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The Evolution and Regional Characteristics of Female Themes in Spring Festival: A Case Study of Taohuawu

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Abstract

The female imagery in Suzhou Taohuawu woodblock New Year paintings evolved from religious figures to theatrical beauties, urban leisure scenes, and modern women, reflecting socio-economic and cultural changes in Jiangnan. Using iconographic and comparative methods, this study analyzes the cultural functions and evolution of these figures, revealing them as composite texts interweaving aesthetics, gender, and consumption. Compared to northern styles, Taohuawu works exhibit more refined elegance and contemporary sensitivity, serving as key visual media for understanding traditional female roles and regional identity. The research further highlights how these images mirror shifts in urban consumer culture, gender norms, and the impact of Western influence in late Qing and early Republican China, offering a nuanced perspective on folk art as a dynamic record of social transformation.

Keywords

Taohuawu New Year Prints; Female Themes; Regional Characteristics; Secular Culture

1. Introduction

Within the historical lineage of Chinese figure painting, the female image has always been a significant motif. Previous research has largely focused on palace ladies in scroll paintings or poetic beauties in literati paintings, extensively discussing their moral didactic and aesthetic functions. However, female images in folk art, represented by woodblock New Year prints, though long present in urban and rural settings, have only recently entered the mainstream academic discourse. Scholars like Wang Shucun have systematically categorized New Year prints by regional style and subject matter, laying the foundation for this study (Wang, 2002). Research on the Jiangnan commercial economy by scholars like Fan Jinmin provides the historical context for understanding the New Year print consumer market (Fan, 2005). Nevertheless, existing studies often treat women in New Year prints merely as aesthetic objects or folk symbols, failing to fully explicate their systematic value as composite "social-cultural-aesthetic" texts (Wang, 2002; Chen, 2021). There is a particular lack of in-depth analysis focusing on the diachronic evolution and synchronic comparison of female themes from the specific production center of Taohuawu (Zhang, 2006).

The "Taohuawu New Year prints" discussed in this paper specifically refer to woodblock New Year prints produced centered in Suzhou, which peaked during the mid-Qing Dynasty and were renowned alongside Tianjin's Yangliuqing prints as "Southern Taohuawu and Northern Yangliuqing." The female-themed New Year prints studied

herein encompass all works where women are the core subject, including deities, opera scenes, beauties, urban customs, and contemporary news. These prints are rooted in Suzhou's highly developed commodity economy, prosperous urban civic culture, and the regional aesthetic soil of "venerating refinement and elegance". The evolution of their female images visually reflects the local imagination, discipline, and representation of women's roles during specific historical periods, constituting a unique visual expression of Jiangnan secular culture.

2. The Rise and Evolution of Female Themes in Taohuawu New Year Prints

The evolution of female themes in Taohuawu prints is not a linear process but the result of close interaction with the local economy, cultural trends, and social changes. It can be roughly divided into three stages.

2.1 Ming-Qing Transition: From Auxiliary Deities to Opera Heroines

Early Taohuawu New Year prints served folk beliefs, with religious themes dominating. Female figures mostly appeared in supporting roles, such as the Kitchen God's wife or the Queen Mother's maidens, their functions limited to religious rituals. By the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty, with the development of the commodity economy in Jiangnan and the growth of the urban citizenry, the function of New Year prints shifted from worship to secular entertainment. Influenced by the aesthetic trends of the "Wu School" of painting, print creation began catering to public tastes, turning its gaze towards urban life. Although few physical prints survive from this period due to warfare and the perishability of woodblocks, works like "Meeting on the Magpie Bridge" and "Deep Jade Affection", based on opera stories, show artists visualizing romantic narratives to meet the cultural entertainment needs of the urban populace (Chen, 2021). Women began to become the subjects of emotion and narrative.

2.2 Mid-Qing Dynasty: The "Qian-Jia Golden Age" and Thematic Expansion

By the early Qing Dynasty, female themes in Taohuawu New Year prints, comprising about thirty percent of output, focused mainly on opera stories and beauties with children. During the mid-Qing "Qian-Jia Golden Age", wealthy urban groups like Huizhou merchants spurred cultural consumption, enabling artists to diversify and detail urban life. Female themes expanded sharply to nearly half of total production, breaking beyond traditional boudoir scenes to depict leisure activities such as boating, swinging, gaming, and socializing. boating in "Two Beauties on a Boat", playing on swings in "Beauties on Swings", gaming in "Ladies Gambling in the Spring Boudoir", and even socializing in urban settings like "Chatting and Laughing on the Street". Women shifted from being observed objects to active subjects enjoying urban life, reflecting loosened social mores and the influence of urban aesthetic tastes.

2.3 Late Qing and Early Republic: New Looks Amidst Decline and Change

In the late Qing Dynasty, impacted by wars such as the Taiping Rebellion, Taohuawu New Year prints overall declined from their peak. To adapt to rural markets, themes reverted to traditional formats like door gods and paper horses, with female themes diminishing in both quantity and quality. However, under the influence of the influx of Western learning and the trend of women's liberation, New Year prints also displayed new contemporary elements. Works depicting girls' schools and female factory workers emerged, showcasing women's new roles in leaving the home and participating in social production. Simultaneously, the infiltration of Western fashion culture introduced new symbols like permed hair, qipaos, and Western umbrellas in "Picture of a Modern Girl". Although the craftsmanship of female themes in this period was somewhat crude, they vividly recorded the changes in women's lives amidst the collision of tradition and modernity, injecting the final vitality into Taohuawu New Year prints.

Throughout their evolution, the female images in Taohuawu New Year prints underwent a transformation from religious symbols to secular subjects, from boudoir elegance to the vibrancy of urban life, and further towards new social roles for women. This transformation profoundly mirrors the shifts in socio-economic forces and cultural trends within the Jiangnan region.

3. The Distinctiveness of Female Themes in Taohuawu Prints: A Perspective Based on Regional Comparison

Deeply rooted in regional cultural soil, the uniqueness of Taohuawu's female themes becomes more apparent when compared with representative northern production centers exemplified by Yangliuqing and Fengxiang.

3.1 Worldly Concerns in Thematic Content: Life and Symbolic Expression

In thematic content, the uniqueness of Taohuawu prints stems from Suzhou's urban identity as a "consumption center." The works highly cater to the aesthetic and life interests of the urban citizenry, extensively portraying women's leisure, entertainment, urban scenery, and secular life, brimming with worldly concern and the atmosphere of daily life.

Compared to Fengxiang prints, this difference is particularly evident. Taking Fengxiang's "Picture of Ten Beauties" as an example, although it depicts women, it is essentially a set of auspicious symbolic prints using women at different life stages to represent "perfection", such as "Joy of Fish", "Fair Lady Seeking Plum Blossoms", "Offering Peaches for Longevity" (Wu, 2019). Their function leans more towards invoking blessings rather than realistically depicting life. The figures are also more impressionistic and stylized. In contrast, Taohuawu's female themes focus more on the representation of real-life scenes and aesthetic appreciation. Even when containing auspicious meanings, they are often cleverly integrated into realistic life situations rather than being purely symbolic expressions.

3.2 Acute Recording of Era Transformation: From Tradition to Modernity

In the late Qing and early Republic period, Taohuawu prints demonstrated their sensitivity as a folk art to epochal changes. Against the backdrop of the women's liberation movement, they took the lead in depicting new social phenomena such as women studying and working, e.g., "Picture of a Girls' School." Simultaneously, absorbing Western painting techniques, they innovated in figure modeling and perspective composition, giving rise to more three-dimensional and contemporary-looking "modern girl" images (Sun, 2020; Liu, 2022). This rapid response to real life and artistic synthesis was beyond the reach of many traditional northern print centers, highlighting the openness and inclusiveness of Taohuawu's regional culture as a forefront area near Jiangnan's treaty ports (Wang, 2019).

4. Conclusion

The female themes in Taohuawu New Year prints transcend mere aesthetic decoration, becoming a dynamic medium of cultural narrative. Their evolutionary process clearly records the socio-economic changes, shifts in cultural trends, and the transformation of concepts regarding women's roles in Suzhou from the Ming-Qing period to the modern era. Moving from religion to secular life, from the inner chambers to the urban streets, and then into society, the changes in female images represent not only an expansion of artistic themes but also a profound visual projection of social structure, economic dynamics, and cultural currents of thought (Panofsky, 2011; Li & Zhang, 2023).

Through comparison with northern New Year prints, their uniqueness in regional characteristics is established: formally, they exhibit the Jiangnan aesthetic through delicate, elegant colors and forms (Liu, 2022; Zhang, 2006); content-wise, they reflect urban tastes through strong worldly concern and lifelike atmosphere (Chen, 2021); and temporally, they more acutely captured and recorded the new female demeanor during the early phase of social modernization (Sun, 2020). Therefore, the study of female themes in Taohuawu New Year prints is not only an exploration of an art form but also an important pathway, through visual materials, for interpreting modern Chinese social transformation and the formation of regional cultural identity.

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