

Research on the Historical Context and Artistic Features of 'Tancheng Woodblock New Year Paintings'

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Abstract: In Chinese folk art, the woodblock New Year paintings of Tancheng, featuring "Door Gods" as their theme, have a unique creative style and constitute a crucial part of our traditional culture. Originating over two hundred years ago in Shaxi Village, southwest of Tancheng County in Linyi City, Shandong Province, these paintings were initially influenced by the woodblock New Year paintings from Yangjiabu in Weifang, Shandong. However, under the combined influence of folk art in northern Jiangsu and southern Shandong, they gradually developed their distinct artistic characteristics. In May 2013, Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings were officially listed as a "Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage" in Shandong [1].

1. Introduction

The Door Gods New Year prints not only stem from the daily lives of the Chinese people but also embody the artistic aesthetics and cultural ideology of the Chinese populace, thus contributing to the diverse development of modern Chinese art. The author instigated changes in the expressive techniques of Door Gods New Year prints to make them more adaptable to contemporary life. As Mr. Zhang Daoyi remarked, "The richer material life becomes, the higher the level of civilization, and people's demand for life converges towards the unity of beauty, not staying at yesterday's level. The theoretical research in arts and crafts aims to explore these patterns, progressing from spontaneous development to conscious transformation and development, enhancing the quality of life." [2] As Mr. Feng Jicai expressed, "Today, we are in the transitional period from the agricultural civilization era to industrialized modern civilization. Creations of the agricultural era are gradually becoming historical forms. We should transcend the biased perspectives and narrow concepts of viewing folk culture from the past, understanding folk culture from a broader and deeper cultural perspective, appreciating the unique aesthetics of folk culture, turning our ancestors' creations into a complete treasure for future generations to enjoy." [3] Door Gods New Year prints represent a folk art rich in Chinese customs, drawing nourishment from folk cultural elements to enrich their own artistic language. Artworks created using folk elements often possess a certain affinity, making them more easily accepted by the general populace and enhancing the influence of modern art with a folk style on people's aesthetic perceptions.

2. Historical origins

In Chinese folk art, the Tancheng woodblock New Year prints, with "Door Gods" as the main theme, have a unique creative process and are an important part of our traditional culture. Originating over two centuries ago on the north bank of the Xinyi River, southwest of Tancheng County in Linyi, Shandong, these prints were concentrated in the village of Shawo in Shengli Town. Emerging during the Qing Dynasty, the Tancheng woodblock New Year prints thrived in the mid-19th century, influenced by local customs in areas like Luanan and Subei. Despite a decline during the Republican era, they experienced a revival after the reform and opening-up period. Today, they are recognized as a "provincial intangible cultural heritage and continue to be passed down as a fine traditional folk

craft." [4] The historical roots of Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings trace back to the Qing Dynasty when a craftsman from Weifang's woodblock New Year painting industry sought refuge in Shaxi Village during a famine. Facing hunger during the Chinese New Year, he used the woodblocks he carried to print and sell Door Gods paintings, which unexpectedly gained popularity for their vibrant colors and joyful atmosphere. This marked the beginning of the prosperous development of Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings.

Now, under the guidance of inheritors like Zhang Chaolie and due to the local emphasis on the exploration, rescue, and protection of intangible cultural heritage, various relevant policies have been formulated. This has led many young people to become aware of Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings and start learning the art, giving great hope to dedicated artists like Zhang Chaolie. Consequently, this unique folk art has been able to continue and develop.

This article introduces the historical context of Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings, focusing on the Door Gods series, and explores its artistic features. By studying and extracting traditional elements from the Door Gods series of Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings, not only does it enrich personal artistic language, but it also deepens the understanding of traditional folk art and strengthens the recognition of China's outstanding traditional culture.

Chinese traditional culture encompasses rich artistic elements, and "Door Gods," as one of the representative artistic symbols of Chinese folk culture, carries significant cultural significance. Originating from Linyi City, Shandong Province, Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings have a history of over two hundred years. Although they originated from Weifang's woodblock New Year paintings in Shandong, they gradually developed a unique artistic style under the combined influence of northern Jiangsu and southern Shandong. In May 2013, Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings were included in the intangible cultural heritage protection list of Shandong Province, and the Door Gods series, its iconic representative work, won a silver award in the "National Folk Art Grand Exhibition" held by the Ministry of Culture in 1994. This article focuses on the folk art symbol of "Door Gods," detailing the historical overview of the Door Gods series in Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings and summarizing its artistic features shaped by historical and geographical evolution.

As times change, traditional Chinese culture is gradually overlooked due to the influence of Western culture. To explore new development paths, Chinese artists actively absorb and integrate the essence of Chinese traditional culture, closely aligning with their own reality and emphasizing the development of local culture. In the vibrant tapestry of traditional Chinese folk art, for the author, analyzing the Door Gods through text is a unique exploration of the artistic value of traditional Chinese culture. Despite the rapid development of society and the continuous advancement of technology, people are gradually neglecting the significant impact of Chinese traditional folk culture in daily life. However, in reality, folk culture has a unique charm and irreplaceability. The Door Gods, as one of the representatives of folk culture, emanate a unique artistic beauty.

3. Artistic features

3.1 Color coordination

Color is a crucial component of Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings, particularly in the Door Gods series, where the most common colors are red, yellow, green, and purple. Black ink lines and the inherent white color of the paper serve as complementary elements. The paintings emphasize the combination of "five colors" and "five elements" resulting in vivid and visually impactful compositions. The color palette of the Door Gods series exhibits three main characteristics:

Firstly, it often employs complementary and contrasting colors, with a focus on pairs like red and green (or blue), yellow and purple. This helps alleviate the potential issues of high color purity, visual aggression, and strong stimulation associated with monochromatic hues. For instance, in the martial Door God painting "Qin Qiong Jing De" the entire composition contrasts "red and green" and "yellow and purple," reflecting the color characteristics of traditional Chinese New Year paintings—minimal use of complex or intermediate colors, and a preference for warm and cool color contrasts.

Secondly, there is an emphasis on the combination of soft and hard colors. Zhang Chaolie

mentioned two color pairing proverbs: "Purple is bone, green is sinew; with red and yellow intermingling, renewal is achieved." Another proverb states, "Soft relies on hard; color should not be rigid" Here, "soft" refers to colors with higher brightness and saturation, such as red and yellow, while "hard" refers to colors with lower brightness and saturation, such as black and purple. Pairing only hard colors may create a feeling of oppression, but combining hard and soft colors with varying brightness creates a harmonious overall effect.

Thirdly, the paintings make extensive use of small color areas, dividing different regions of the image into small structural elements. A limited number of colors are used, and the color hierarchy is created by changing regions and repeating interspersed shapes. Taking the martial Door God painting "Qin Qiong Jing De" as an example, the characters Qin Qiong and Jingde have corresponding black areas for the "ink lines" of the Door God. Although the two characters appear as a unified whole, different color areas separate their hat decorations, beards, shoulders, elbows, waists, hems, and boot surfaces, resulting in distinct visual effects. In another martial Door God painting "Guan Gong" the differentiation of color depth is achieved by distinguishing the small areas beneath the garments of the two Door Gods on the left and right. The right Door God's garment decoration is visibly lighter in color compared to the left Door God, highlighting the variation in color pairing. Overall, the color patterns of the Tancheng woodblock New Year painting Door Gods series use bold and exaggerated techniques while maintaining a rational aspect.

3.2 Structural form

The Tancheng woodblock New Year paintings, featuring door gods as a significant traditional decoration for the Chinese New Year, exhibit a diverse range of compositional styles. The composition includes symmetrical, triangular, and scattered arrangements. Notably, the artwork follows traditional two-dimensional painting techniques with a focus on stylized design, lacking three-dimensional elements for a decorative effect.

Symmetrical composition is predominant, exemplified by door god paintings like "Zhao Gongming and Ran Deng Dao Ren", "Qin Qiong Jing De" and "Guan Gong" where figures are arranged on the same plane with minor differences in decoration and color. This creates a stable and harmonious visual experience. Triangular composition is evident in literary door god paintings like "Fu Lu Shou San Xing" distributing the Fu Xing, Shou Xing, and Lu Xing in a triangular layout for visual stability. Scattered composition, seen in literary door god paintings like "Wu Zi Deng Ke" and "Duo Zi Duo Fu" involves a higher number of characters, enhancing the narrative aspect.

The group painting of Door Gods in Tancheng woodblock New Year prints, solely based on the overall effect of its Door Gods' forms, reveals a strong subjective representation, lacking a realistic portrayal of natural images. However, it achieves authenticity in the artistic expression of imagery, embodying the idea of "accurately representing an object through a certain erroneous drawing" (Rudolf Arnheim, "Art and Visual Perception"). The stylistic characteristics of this subjective imagery can be summarized in two aspects: first, the deformation and exaggeration of the imagery; second, its comprehensive and summarizing nature. [5]

Finally, the paintings adopt a "sky-reaching, earth-standing" composition with a full layout yet leaving room for imagination.

3.3 The stylistic features

The figures in Tancheng woodblock New Year prints, especially those depicting door gods, are often inspired by legendary stories, historical legends, and folk beliefs. The martial door gods include characters like "Guan Gong," "Qin Qiong and Jingde," and "Zhao Gongming with Ran Deng Daoist," drawn from various sources like the Investiture of the Gods and traditional folk tales. On the other hand, the literary door gods series typically features "Fu Lu Shou Three Stars," "Five Sons Passing the Imperial Examination," and "Many Sons, Much Happiness," reflecting the societal desire for prosperity and the pursuit of a better life. Tancheng woodblock prints are known for their exaggerated and unique character depictions, using bold lines to create a lively and rhythmical composition. Despite the boldness, the details, such as the door gods' distinct beards, are carefully rendered. Overall, the door god figures in Tancheng woodblock New Year prints, shaped through generations of bold

innovation by artists, exhibit a grand and imposing presence with both exaggerated and detailed characteristics, reflecting the aesthetic preferences of the northern Chinese people.

The Tancheng woodblock New Year prints showcase distinctive features, including significant color contrast, a harmonious blend of firm and soft lines, unique shapes, and rich compositions in their door deity group paintings. These characteristics align with the aesthetic preferences of Northern agrarian culture, catering to the psychological needs of the laboring populace and embodying the unique culture of the Yimeng region. The color palette typically includes red, yellow, green, blue, and black, with white left as blank space replaced by the color of the paper. Market competition has led to the addition of peach red and purple, evolving into a "seven-color, seven-block" scheme.

From the color, tancheng woodblock New Year prints aim for a deep, rustic, and natural atmosphere, utilizing saturated colors complemented by black and white lines for clear and balanced combinations. Stylistically, characters in door deity paintings are often exaggerated and boldly portrayed, offering a pleasing and familiar experience for the audience, drawing inspiration from folk tales and historical figures. In terms of compositional form, traditional flat painting methods, symmetrical balanced compositions, and the characteristic "sky-reaching, earth-standing" approach are predominantly employed.

In summary, traditional Door God New Year paintings primarily serve the purposes of adornment and decorative enhancement, with an additional role in moral education. As a significant medium expressing the ideals of Chinese outstanding traditional cultural thought, Door God New Year paintings convey these cultural ideals more effectively through understanding their cultural connotations. By adopting new artistic forms, these paintings continue to inherit and promote China's intangible cultural heritage. The unique charm emanating from traditional folk art, coupled with the unwavering commitment of laboring people to their beliefs, showcases the artists' relentless innovative spirit as they express a profound love for Chinese culture. The public can gain a profound understanding of the complexity and rich meaning of outstanding traditional culture in human history, explore the artistic allure of traditional folk art, and attempt to unearth its emotional value in the new era.

4. Conclusion

The author, approaching Tancheng woodblock New Year prints' original Door God images from a subjective artistic perspective and engaging in a dialogue with them, conducted a brief analysis of the historical overview and artistic features of the Door God group painting through on-site investigations, inspired by a series of literary and philosophical works. The understanding gained highlights that studying outstanding traditional Chinese culture and refining it is a crucial method in contemporary oil painting creation. Throughout the research, the author not only experienced the unique charm of traditional folk art and the unwavering commitment of the laboring people to cultural heritage but also appreciated the tireless innovation and love for Chinese culture exhibited by Chinese artists. This further motivates the author to forge ahead, reinforcing the determination to explore more of our country's outstanding intangible cultural heritage. The goal is to encourage more Chinese artists to infuse "ancient charm" into their artistic innovation, deeply understand the characteristics of traditional culture, and continue transmitting the excellent essence of Chinese traditional culture. This aims to help more people discover the brilliance of China's intangible cultural heritage. It is hoped that the public can profoundly recognize the complex process and rich content of outstanding traditional culture in human history, appreciate the charm of traditional folk art, and further conduct in-depth research, actively promoting and exploring its emotional value in the new era.

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