2016


Sandra Cheng
CUNY New York City College of Technology

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs

Part of the American Art and Architecture Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, Contemporary Art Commons, Immigration Law Commons, Sculpture Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Book Chapter or Section is brought to you for free and open access by the New York City College of Technology at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Silent Protest and the Art of Paper Folding:
The *Golden Venture* Paper Sculptures at the Museum of Chinese in America

*Sandra Cheng*

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

*Lao-Tzu*

Housed in the Museum of Chinese in America (MoCA) is the *Fly to Freedom* collection of paper art that was produced using traditional folk methods of Chinese paper folding. The 123 paper works were created by detainees of the *Golden Venture*, a freighter used to smuggle undocumented immigrants into the United States. On the evening of June 6, 1993, the ship ran aground off the Rockaways in New York City and nearly three hundred migrants, gaunt from a four-month ordeal at sea, poured out of the cramped windowless hold of the vessel. Several drowned that night, a few escaped, but the majority was detained by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), some for nearly four years. A large group of men were assigned to a detention center in York, Pennsylvania, where they produced over ten thousand paper sculptures that helped fuel a grassroots movement to secure their freedom.

The detainees produced paper sculptures of ships, fruit, and animals, but perhaps the most emblematic was the eagle, an American symbol of freedom and strength. Advocates referred to the paper eagles as “freedom birds,” reflecting the detainees’ quest for release from the detention centers. The museum has a poignant example of an eagle sculpture that is highlighted on its website (Plate 16). Constructed out of paper and papier-mâché, the bald eagle is perched atop two crossed branches with inscriptions “Fly to the Freedom,” “Made in York,” and “自由” (liberty), which specifically referred to their incarceration in Pennsylvania and the desire for liberty. In 1996, MoCA included this eagle sculpture in an exhibition, *Fly to Freedom: The Art of the Golden Venture Refugees*, located in the institution’s earlier location at
70 Mulberry Street in New York City's Chinatown. The exhibition became a traveling show that helped raise awareness of the detainees' plight, many of whom were still incarcerated in York three years after the ship's grounding.

Today, the eagle and other Golden Venture sculptures are stored in the museum's archives and rarely put on display. Their inaccessibility is a metaphor for the ephemerality of folded paper art, an art form that is difficult to preserve and not the customary subject of art historical scholarship. The absence from display also speaks to the lack of artistic status of the makers, imprisoned refugees from coastal China who were far removed from the art world. The Golden Venture makers are not often viewed as artistic identities in comparison to celebrated artists who explore the impermanence of paper constructions such as Thomas Demand or Huang Yong Ping. Huang, the founder of the radical avant-garde collective Xiamen Dada, hailed from Fujian, the same Chinese province that most of the Golden Venture passengers called home, but unlike the refugees he was a well-connected entity within the contemporary art scene. This essay proposes that the Golden Venture collection at the newly refashioned MoCA helps art historians consider the interconnected roles of politics, identity, and advocacy in relation to artistic production by immigrants. These next pages examine the cultural and artistic issues of transmission of the Golden Venture paper sculptures, the communal and individual agency of the disenfranchised, and the importance of gift giving across cultures of this group who were caught in the political red tape of shifting immigration policy. Left to languish in detention centers with an unknown timetable, the Golden Venture refugees turned to a folk technique to express their deepest fears, anxieties, and hopes.

Political Puppets, Accidental Artists

After the Golden Venture crashed into the Rockaways, the passengers were ordered to jump overboard to reach the shoreline because they were told that if they were caught before reaching land, they would not be able to apply for political asylum. Many could not swim, precipitating a spectacular rescue effort by the Coast Guard and local law enforcement. Sending a strong statement of deterrence to those seeking to illegally enter the United States, President William Jefferson Clinton made a bold move to have the Chinese refugees detained. In earlier cases, if illegal immigrants were caught, it was customary for migrants to apply for political asylum and be released on bond, thereby avoiding jail time. The Golden Venture refugees, however, were the largest group of illegal aliens to reach American shores at once, and they did so in the most dramatic manner with television crews documenting the rescue of frightened and malnourished passengers. President Clinton made an example of the Golden Venture passengers, a reflection of the hardening US
policies concerning illegal immigration. Captured were 262 men along with 24 women and 14 children; another 6 managed to slip away during the chaos of the rescue. INS was unprepared to accommodate the large number of detainees and transferred the refugees to sites across the country, some as far as Bakersfield, California. Within days, one wing of the medium security jail, York County Prison in Pennsylvania, was converted into a detention center for INS, becoming the largest holding space for the refugees. The prison was a startling welcome for the bewildered men, who had already endured a tortuous voyage to America.

The Golden Venture was a 150-foot, worn-out freighter that picked up passengers in Bangkok and again in Mombasa where the ship's hold was filled to overcapacity, a hold that was the size of a two-car garage with one toilet. To gain passage, each person paid a fraction of a $30,000-plus fee to "snakeheads," the human smugglers for whom they planned to work to repay the remaining debt after arrival. For many the trip to America began long before they boarded the Golden Venture. To reach Bangkok and ocean passage to the United States, many left China on foot, crossing the mountains in the west into Myanmar and walking their way across tropical terrain to Thailand. On board the Golden Venture, they slept, ate, and passed the time on the floor atop tiny spaces allotted to each. The passengers described their overcrowded voyage as a "hell" filled with brutalities from their handlers, who meted out punishment and raped some of the women, as well as the gnawing lack of food. After the shocking end to a traumatic voyage, the men were confined to jail cells in York, rendering them ineffectual and unable to repay their debt to the snakeheads nor to assist their families back home.

The detainees applied for political asylum, citing numerous reasons for leaving that ranged from persecution under China's one-child policy and forced sterilizations to fear of reprisals from involvement with the pro-democracy movement that was violently suppressed at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Without doubt, the majority attempted to illegally enter the United States because of the lack of economic opportunities back home. Almost all the York refugees were from the Fujian province, part of a new wave of Chinese immigration that began in the 1980s that was attracted to the potential for financial success in America. To pass the time as they sought asylum, many of the Golden Venture detainees turned to the folk art of paper folding and produced sculpture from torn pieces of paper recycled from magazines and newspapers.

Zhezhi was the traditional art of paper folding that most Chinese learned as children when they mastered basic folds to make paper hats and boats. The Golden Venture refugees would have been familiar with paper folding done for amusement or funeral practices. Around the holidays, people often constructed paper fruit out of money for good luck. Paper folding was also an important part of funerary practice, which included the burning of paper
objects to commemorate the dead. At funerals, people folded joss paper, or hell money, into the shape of gold ingots and burned these offerings to provide for the deceased in the afterlife. Traditional Chinese paper folds were fragile and fell apart easily. The detainees, however, developed a sturdier form of zhezi that used glue. To this day, their practice is often referred to as "Golden Venture" paperfolding since their art works exposed an overlooked Chinese folk practice to a wide Western public.

Attorneys with little immigration experience helped the detainees process their asylum cases. At the behest of Jeff Lobach, president of the York County Bar Association, many attorneys and legal assistants signed up to take the cases pro bono and took crash courses to learn the basics of immigration law. The detainees had no resources; most arrived with possessions that could fit into a small grocery shopping bag. The attorneys visited the prison to build the asylum cases, providing a service that the detainees had no means to repay. As small tokens of thanks, some of the Chinese men began folding paper sculptures and giving them to the attorneys. They taught each other the folding techniques and soon the practice of constructing paper sculpture for gifts spread to nearly all the men. The detainees, terrified of imminent deportation and frustrated with incarceration, turned idle hands into an expression of appreciation and found a means to reciprocate the attorneys' gift of service. Bound by a culture with highly ritualized gift-giving practices, the Chinese men invented a way to partially satisfy the norms of reciprocation and "saving face" necessitated by receiving pro bono counsel. The Golden Venture detainees became artistic makers not only to create tokens of gratitude for the lawyers, but to fulfill the requirements of gift exchange that were intrinsic to their cultural identity.

Collaborative Paper Folding: Techniques and Themes

What initially began as gifts for attorneys turned into an extensive workshop production of paper art. As stories leaked about the detainees' request for asylum, disapproval mounted against their incarceration, which many felt was unjust and inhumane. Some were fleeing from religious persecution, others told horrible tales of forced sterilization (the women detained at other sites reported forced abortions). All feared deportation to China where they would certainly face imprisonment, torture, punitive fines, and possibly death. Supporters soon gathered outside the prison to demonstrate their solidarity with the detainees. A grassroots organization, the People of the Golden Vision, began to meet every Sunday for a weekly vigil. Protesting under the umbrella of social justice, people came together for different reasons. Most were conservative, pro-life advocates who opposed the Chinese government's measures of enforcing a one-child policy; others were politically left-leaning
and viewed the detainees' plight as a human rights issue. The first prayer vigil was held in August, two months after the men arrived in York, and continued until the last man was released. Lobach's wife, Cindy, began distributing a one-page newsletter about the detainees that helped solicit support for their cause. The newsletter included English translations of letters from the Chinese men, reports of detainees held at other sites, requests for supplies or money, and fundraising activities. The support group eventually swelled to 600 members.

Cindy Lobach was the first to suggest the sale of art to help raise awareness and to build funds for their advocacy. The refugees used materials at their disposal, including Styrofoam cups, toilet paper, newspapers, and magazines. At first the paper sculptures were simple, small-scale pineapples and birds that the men gave to prison officials, attorneys, and legal aides. Prison officials encouraged the activity since it lifted the men's spirits. The prison chaplain secured the detainees the right to use scissors under strict supervision. Many of the early works fell apart; therefore, the chaplain persuaded authorities to give the detainees access to glue to help keep the sculptures intact.

Each sculpture was composed of a thousand or more pieces of folded paper. Small paper pieces were folded into triangular forms and nested into each other. The detainees often worked in groups, a factor that was dictated by the prison system. The men were separated by "pods," bi-level units of 16 to 32 cells, which functioned as microcosms of artistic production. A main designer would carefully plan the pattern and his assistants would fold paper, grouping heaps of paper units according to color. Each pod gained a reputation for a genre of paper folding. Bill Westerman, the curator of the Fly to Freedom exhibition noted, "One pod was known for baskets, another for trees, another for towers."

Many detainees chose to produce eagles, not only because they were the American national bird but for the association with liberty. The detainees had modified the traditional paper-folding technique with the addition of papier-mâché, which they prepared by soaking toilet paper in glue and water. The combination of folded paper and papier-mâché allowed the makers to mold the works into highly realistic representational forms. The "freedom birds" required a combination of techniques, including thousands of folded papers for the wings and tail and papier-mâché for the head, feet, and body, which were colored with marker. The sculptors applied a glaze of white glue, smoothed over with a plastic spoon. The eagles varied in size from approximately 1 foot to more than 3 feet. Papier-mâché was used to build up bases from cardboard armatures to allow for even larger installation pieces, such as one with two eagles in a tree. At times the pods would compete with each other, striving to outdo the other groups, or pods would experiment and
develop new motifs or processes that the men would share by holding their works up to cell windows.

The eagle by Cheng Kwai Sung is a typical example of a freedom bird. What strikes one immediately is the kaleidoscope of color on the wings. The nested pieces of paper units and the wear and tear of the creased edges produce an uneven surface that evokes the texture of ruffled feathers. The hollow beneath the wings gives the illusion of flight, as if the eagle is about to fly. The head is constructed of papier-mâché and painted white in stark contrast to the colorful wings. The black oblong-shaped eyes are ringed with yellow to make them appear fierce. The pointed beak is heavily incised and curves into a slight hook, giving the eagle a determined expression. The eagle sits alight crossed branches painted white and decorated with floral motifs and writing in Chinese and English. The inscriptions are what make this eagle the most symbolic of the museum’s freedom birds because of direct reference to freedom and the prison in York. Aside from eagles, numerous themes were appropriated from American culture, including the Statue of Liberty and Disney characters. Religious themes were represented too with several statues of Christ on the cross. More bittersweet objects included caged eagles, replicas of the Golden Venture ship, or the occasional paper cakes that marked the passing of time. MoCA’s collection has two birthday cakes that “celebrate” the second anniversary of the ship’s grounding.

“Art from Behind Bars”: Chinese Immigrants as Outsider Artists

The paper sculptures raise the knotty question of classification in art history and the art market. The works can fall under diverse categories including folk art, outsider art, and self-taught art.5 Though the sculpture derived from Chinese paper craft traditions, the men were not associated with artisanal practices in China. Most of the men were manual laborers who did not participate in revived Chinese craft traditions, especially the production of paper offerings.6 On a certain level, the art production at York fits within the rubric used to define outsider art.7 Self-taught, incarcerated, and desperate, the detainees fit the profile of most outsider artists whose biographies tend to emphasize personal trauma and the lack of formal artistic training. However, the detainees problematize the notion that outsider artists create art independently. The Golden Venture refugees may have worked in social isolation because they were behind bars but there existed a strong sociability between the men, which fostered competition and inventiveness. Despite the differences between the detainees and outsider artists, the emphasis on their peripheral status—prisoner, illegal alien, and outsider—helped fuel the sale of their works.
With the intent to raise funds and garner publicity, Cindy Lobach arranged for the artworks to be sold at auction. Despite the detainees' doubts, the first auction took place in March 1994 and Lobach sold all 100 paper objects that she brought to the local YWCA for sale. Production increased manifold after the prisoners received some of the proceeds from the sales. The detainees became more motivated, some worked for hours on end between 10 am and 10 pm or later. Reports of visits to the prison described cells filled with art. Lobach marveled, "It didn't take them long to pick up on the capitalist system." The exhibitions stressed the handcrafted quality of the works, the use of rudimentary materials like Elmer's Glue, and the prisoner status of the artists. The announcement for a March 1995 auction at Grace United Methodist Church in Hanover, Pennsylvania, featured the image of an eagle with the headline "Art from Behind Bars."

Lobach intentionally sold the works at low cost in order to make it possible for a wide range of people to support the refugees. As she made arrangements for more auctions, word spread of the detainees' artwork. Her house became a veritable gallery and she fielded purchase requests at all hours of the day. By July 1994, four benefit auctions had been held for the refugees and $15,000 had been raised. The auctions attracted the attention of gallery dealers and museums in the Philadelphia area and beyond. The following year, the paper sculptures were exhibited in an upscale gallery on Madison Avenue. One hundred pieces were priced between $135 and $450 to raise money for the detainees' legal defense.

The excitement, over the paper sculptures from folk art dealers and advocates of the budding field of outsider art (the first annual Outsider Art Fair happened in 1993) made it an opportune time for the works to be well received. There was even an attempt to give the refugees' paper-folding technique its own name. The magazine Folk Art, a publication of the Museum of American Folk Arts in New York City, published an article that identified the technique as Qian Shi, which meant "a thousand papers." The label Qian Shi was fabricated because one of the detainees' attorneys felt "this unique paper sculpture needed a name to help identify it" and consulted a historian to generate a label. This type of branding reflects a desire to frame the Golden Venture art within a genre, generally folk art, when, in effect, the paper sculptures problematize attempts to classify it. Unlike outsider art that privileges the work of the mentally ill or folk art that highlights the gravitas of a folkloric tradition, the Golden Venture sculptures were produced in response to a situation imposed on the refugees. Most of the men were carpenters, electricians, and construction workers, not artists driven to carry forth a time-honored tradition. They learned the techniques in prison and they sculpted in response to whatever stimuli they encountered from behind prison walls. Their period of art production was a reactionary one that would not continue once the men were released.
As their imprisonment dragged on, some of the men became increasingly dejected and stopped making art. One detainee, Lin Ping, recalled how he stopped folding papers after six months. Overcome with worry for the wife and children he left behind and his inability to repay the $10,000 his family borrowed to fund his passage on the Golden Venture, Lin stated, “I don’t have any interest in it anymore.” One by one the asylum cases were rejected and more were deported. Others gave up their asylum cases, preferring to return to a hostile reception in China than to remain imprisoned.

In the three-and-a-half years they spent at York County jail, the detainees produced more than 10,000 sculptures and raised more than $100,000. The prolific production was indicative of the industriousness of the men. They were willing to enter the country illegally and make incalculable sacrifices necessary to repay the snakeheads for providing passage to America. Leaving behind families and working like indentured servants for years, the men expected to repay their debt and to save enough to start their own businesses. The entrepreneurial drive is indicative of what the Chinese equated with “making it” on Gold Mountain, the colloquial Chinese name for America as the place of freedom and prosperity.

Freedom Birds and Maya Lin’s Museum of Chinese in America

In spring of 1996, the third year of incarceration for the detainees at York, MoCA’s Fly to Freedom exhibition caught the eye of Bob Herbert of the New York Times. Herbert’s editorial called attention to the detainees’ plight as a travesty of an ill-defined immigration policy. The confinement, as Herbert noted, led to the production of artworks infused with dreams of freedom and frustrations over the lengthy incarceration. Herbert ended his opinion piece solemnly, “Depressed, the men in the York County Jail have stopped making their paper constructions.” As the men despaired, their artwork continued to be exhibited and sold.

The release of the remaining passengers occurred in February 1997, after a congressman from York intervened and presented President Clinton with two paper sculptures. Attorneys for the detainees credit New York Times coverage and the congressman’s involvement as a turning point for the refugees. Republican William Goodling met with Clinton and presented him with two paper sculptures, a freedom bird and a tree, to which the president remarked, “They’re beautiful,” and decided the next day to release the men. The last 39 Golden Venture detainees left York County Prison on February 26, 1997, almost four years after their doomed voyage. In the end, their release was bittersweet because Clinton did not grant asylum but placed them on parole, thereby condemning the men to a legal limbo that made them vulnerable to deportation.
Many paper sculptures entered MoCA's collection after the pivotal 1996 *Fly to Freedom* exhibit but the works are no longer on display. Since then, the museum was transformed from its homespun origins as the New York Chinatown History Project, established to preserve the community's local history, to a national-level cultural institution. Maya Lin renovated an nineteenth-century factory building on the edge of Chinatown to house MoCA's galleries and offices, a process that expanded exponentially the display space from the cramped one-room exhibition area in an old school building on Mulberry Street. She intentionally highlighted spatial juxtapositions between the past and present by designing what she called a "bridge" between old and new, creating a space that encouraged visitors to contemplate the experience of the Chinese diaspora in the Americas on multiple levels.  

The factory building, a former machine shop, has two facades, one that faces the Chinese community and the other looks to American modernity represented by New York's Soho neighborhood. The main entrance is located on Centre Street, the side that faces Chinatown, reinforcing the museum's connection to the Chinese community. A floor-to-ceiling window on the Soho side allows one to peer into a reproduction of a nineteenth-century Chinese general store, the gathering space of the community, thus highlighting the interchange between past and present. The core of the building is a hollow light well that Lin unearthed and left raw, retaining the original skylight and red brick walls (Figure 16.1). This courtyard serves as the symbolic core of the building, reminiscent of the internal courtyards found in traditional Chinese residential architecture. The walls are punctured with portals that offer glimpses into the permanent exhibition on Chinese American experience, *With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America*. Lin's juxtapositions of old and new, East and West, help engineer a confrontation with the museum space that is infused with nostalgia and questions of identity.  

The new MoCA building is itself a work of art. Lin constructed an atmospheric space out of soothing muted colors and subtle historic details, forming a space that encourages reflection. The core exhibit is carefully orchestrated around objects from MoCA's collection, which unfortunately excludes the paper sculptures. The *Golden Venture* art remains in storage but its story is important to the continuing narrative of Chinese experience and modern immigration. One can only hope MoCA will make the sculptures accessible, because the art is an eloquent expression of a critical global issue. President Clinton's unprecedented decision to imprison the *Golden Venture* passengers in 1993 paved the way for the troubling treatment of immigrants today. Currently, approximately 430,000 people are detained each year for immigration issues in the United States. Without sustainable immigration reform, situations like the *Golden Venture* beached on a New York shoreline or hundreds of migrant children detained in warehouses will become more common, and increasingly difficult to ignore.
16.1 Photograph of courtyard in the Museum of Chinese in America.
Designed by Maya Lin, 2009. Courtesy of Maya Lin Studio/
Notes

1 "飛向自由" is Chinese for "Fly to the Freedom." According to the Museum of Chinese in America's inventory, this eagle sculpture was produced by Cheng Kwai Sung and inscribed by Shi Jian Li, acc. no. 1.1996.001.49.


3 On Demand, see the recent exhibition catalog, Thomas Demand (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005). On Huang, see Huang Yong Ping and Philippe Vergne, House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2005).


5 A good overview of immigration policies and the political asylum process is Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman, Rejecting Refugees: Political Asylum in the 21st Century (New York: Routledge, 2008), especially chapter 1, "No More Huddled Masses."


8 A smaller group of men was sent to a facility in Winchester, Virginia; the women ended up in New Orleans, Louisiana or Bakersfield, California, and juveniles were placed in foster care.


14 Two of the refugees profiled in the Golden Venture documentary reported how they were imprisoned, tortured, and fined large sums following deportation, Cohn, Golden Venture.

15 Joan Maruskin, a United Methodist minister, planned the first vigil and recalled, "It was very strange. We had guys with rifles pointed at people praying." The vigils were held nightly for almost a year and then weekly for the remainder of the refugees' imprisonment. Mike Argento, "Golden Venture 20 Years Later Today: Many Lives Remain in Limbo," York Daily Record, June 6, 2013 (accessed July 15, 2014, http://www.ydr.com/ci_23622804/golden-venture-20-years-later-many-lives-remain).

16 The newsletter appeared to have been published from September 1993 through February 1997, the month the York detainees were released.


18 Westerman, Fly to Freedom, 25.

19 These distinctions are beyond the scope of this essay but important to acknowledge to better understand the reception of the art works. Charles Russell refers to and moves beyond this "term warfare" in his analysis of non-mainstream art, "Finding a Place for the Self-Taught in the Art World(s)," in Self-taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 3-34.


21 The literature on outsider art is extensive but tends to focus on the study of individual artists. Good historical overviews of the movement are Roger Cardinal, Outsider Art (London: Studio Vista, 1972); and Vera L. Zolberg and Joni Maya Cherbo, eds., Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
22 Westerman, Fly to Freedom, 45-6.
23 Gregory, “Qian Zhi,” 49.
26 The museum is now called the American Folk Art Museum. Gregory, “Qian Zhi,” 46-52. Several of the paper sculptures illustrated in the article belonged to Frank Miele’s gallery.
27 The article also perpetuated a mythic beginning to the unusual paper fold, which the author ascribed to an anonymous detainee who was transferred to another prison; Westerman noted how this story circulated widely though in truth many of the refugees had experience with paper folding, Fly to Freedom, 23.
28 Although, it should be noted that five detainees were granted permanent residency for “extraordinary artistic ability.”
32 The men are allowed to live, work, and pay taxes but they do not have permanent residence, and several have received notices of deportation that have been repeatedly appealed. Patrick Radden Keefe, “A Path Out of Purgatory,” New Yorker, June 6, 2013 (accessed July 11, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/a-path-out-of-purgatory).
34 On immigration, identity, and nostalgia, see Andreea Deciu Rîțoiu, Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).
35 Radden Keefe points out that the cost of federal immigration enforcement is $18 billion, more than the budget of all other major federal law enforcement agencies combined. See “A Path Out of Purgatory.”