

## Research on the Chinese Opera-Themed Woodcut New Year Pictures in Yangjiabu from the Perspective of Cultural Studies

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### **Abstract**

*Chinese Opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures in Yangjiabu are representative of Chinese New Year pictures. This research takes cultural research as a breakthrough point, analyzes and combs its Context, Representation, Coding & Decoding, and finds that: After the imitation and restatement of traditional Chinese opera, the opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures have formed a dynamic intertextual relationship with Chinese culture and traditional Chinese opera. The understanding of this intertextual relationship is not only an important way to study Chinese folk art but also one of the ideas to show the aesthetic spirit of it.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Studies, Chinese Traditional Opera, Opera themed woodcut New Year pictures in Yangjiabu*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Yang Jiabu, as prestigious as Yangliuqing in Tianjin, Taohuawu in Jiangsu, and Mianzhu in Sichuan, is one of the four major production areas of Chinese New Year pictures. The origin of opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures in Yangjiabu can be traced back to Ming Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Hongwu, “According to the Genealogy of Yang ... During the Hongwu reign of the Ming Dynasty, the clan of Yang moved from Sichuan Province to Zhuo County (now Weifang City, Shandong Province) and settled down on the west bank of the Zhuo river, from which the village name of Yangjiabu came... After moving to Weixian County, skilled carving technology was used and the production of New Year pictures were engaged in accordance with the local conditions and customs of Shandong with regard to aesthetic views and actual needs” [1]. The distinct folk art characteristics distinguish opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures in Yangjiabu from others, of which its colors are bold and thick, modeling is unsophisticated but wonderful, and local flavor is rich. The subject accords with the aesthetic needs of the masses of farmers, and mainly focuses on Auspicious Paintings, Ceremonial Paintings, Traditional Opera, and Folk Story Paintings, among which the opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures are particularly brilliant. As for the definition of the concept of opera, I agree with the view of Zhang Geng, a drama theorist, that “Chinese traditional opera has a unique title: ‘Xiqu’... Until the modern Wang Guowei, ‘Xiqu’ was used as a general name for traditional Chinese opera culture, including the southern opera of Song and Yuan Dynasties, the Zaju in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, the chuanqi of Ming and Qing Dynasties, as well as the modern Peking Opera and all local operas.” [2]. Opera-themed New Year pictures are a type of New Year pictures that use images to show opera stories, and convey the scenes of opera

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performances to the audience vividly. The number and sales volume of opera-themed New Year pictures in Yangjiabu are tremendous, among which the stories of the Three Kingdoms and the Water Margin account for a large proportion. And related Opera themes such as the Legend of the White Snake, the General Yang, and Tianhe Match are also common. From the perspective of cultural studies, this research will analyze the Context, Representation, Coding & Decoding of opera-themed New Year pictures in Yangjiabu, in order to clarify the relationship between social ideology, folk art, and the people at the bottom.

## **2. CONTEXT: TRADITION OF MUSIC AND OPERA, CULTURE OF ANCIENT SCHOLAR, AND MASS ENTERTAINMENT**

Developed from the original song and dance, Chinese opera sprouted from the Qin and Han Dynasties and has lasted for thousands of years, forming a unique Chinese opera music tradition. From the budding stage of “Baixi” to the folk rise of the Southern and Northern Dynasties “Opera of Song and Dance”, then to the Tang and Five Dynasties “Canjun Opera”. In Song Dynasty, opera scripts even appeared, adding to the literary characteristics of opera, forming an art form of opera that integrates Editing, Performance, and Viewing, which also marks the development and maturity of Chinese opera. Numerous literati in the Yuan Dynasty partook in the creation of Zaju, which gradually became a trend of scholar culture, making “Yuan Opera” prosperous for a time, becoming as prestigious as the “Tang Poetry” and “Song Poetry”. This trend of scholar culture has influenced the historical process of Chinese opera culture to a certain extent. The reason is that Wang Guowei once made a detailed discussion in his book the History of the Song and Yuan Opera: “In the early Yuan Dynasty, there were many famous officials who wrote Xiaoling. Only the author of the Zaju, most of them were ordinary people. Otherwise, they have belonged to the Henan Province. Among the Semu people of Mongolia, there were also those who made Xiaoling, but those who made Zaju were only Han people (among them, Li Zhifu was the only Jurchen). Probably because of the importance attached to officials at the end of the Jin Dynasty, people from Yuan Shi were better appointed than those from Imperial Examinations. By the time the Mongols destroyed the Jin Dynasty, the imperial examination system had been temporarily abolished for 80 years, which was something unprecedented in history. So the number of people who could write operas dropped dramatically. Therefore, it is not surprising that most writers of Zaju came from Yuan Shi...I believe that the abolition of imperial examination in the early Yuan Dynasty was the reason why Zaju prospered later. Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, the situation that those who competed under the imperial examination system had been come into being for a long time. Once the imperial examination system was abolished, their talents would have no place to apply but to write operas. And the Jin Dynasty's imperial examination system of learning content was the most humble compared to the others (See the volume 7,8,9 of Liu Qi's *Guiqian Zhi*). Such people will never succeed academically if they cannot do what they could have done otherwise. And the elegant classics of literature and history were not something they had studied, which was the reason why the writers of Zaju were born. One or two more geniuses were born among them, and their outstanding literary attainments were displayed, of which most writings of Yuan Opera used absolutely fabulous and marvelous words.”[3]. That is to say, under the rule of Mongolia, the status of the Han people declined, and the imperial examination system was interrupted. A large number of that they were hopeless in politics, then turned to the creation of opera scripts. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the art of traditional Chinese opera reached the peak of prosperity, especially in the Qing Dynasty. Opera was loved by the imperial family to the scholar, farmer, artisan, and merchant. And listening to opera had become an important entertainment way for the public at that time. Zhang Cixi, a historian, also discussed the reasons for its prosperity in this period: “Along with opera, the Qing Dynasty was the most prosperous, which is probably because the rulers of the Qing Dynasty came from the desert. All they see was murder, and all they hear was the sound of the

sword. When listened to the peaceful and elegant singing of a man, singing the sound of debauchery, they should be likable and delighted.”[4]. In addition, “When there was a change of dynasty, the wind of opera was often prosperous.”[5]. The dedication of Han people to opera and the sentimental atmosphere of opera made the late Ming opera music continue in the Qing Dynasty. At the same time, the rulers of the Qing Dynasty, with the purpose of maintaining rule and civilizing the common people, advocated the promotion of opera in the palace and the folk, and promoted the prosperity of it. No matter in urban or rural areas, large and small opera stages were all over China. Like Hippolyte Adolphe Taine said, “the production of works depends on the spirit of the times and the surrounding customs.” [6]. As a traditional art loved by Chinese people, opera-themed New Year pictures came into being in the above context, bearing the function of educating and entertaining the public.

### 3. REPRESENTATION: THE DIMENSION SHIFT FORM STAGE TO IMAGE

According to the statistics, opera-themed New Year pictures in Yangjiabu mainly appeared in the Qing Dynasty, with a number of more than 100. According to Stuart Hall, “Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language to produce meaning.” [7]. And opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures have their unique way of “language” to tell their story. Next, this research will focus on the presentation strategy of Yang Jiabu's opera theme New Year pictures from the two important dimensions of Image and Style.

#### 3.1 Image: Single Image and Serial Image



Figure 1. Tianhe Bath



Figure 2. Three Heroes Combating with Lv Bu at Hulaoguan

There are two types of Images of opera-themed New Year pictures in Yangjiabu: Single Image and Serial Image. A single image is to show a scene or plot in a picture, and a serial image is to put multiple plots into the same picture in the form of multiple images in logical order or time sequence.

The proportion of single images in opera-themed New Year pictures in Yangjiabu is large, which is generally used to represent a part of the story that people are familiar with. For example, Yangjiabu's New Year pictures Tianhe Bath (Fig 1) is based on the opera Tianhe Match (the story of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl ). These New Year pictures condensed stories into a single image in the form of paintings, which stories are the Bathing of Weaver Girl, Cowherd Stealing Clothes, Queen Mother Separates the Cowherd and Weaver by the Tianhe River, the Meet of Cowherd and Weaver on the Magpie bridge on Chinese Valentine's Day and others that people are familiar with. The Yangjiabu's New Year picture Three Heroes Combating with Lv Bu at Hulaoguan (Fig 2) is also a single image of the wonderful fighting scene of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei against Lv Bu at the Hulaoguan in the still image, which represents the widely circulated story Three Heroes Combating with Lv Bu. However, a single image often fails to present a comprehensive and complete opera story. Compared with the New Year pictures in other regions, there are not many serial image opera-themed

New Year pictures in Yangjiabu. In Yangjiabu's New Year picture Xu Shu Zou Ma Jian Zhuge (Fig 3). It simplified and compressed the allusions into four images and placed them in a single picture, of which the stories are about Xu Shu's Mother Kidnapped by Cao Cao, A Home-Letter Faked by Cao Cao, Xu Shu Forced to Become Cao Cao's Subordinate, and Xu Shu's recommendation of Zhuge Liang when leaving Liu Bei. This New Year's picture took the development sequence of opera stories as the logic and presented several key plots such as Liu Bei's farewell to Xu Shu, Xu Shu's recommendation of Zhuge Liang when leaving Liu Bei, and Liu Bei's Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage.

To sum up, with the segmented scenes, the serial image opera-themed New Year pictures have stronger coherence, the narrative of the New Year pictures is enhanced, and the key plot with segmented pictures is shown. Compared with the single image New Year pictures, they are also more ornamental and storytelling.

### 3.2 Style: Retell in Imitation and Construction

#### 3.2.1 Imitation: Realistic Description of Opera

In the ancient Greek period, Plato put forward the "Imitation Theory" of Art (at that time, the concept of "Art" didn't appear, and art was only known as "Skill"). "Plato was more inclined to 'Imitation' than 'Art' to construct the concept of art. The idea of 'mimesis' is imitation, that is, the intuitive copy of nature." [8]. That is, Art is an imitation of nature. This artistic concept is also reflected in the works of Chinese New Year pictures thousands of years later, but the opera New Year pictures in Yangjiabu are not an imitation of nature, but an imitation of opera.

Part of Yangjiabu's Opera New Year pictures is the imitation and reproduction of the opera performance scenes that are familiar to the people. For example, in the opera-themed New Year pictures in Yangjiabu Sweet Dew Temple (Fig 4), Zhao Yun puts a fighting posture in the middle. Liu Bei, his wife Sun Shangxiang and two servants girl look back on the right side, Xu Sheng and Ding Feng who was sent by Zhou Yu do the gesture of bow hand to leave on the left side of the picture. The figure's appearance and background are completely set according to the stage style. In the opera of the Three Kingdoms, Liu Bei and his wife Sun Shangxiang were blocked on their way back to Jingzhou. According to Zhu Geliang's plan, Liu Bei encouraged Sun Shangxiang to drive away two generals from the Kingdom of Wu sent by Zhou Yu. This kind of New Year picture is a true portrayal of the stage. Through mass printing and sales, it meets the needs of the bottom people to see the opera to a certain extent.

#### 3.2.2 Retell: the Transformation of "Freehand Brushwork" of Traditional Opera

"Opera-themed New Year pictures do not just still but also pictures with the painter's unique thoughts and ideas. It is the crystallization of opera art and print art." [9]. The painters' unique thoughts and ideas made them transform the New Year paintings and construct many unsurpassed and unparalleled works.

Under the artist's ingenious conception, several works replacing stage backgrounds with Natural Landscapes, Pavilions, and Realistic Carriages appeared in Yangjiabu's Opera New Year paintings. For example, Yangjiabu's New Year picture Zhuan Yuan Ji Ta (Fig 5), which is based on the Legend of White



Figure 3. Xu Shu Zou Ma Jian Zhuge



Figure 4. Sweet Dew Temple



**Figure 5. Zhuang Yuan Ji Ta**



**Figure 6. The Flooding of Jinshan Temple**

Snake, depicts stones, trees, and Leifeng Pagoda in a realistic way, without any trace of the stage. Another Yangjiabu New Year picture with the same theme, the Flooding of Jinshan Temple (Fig 6), places a white snake and Xiao Qing on a realistic boat, the waves under the boat are surging, and a big fish jumps out of the water, which is also following this technique of painting. In fact, because traditional Chinese opera has a strong moveability, most of Yangjiabu's Opera New Year pictures have the style of imitation and construction at the same time, “the determination of the environment on the opera stage is based on people (Characters). The environment is mostly ‘carried’ by them. The characters are moving, by which the environment is always moving.” The environment is mostly ‘carried’ by them. The characters are moving, by which the environment is always moving.” [10]. As a two-dimensional and static form of plane art, the New Year picture tends to show the opera performance that exists in the three-dimensional space which is constantly moving. Limited by the spatial structure, it can only imitate the opera and transform it at the same time. Through two-dimensional space painting, it retells the opera that exists in space and time.

#### **4. ENCODING & DECODING: CREATIVE PARADIGM AND DYNAMIC INTERTEXTUALITY**

The theory of “Encoding & Decoding” is proposed by Stuart Hall, a scholar of the Birmingham School in the UK, as “a detailed analysis of the production, dissemination, consumption and acceptance process of mass media” [11]. According to Hall's theory, coding is an image production, and decoding is an image acceptance, That is, “the production of meaning, to some extent, can be seen as an ideological implant program. The coder will implant its politics, culture, history, values, and hidden or obvious images... Meaning acceptance is carried out within the framework limited by the coder, but the asymmetric information between the coder and the decoder will lead to differences between image production and acceptance.” [12]. Although this theory is a research result in the field of mass media or mass culture, it seems that it is not related to the topic of my research, but I hold the opinion that it is feasible to use Holzer's “Coding & Decoding” theory to study opera themed New Year pictures, which is on account of in the social context at that time, opera-themed New Year pictures can be said to be a visual image product with the nature of mass culture, of which its production, consumption, and process of acceptance has research value and significance. Next, this research will analyze the Creation Paradigm of Yangjiabu's opera-themed New Year pictures, and the decoding method and meaning production of the audience from Production, Consumption, and Acceptance.

##### **4.1 Coding Stylization: The Appropriation of the Symbolic Language of Traditional Opera**

As mentioned above, coding is a process of meaning production, and meaning needs language to express, and language has specific rules. Only when coding in accordance with language rules, can meaning be expressed clearly and understood. At the same time, in the process of development, Chinese opera has already formed a set of its own stylized “language” traditions, which can be understood as a set of symbolic language systems. Therefore, in the production process of opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures, in order to better convey the meaning that the creators want to express so that people can understand the New Year pictures created by themselves, the opera symbol language was naturally appropriated to the New Year pictures.

#### 4.1.1 The Appropriation of Character Modeling

Chinese opera has its own stylized language system in character modeling, mainly reflected in clothing, make-up, and other aspects. For example, in the clothing of traditional Chinese opera, the clothes with Bagua and Taiji patterns often symbolize being good at Daoism or having wisdom, and the military generals and strategists on the stage often wear such patterns. In the Yangjiabu's opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures, Xu Shu in Xu Shu Zou Ma Jian Zhuge (Fig 3) all wear the clothes of Bagua or costumes that draw Bagua and Taiji at the same time.



Figure 7. Qu Gui Yang

From the perspective of costume accessories in opera, the characters of a military general have usually tied “Kao Flags” around the back to symbolize the leadership of thousands of troops. The generals in Yangjiabu's opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures, such as Zhang Fei in Qu Gui Yang (Fig 7), and so on, also have the “Kao Flags” behind them. The most representative form of make-up in traditional Chinese opera is Facial Makeup. The color of Facial Makeup adheres to the traditional Five Color Concept, which is mainly green, red, white, black, and yellow. Guan Yu with a red face and Zhang Fei with a black face are familiar to people. In Yangjiabu's opera-themed New Year picture of Three Heroes Combating Lv Bu at Hulaoguan (Fig 2) mentioned above, there are Guan Yu with a red face and Zhang Fei with a black face. In summary, it can be seen that Yangjiabu's opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures transplant some of the language rules of opera to the New Year pictures by appropriating the stylized language of operas such as costumes and facial makeup, so as to transmit the language rules of opera theme New Year pictures to the audience.

#### 4.1.2 Appropriation of Props

Props are another important manifestation of the stylization of opera, which has a strong symbolic nature and can be said to be an important part of opera language. The props in Chinese opera are very different from the objects in reality. They are often simplified and virtualized. “One table, two chairs” is the most classic style of props on the stage in Chinese opera. It is an intelligent artistic expression created by opera artists in the era of material shortage.

“One table, two chairs” is the most classic style of props on the stage in Chinese opera. It is an intelligent artistic expression created by opera artists in the era of material shortage. “ ‘One table and two chairs’ seems to be simple, but it is not restricted by logic, which can be imagined arbitrarily, changed diversely, and is not restricted by a certain pattern. It can not only represent the luxurious throne in the palace but also can be the shabby furniture in the cold cellar. When Zhou Yu began to discuss military business in the tent, the scene became a military camp with strict discipline. When Wang Jinlong sat upright, it became the lobby of the Yamen. When Ren Tanghui lies on the table, it becomes a bed in a village shop. When Zhang Yide stood on the table, it became a bridge. When Guan Yu stepped onto the table, the table turned into Mountain. This kind of space environment combined with ‘One table, two chairs’ is simple, flexible and convenient. It's a freehand artistic technique that doesn't seek resemblance in form but focuses on resemblance in spirit”[13]. The symbols of “Table” and “Chair” are also widely used in the opera-themed New Year pictures in Yangjiabu.

In addition, in Chinese opera, “Che Qi (flags)” is used to show vehicles, and horsewhip is used to refer to horses in reality. This symbolic opera language has been appropriated in the creation of Yangjiabu's opera-themed New Year pictures.

## 4.2 Coding Categorization : The Creation of Stage Space

As mentioned above, Yangjiabu's opera-themed New Year pictures both imitate and transform Chinese opera. From the perspective of space creation of these opera-themed New Year pictures, there are both works that directly imitate the stage setting and works that replace the stage setting with real scenes. But the picture composition of these two categories of works is not divorced from the mode of stage performance, which shows the creation of stage space.

### 4.2.1 Opera Themed Stage

The opera-themed New Year pictures which directly imitate the stage sets are often used to put only tables and chairs, or further depict the stage by partially or completely reproducing the appearance of the stage. For example, the Yangjiabu New Year pictures by Qu Chang Sha (Fig 8) is reproduce the performance of the stage in a realistic way, and even the beams and columns of the stage are portrayed in detail, with clear patterns and lines.

### 4.2.2 Real Scene Stage

The opera-themed New Year pictures with real scenes instead of stage settings set the background as real mountains and rivers, and pavilions. But the layout of the characters still follows the stage style position setting. For example, Yangjiabu's New Year picture Hu Lu Yu (Fig 9) depicts the scene of Zhuge Liang fighting Sima Yi with fire at Hu Lu Yu. There are a lot of realistic scenes to show the theme from the perspective of the picture, such as realistic depictions of rocks, trees, horses and vehicles, fire and so on, but the layout of the characters still gives people the feeling of performing on the stage. If these scenes are removed and replaced the background with a stage or "One table, two chairs" is not a violation.



**Figure 8. Qu Chang Sha**



**Figure 9. Hu Lu Yu**

## 4.3 Decoding: The Dynamic Intertextual Relationship Among Culture, Opera, and New Year Picture

Intertextuality was proposed by Julia Kristeva, a Cultural Research Scholar. She believes that a text is actually the intersection of multiple texts, and each text exists in a relationship with other texts and cultures. And every text absorbs and transforms other texts [14]. John Fiske believes that "the meaning of TV is always intertextual because TV interpretation always occurs in the context of other texts, and it is these other texts that constitute the cultural experience" [15]. For Yangjiabu's opera-themed New Year pictures, the research object of this research, its production of meaning is similar to the production of TV meaning mentioned by Fiske. And it is produced by the intertextual relationship between Chinese opera and opera literature. In the heyday of Yangjiabu's opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures, "According to the Genealogy of Yang,

during the Xianfeng Period, there were up to 154 New Year picture workshops... At this time, the Yangjiabu village formed the scene of “Every family prints New Year pictures and builds kites”. And there was a scene where “Hundreds of picture shops, thousands of pictures, and ten thousands of picture plates” [16]. Generations of Yangjiabu people have continued the culture of opera in family's New Year pictures through the production method of woodblock printing.

In feudal China, the grass-roots people generally had no chance to read, especially the farmers, who were uneducated. However, these illiterate farmers can talk about the history of Empires, and praise and criticize Historical figures in their spare time. The reason is that they listen to storytelling and watch operas. In addition, traditional Chinese opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures also carried a large number of traditional Chinese culture, spreading the art of opera and historical stories. Their function cannot be ignored, and they have also been called “the Most Educational New Year Pictures”. The spread of New Year pictures is more extensive and convenient than traditional opera performances. It is a tradition in China for thousands of years to post New Year pictures. In the old times, almost every family in China had New Year pictures. The audience watched the opera solidified the New Year picture image through intertextuality, and produced a new meaning of opera culture, by which Chinese opera, classic stories, Chinese history, and culture continue in the memory of the people at the bottom.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures in Yangjiabu are not only typical folk art but also typical Chinese farmer's art. The opera-themed woodcut New Year pictures are based on Chinese opera. Through the imitation and reconstruction of opera, it presents stylized and typed unique artistic characteristics. The picture has the tension of an opera performance and the unique charm of Chinese painting. As the most learned New Year picture, it is not only the great artistic creation of the ancestors but also the epitome of the social context at that time. The opera-themed New Year picture in Yangjiabu contains a dynamic intertextual relationship between Chinese culture, opera, and New Year pictures. China's folk art has a strong vitality, which regards folk art as a cultural phenomenon. From the perspective of cultural studies, it is of great significance to the research of folk art, and will also inspire the creation of contemporary art. We are looking forward to scholars' further exploration.

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