

FOLK CRAFT HERITAGE OF CHINA



# FOLK NEW YEAR PICTURES



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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*Compiled by Lan Xianlin*



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# Contents

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## Introduction / 1



## Door Gods / 19

Military Door Gods / 20

Civil Door Gods / 42

## Folk Deities / 51

Enshrined Deity Images / 52

Ceremonial Deity Images / 71

## Cute Babies and Beauties / 77

Cute Babies / 78

Beauties / 99





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## Customs and Festivals / 111

Daily Life / 112

Auspicious Pictures and Symbols / 120

New Year Calendar Print / 129



## Stories and Dramas / 133

Stories / 134

Dramas / 142





## INTRODUCTION





New Year Picture (*Nianhua*) derives its name from the age-old custom of Chinese New Year decorations. A fascinating and popular art form, it in fact constitutes a separate branch of traditional Chinese painting. The concept of New Year Picture refers to painted works made by local workshops and regularly posted inside and outside homes. New Year Picture encompasses all such paintings reflecting rural and urban lives, handmade by folk artisans, as well as those carved or produced and painted in local workshops. Chinese New Year Picture possesses colorful detail with abundant cultural and historical connotations.

## Origins

As an old genre of painting, inspired and improved by ancient ceremonial customs, Chinese New Year Picture originated around the 11th century BC, when deities related to nature were the most important subjects. In ancient times, people felt deep reverence toward these deities, and monarchs would make sacrificial offerings each year to the "Five Sacred Mountains" (Mount Tai, the Sacred Eastern Mountain in Shandong; Mount Hua, the Sacred Western Mountain in Shaanxi; Mount Heng, the Sacred Southern Mountain in Hunan; Mount Heng, the Sacred Northern Mountain in Shanxi; and Mount Song, the Sacred Central Mountain in Henan) and the "Four Sacred Rivers" (the Yangtze, Huaihe, Yellow, and Jishui rivers



Illustrations of *Women's Ethical Code*: a famous painting made in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) according to the classic *Women's Ethical Code*, authored by Madam Zheng of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), intended to cultivate female conduct under feudal China. This is a picture to illustrate the content of the book; Song Dynasty (960-1279), Anonymous





Itinerant Peddler:  
Southern Song Dynasty, Li Song



The scroll of Lotus and Mandarin Ducks:  
Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), Li Song

– considered to represent the River God for the Chinese nation). Meanwhile, ceremonial offerings to local deities, town deities, mountain deities and the Dragon King were likewise conducted among the people each year.

The Door God and Kitchen God played major roles during the time of the Shang and Zhou dynasties (1600-256 BC). Artistic images of the Door God and Kitchen God were handed down from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). Historical records of that time mentioned two Door Gods named Shen Tu and Yu Lei (brothers experienced in catching ghosts: if any demons dared plague people, they would catch and bind them as food for tigers; later on, people painted the two brothers' images along with tigers on their doors to ward off evil). The images of four deities, Qinglong (Green Dragon), Baihu (White Tiger), Zhuque (Vermillion Bird) and Xuanwu (Black Warrior), were regarded as auspicious symbols during the Han





Illustrations from local operas,  
Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)



Beauties: Sui Dynasty,  
Linfen, Shanxi Province

Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). In those days, New Year Pictures were painted directly onto doors, gradually fading away over the years. Although no longer seen today, we can still imagine how splendid these had been, through the tomb frescoes, portrait stones and bricks preserved from those times.

The Tang Dynasty (618-907) was one of the most powerful feudal empires. Skills in folk paintings became greatly inspired, thanks to vast economic advancement and cultural prosperity. The subject matter of paintings was broadened extensively. It was said that Zhong Kui (a Chinese folklore deity who drives away evil spirits) could catch and eat evil ghosts while escorting the Son of Heaven (the emperor). So his image was favored among the people during this time. With the emergence of pictures of maids or beauties, subjects reflecting common lives began to enter the social scene.

The Song Dynasty (960-1279) was a period of growth. A prosperous economy, advanced technology in handicraft, and emphasis on culture offered requisite nourishment for the growth of New Year Pictures. "Paper pictures" expanded extensively into mass quantities through the development



of printing craft, accompanying the emergence of numerous professional workshops. New Year Picture was successfully transformed from being only religious iconography into a daily commodity, and gradually became a popular folk art form. It began to depict everyday life and reflected agricultural production and daily living. Subject matters, such as household Door Gods in the form of civil officials, beauties, cute babies and other new themes, gradually emerged. Ultimately, New Year Pictures became indispensable decorations for the Chinese New Year.

The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) was a period of maturity. Book illustrations became popular at that time. Printing technology exceeded all previous dynasties. Furthermore, the craft of carving became more accomplished, while chromatography skills achieved continuous innovation. The technology of woodcut printing to a large extent drove the prosperity of New Year Pictures. Two woodcut printing centers were established. Beijing acted as the center in the north, while the southern center encompassed Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou and Jianou. Under the influence of the two centers, groups of New Year Picture production bases, including Yangliuqing in Tianjin,



*Zhong Kui on an Inspection Tour:*  
mid-13th century, Gong Kai

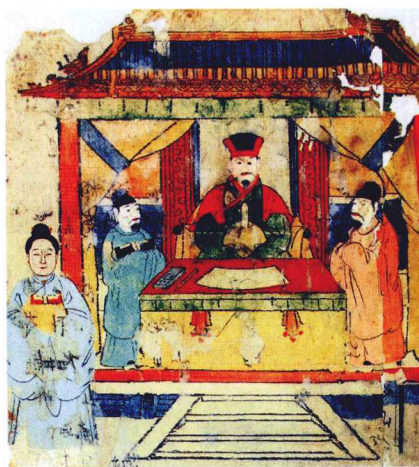


*One-Hundred Fortunes: Ming Dynasty*

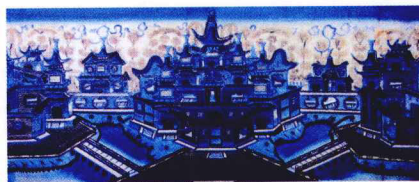


Yangjiabu in Shandong, Zhuxianzhen in Henan and Taohuawu in Suzhou, emerged one after the other. New Year Picture themes in the Ming Dynasty added new elements built on the essentials passed down from previous dynasties. For instance, Qin Qiong, a famous general of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and Yuchi Gong (another famous Tang general) became new idols for military Door Gods.

New Year Picture attained its peak during the Qing Dynasty (1616-1911) in three successive stages. The recovery stage spanned from 1662 to 1736, due to the stability of regime and the development of social production. New Year Picture referring to farming and weaving, cute babies and other subjects reflecting filial piety, righteousness and civilization prevailed at this time. By building on traditional arts, it attained even higher quality in the period 1736-1796 due to the development of the economy and the prosperity of society. New Year Picture picked up a great deal from local operas, novels and other related genres, as well as absorbing essential skills and expressive styles from European prints. The most important subjects at that time in New Year Pictures belonged to historical stories, legends and mythologies, local operas, as well as landscapes and scenic spots. With domestic crises and foreign invasions after 1821, the whole nation suffered a huge blow and started to wane. By that time, themes, influenced by the current politics, began to criticize the ills of the times and reflect the call for social reform.



Ten Kings of the Palace of Hell  
(Yama, one of ten kings in the  
Palace of Hell in Chinese folklore):  
Ming Dynasty



Pavilions in the Western Regions:  
Qing Dynasty, Beijing





Wang Zhaojun Marrying a Tibetan Chieftain (the picture shows the beautiful Wang Zhaojun marrying a Tibetan Chieftain for the country in 36 BC); Qing Dynasty, from the collection of Li Cunsong

During the period of the Republic of China (1912-1949), New Year Pictures not only described traditional folk lives but also reflected the new fashions and morality of the society. Thus, it was also referred to as "New New Year Picture." For instance, calendar pictures became a favorite vehicle. With the rise of lithographic printing, a type of calendar printed with new lunar dates emerged in Shanghai, and was often given as gifts when lottery tickets were sold, and the calendar was named *Hujing Kaicai Tu* (*The Opening Ceremony of Lottery Issue in Shanghai*). Scenic sites in Shanghai, flowers, characters and sales materials for the lottery were all imprinted. It harmoniously combined forms of traditional Chinese New Year Picture with manifestations of Western paintings, with vivid colors and smooth depictions of scenery. There was also another genre of New Year Picture in the form of vertical scroll, which were used for advertising such items as cigarettes.



# Types and Styles

Numerous varieties and different appellations for Chinese New Year Pictures made classification extremely complicated.

## 1. Classification by Technology

**Print Blocks** This variety takes the lead in all types, with both monochromatic prints and color paintings. Core technologies are woodcut and prints.

**Hand-drawn** The oldest New Year Pictures were drawn manually. These included “*Pu Hui*”, outlined with the carbon and ash from burned willow branches, only produced in Gaomi, Shandong Province; and “*Feng*”, which took the phoenix as its subject, made in Fengyang, Anhui Province. During the process of making “*Pu Hui*”, artisans would put the rough sketch, drawn with carbon and ash, on formal rubbing paper and complete the whole picture on it, featuring bold lines and smooth dyes.

**Half-printed and Half-drawn** This variety is a combination of printing and drawing. Artisans usually cut wood to make a block model first, and then print ink lines and part of the background colors on it. The following are steps in the sketching of contours and the painting of colors. New Year Pictures made in Yangliuqing, Tianjin and Mianzhu, Sichuan, all belong to this variety.



Military Door Gods: Sichuan Province







Door Gods, lintel pictures and door couplets: Qi'ao, Zhuhai

## 11. Classification by Usage

**Door Pictures** Pictures posted or directly drawn on doors were called door pictures. Door pictures possess a long history and can be dated back to the Shang and Zhou dynasties (1600-256 BC). People posted these types of pictures on doors not only for warding off evil spirits, but also as decoration.



Center Piece in a home:  
Shi Family Compound, Tianjin



Paper-cuts at civilian residences  
in northern China: Wuqiang, Hebei

