

China Folk Arts Series



CHINESE NEW YEAR PAINTINGS

CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

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Preface



New Year paintings (*nian hua*) belong to the Chinese folk paintings created for the traditional Spring Festival. Drawn by folk artists, the paintings are made in special studios and sold on rural fairs before the Spring Festival, which generally falls in January or February. With bright and contrasting colors and auspicious symbolic patterns, the paintings have enjoyed great popularity among local Chinese and overseas visitors. Before the early 20th century, it was customary for Chinese to buy New Year Paintings upon each Spring Festival and put them at home, hoping for good luck and happiness in the coming year.

New Year paintings appeared very early in history. Experts have found written records in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) about a pair of brothers named Shen Tu and Yu Lei who were believed to be door guardians. Paintings about them were called “*men hua*” - door paintings, from which the New Year paintings have developed. Even today, paintings on the door are still an important genre of the New Year paintings. But it wasn't until the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that the term “*nian hua*” - New Year paintings - formally appeared to refer to such seasonal paintings that embodied people's good wishes. The earliest written record containing “*nian hua*” appeared in the book *Amusing Rural Talks (Xiang Yan Jie Yi)* written by Li Guangting, a native of Baodi in today's Hebei Province who lived during the rule of Emperor Daoguang (1782-1850) in the Qing Dynasty. Among the ten must-dos before the Spring Festival, Li says that “people give their houses a thorough cleaning, then put on New Year paintings, which are about children playing”.

As they were part of the interior decorations for the nation's main festival, there were different rules for paintings aimed at different places. They were so well designed that in the past, almost every prominent corner in a house was taken up by one such painting.

New Year paintings on the door are called “*men hua*”. On the front door, the guardians are usually fully armed generals whom people believe can keep all evils away. On doors inside the house, the guardians are generally imperial ministers or chubby children, who are believed to bring good luck. Inside the main hall, New Year paintings on the most important wall are called “*zhong tang*” or “*gong qian*” - the former is a large vertical drawing and the latter is a horizontal art work. Some people also prefer two vertical paintings of the same size, which are called “*dui ping*”. The paintings in the main hall generally portray the three immortals that represent good luck, high official ranking and longevity. The paintings could also depict a scene from a folk opera or some local scenery or folk customs. Besides these, there are many paintings to put on the windows. Named “*chuang hua*”, they are generally much smaller. The paintings put on both sides of a window are called “*chuang pang*” and they are symmetrical as a rule. Above the window, there can also be a painting called “*chuang ding*”. All paintings on the window are symbolic patterns of good luck. In North China, people stay on brick beds called “*kang*” which is heated from underneath in winter. The walls along the brick bed are ideal places for New Year paintings, which are called “*san cai*”, “*kang wei*” or “*mao fang zi*”. In addition, New Year paintings are also found on furniture. “*Zhuo wei*” is hung on the table where people put sacrificial items for gods or family ancestors; “*fu chen zhi*” is put on cupboards where the painting can keep dust from entering the cupboards; “*dou fang*” is a small diamond-shaped painting put on the jars containing rice or water. Finally, there are three more kinds of New Year paintings: “*li hua*”, a calendar-like painting put on the kitchen wall or besides the door and painted with seasonal terms in the lunar calendar, so that farmers could check the painting to start sowing or harvest. “*Shen xiang*” are portraits of various gods whom people worship. “*Cao tou hua*” are auspicious paintings put on the doors for oxen, horses, pigs or other domestic animals.

Chinese put New Year paintings of different sizes and subjects at various corners of the house to add more color to the Spring Festival and express good wishes for the coming year. These colorful paintings have deeper cultural meanings. Through these art works, Chinese people aspire for a better life. The paintings reflect the interesting folk culture from religion to details of daily life, which are portrayed in abundant detail in varying genres.

New Year paintings of deities mainly reflect the Chinese people's beliefs. Among the door guardians, there are martial and civil gods. Martial gods include Shen Tu and Yu Lei, Yuchi Gong and Qin Qiong, as well as Zhong Kui. Civil gods mainly include different kinds of Gods of Fortune and other celestial deities in Taoist or Buddhist beliefs. There are also portraits of the Jade Emperor - the supreme deity in Taoism; the three elderly figures representing good luck, high official ranking and longevity; as well as the God of Stove and his wife. New Year paintings of auspicious and festive content embody folk values. They usually rely on homophones to express good wishes. For example, peony flowers in a vase read as "*fu gui ping an*" (rich, prominent and safe), pomegranate and peach mean "*duo fu duo shou*" (good luck and longevity), lotus flowers and carp would translate as "*lian nian you yu*" (surpluses for consecutive years). Such paintings carry through a robust and happy atmosphere. New Year paintings of ancient folk operas reflect folk literature and flourished much later than other types of paintings. People living in the countryside or mountains didn't have many chances to watch folk operas, so they bought such paintings as an entertainment. At that time, such paintings also helped spread culture among different regions. New Year paintings of folk life generally portray farming scenes such as good harvest. In addition, at the end of the Qing Dynasty in the early 20th century, many New Year paintings also reflected current affairs and patriotic themes. Such paintings are especially valuable for studying the social life of that time.

In ancient times, New Year paintings were very popular among the common people thanks to their auspicious meanings, festive atmosphere, low price and portability. In today's China, New Year paintings have once again gained popularity due to their unique cultural values.

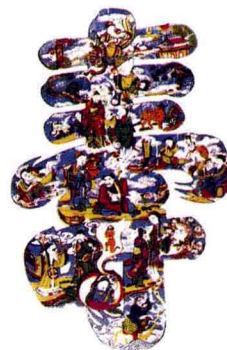
New Year paintings feature exaggerated characters with bright and contrasting colors. The ornamental paintings usually carry strong rural and regional characteristics. This book presents some typical New Year paintings from across the country, so that readers can have a rough idea about the distinctive paintings genres in different regions.





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Yangliuqing of Tianjin

Yangliuqing lies at 15 kilometers to the west of downtown Tianjin. With convenient transportation both on land and water, it has since ancient times been a prosperous commerce center. Originally named Liukou Town, it gained the name “Yangliuqing”, meaning “green willows and poplars” in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The farmers in Yangliuqing are also good at painting. Gradually, Yangliuqing New Year painting became one of the country’s most famous folk arts.

It was about the end of the Ming Dynasty when local people in Yangliuqing gathered to work on New Year paintings in studios. The painting business peaked during the rule of emperors Qianlong and Jiaqing (1736-1820) of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). But it declined by the end of the Qing Dynasty. The business continued in the early 1920s, with as many as 6,000 craftsmen working at the same time. Among the most famous studios were Dailianzeng, Qijianlong, Meili, Jianzengli, Aizhuzhai and Gaoqingyun Old Painting Store.

Yangliuqing New Year paintings cover a wide range of topics with diversified forms. Major subjects include deities’ portraits, literary stories, folk customs, current affairs, beauties and children, flowers and birds, fish and insects. Among these subjects, paintings on people carry the strongest regional feature. Generally, the figures portrayed by Yangliuqing artists are tall, stout and their dresses are painted in details. Different lines are applied to bring out characters whose faces and gestures are dramatically different. Most figures have white faces with pink cheeks. The lines of the face are lightly colored. In the early years, Yangliuqing New Year paintings focused on people and the lines were casual. But gradually, the design became more complicated with elegant background. For different paintings, Yangliuqing artists used woodblock printing, dyeing or filling pigments in frames. Most of the colors used in Yangliuqing are soft and subdued (local artists call them “soft colors”), while bright colors (“hard colors”) are rarely used. In general, Yangliuqing New Year paintings are elegant, simple and unaffected, with thin and clear lines that are well designed.







Door guardians, early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)

Ancient Chinese New Year paintings were mostly made in pairs. This was especially the case with door guardian paintings. This set portrays two guardians in full armor. The guardian on the left has round eyes, thick eye browses and tough curling bristles; the other has narrow eyes, thin eye browses and long beard. They are most probably Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) generals Yuchi Gong and Qin Qiong who were idolized as door guardians in the Yuan and Ming dynasties (1271-1644). The generals are portrayed with vivid expressions and detailed clothing. Different kinds of lines are applied on the two figures' faces to bring out their contrasting characteristics. The simple and unaffected coloring is typical of the early works in Yangliuqing.







Door guardians, Qing Dynasty

This pair of door guardian paintings are also about Tang Dynasty generals Qin Qiong (right) and Yuchi Gong, who aided Li Shimin to found the Tang Dynasty more than 1,400 years ago. Storytellers and popular novels in the Yuan and Ming dynasties added imaginative details to the lives of the two devoted generals, who eventually became the most important door guardians in the country. Qin Qiong has a pale skin with narrow eyes and long beard, using the golden mace in battles; Yuchi Gong, on the other hand, has crimson face with round eyes and curling bristles, using the iron nodular staff. Compared with the previous pair of paintings, this set is much more elaborately done. The background features clouds and the auspicious utensils used by the Eight Immortals in folklore. The colors on the face and hands of the figures are applied manually, while all other parts of the paintings are block-printed. Such kind of paintings with refined figures and complicated background were made in the later years of Yangliuqing.







Zhong Kui, Qing Dynasty

This set portrays another popular door guardian known as Zhong Kui. Legends say Zhong Kui was a man with martial arts who didn't pass the imperial exams to become an official. He died in front of the imperial palace and became ruler of the ghosts. It is said that he once caught and swallowed the evil ghosts that disturbed Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907). Thus the emperor ordered painters to make a portrait of Zhong Kui, which was a way to honor the deceased. Later on, the common folks regarded Zhong Kui as a door guardian and believed he could fend off evil spirits. Zhong Kui is usually portrayed as ugly and vicious-looking. Wearing a hat, he holds a sword in hand. He is always dressed in blue robe and wears leather boots. A red bat follows him. In this set of New Year paintings, Zhong Kui wears elegant official robe which is a different version developed among the folks. The paintings also carry the seal of Qijianlong New Year Painting Studio.





Five children contending for championship, Qing Dynasty

In the picture, five children vie for the lotus. This image implies that the five children contend for championship, they would pass the imperial examinations, and the children themselves are auspicious symbols of prosperity. It is one of the most favored pictures by the ordinary people.