui's carving which have visual movement in their posture as opposed to the slightly rigid posture of the people depicted in the original. Color is also used as a tool to divide space and accentuate small details and identify objects in the painting. Chunhui's carving does not utilize color, but does utilize the real shadows created by the three-dimensionality of the

artwork to add to the immersiveness of the piece. He also uses the structure of the woodgrain to articulate the direction of the crowd's movement on the streets, and different carving techniques for contrasting textures such as the rough looking finish of the rushing water against the smooth appearance of the boat hull in the water. Overall, the artwork of the original scroll seems to be more focused on the compositional elements (people, bridge, river and buildings) creating an identifiable scene, whereas Chunhui's carving aims to create a totally immersive experience that is more akin to an installation artwork than a single sculpture.

Zheng Chunhui is confronting two different aspects of traditional Dongyang woodcarving convention with this sculpture; the first is the component of functionality while the second is the dictation of designs and motifs for Dongyang carving being exclusively reflective of the experiences of the wealthy patrons that commissioned Dongyang carpenters throughout history. This piece defies the convention of functionality known to Dongyang carving in just about every physical way possible. It is important to note that this carving is over forty feet long, very heavy, and is made exclusively for aesthetic appreciation without concern for any kind of function. As a result of the sculpture's mass, it is extremely difficult to transport, store, and display. The intimidating size of this artwork demands contemplation which is a traditionally valued convention of Dongyang woodcarving.⁶⁷ The painting on which Chunhui has based the carving is meant to be read as a scroll (from one side to the other), with the scene unfolding in an almost chronological fashion that illustrates a specific flow to the narrative. The sculpture is intended to be viewed the same way and instead of it being "unfolded" bit by bit, it is the size of the work that requires the viewer to walk more than forty feet from one side to the other, providing substantial opportunity for exploration and contemplation. Chunhui has embraced an extensively ambitious approach to this carving that is simultaneously a departure from conventional practice, and an acceptance of tradition as a source of inspiration.

10. Conclusion

Today, furniture studios in Dongyang county sell their products to a global market, and due to modern advances in technology, these artworks are in higher production and are more accessible (both in terms of price and by means of global shipping capabilities) than could have been imagined by past generations. This accessibility brings change, and change requires that new generations of Dongyang woodcarving artists embrace traditional aesthetics and technique as well as experimentation to sustain relevance in a contemporary context.

The lengthy apprenticeship and required years of work before mastery could act as a detriment to the continuation of Dongyang carving as a trade for newcomers. However, it is this same demanding commitment to the craft that functions to produce highly adaptable and skilled artists that are capable of incorporating the inherited skills and contributions of their predecessors as well as modern technological innovations and solutions into the creation of something reminiscent of the status awarded to Dongyang woodcarving throughout history.

Woodcarving in Dongyang county has long been regarded as a marvel of handmade, sculptural aesthetics. The utilitarian nature of the craft has contributed an important component of identity to the carving practice as well as contributed to its longevity. In a world that is increasingly archival, it is hard to imagine something so visually spectacular being lost to the obscurity of time. As a result of the deep understanding of technique and material by Dongyang's artists throughout history, the tradition has maintained its prestigious reputation and relevance within the contemporary art world.

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