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## Opera cultural context and artistic features of wood-block New Year opera prints in Southern Shanxi

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### Abstract

Southern Shanxi is in the middle reaches of the Yellow River Basin. Its opera New Year Prints are the typical representative of Chinese folk arts with distinctive regional features, representing the bold, unrestrained and simple and honest temperament of the people living in northern China. As two forms of folk art, opera and New Year picture both rooted in the daily life and production of the local people, and nurtured by the fertile historical and cultural soil. Watching opera performance has been the most important large-scale entertainment event for the local people who would be willing to walk several miles to another village or the county town to watch one opera. The broad and solid audience base and a considerable number of mural artists and highly developed woodblock engraving technology bred a special genre of folk art woodblock New Year prints, which developed quickly into different kinds and formed its own unique artistic expression.

**Keywords:** Opera culture, woodblock new year opera prints, opera character, engraved block

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### 1. Introduction

Before television became popular in 1980s in China, at the village markets and temple fairs in southern Shanxi, stalls selling New Year pictures could have always been found at festival seasons. Two bamboo or wooden poles stood with some distance between, ropes were tied to the poles in several lines, on which pictures were hung layer upon layer. The buyers, old and young, men and women, evaluated the pictures in threes or fours and selected the ones they liked. They were particularly fond of opera prints, looking at the pictures and talking about the relevant opera stories or figures. The market place was filled with lively festive atmosphere. Rooted in the local people and reflecting the long history and traditional virtues of the Chinese nation, opera had always been an important form of entertainment for the masses, expressing their thoughts, feelings, ideals and aspirations. Opera fans would watch the same play repeatedly so that they would be able to remember the characters and stories. Not only did they love to watch operas, but often transformed the opera stories and morals to other forms of folk arts. The broad and solid audience base and a considerable number of mural artists and highly developed woodblock engraving technology bred a special genre of folk art-woodblock New Year prints. Woodblock prints of opera accounted for a considerable proportion of all.

### 2. Opera cultural context of Southern Shanxi

Shanxi has been known as the Cradle of Chinese Opera with rich opera cultural heritage. In Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368A.D.), there appeared more than twenty Yuan opera playwrights. Three of the top four playwrights were from Shanxi: Mr. Guan Hanqing (1219-1301A.D.), Mr. Zheng Guangzu (1264-?) and Mr. Bai Pu (1226-1306A.D.). Pingyang Prefecture in Yuan Dynasty had jurisdiction of twenty-eight counties, basically the present day Cities of Yuncheng and Linfen, often called southern Shanxi by local people. This area is one of the birth places of Yuanben (院本, the earlier dramatic form in Jin Dynasty) and Zaju (杂剧, poetic drama set to music, flourishing in Yuan Dynasty).

The number of existing opera relics and sites from different dynasties ranks No. 1 in China. Most of the stages built in Jin and Yuan Dynasties were situated in Southern Shanxi, with some still standing now. Stages built in Ming and Qing dynasties can be still found in many places in southern Shanxi, situated in villages, towns and even remote mountainous areas. Besides, temples for different kinds of folk god have been often used as performance venues when temple fairs were held. Opera character sculptures, operatic figures, line engravings and paintings have been found and unearthed in many areas in southern Shanxi. This fertile opera land had long prepared for the birth of different kinds of opera related folk arts.



**Fig 1:** Stage in Ox God Temple in Linfen (1283A.D)



**Fig 2:** Stage in Temple for Three Saints in Yuncheng (Yuan Dynasty)



**Fig 3:** Jin Dynasy opera figures in Houma



**Fig 4:** Jin Dynasty opera brick sculpture in Xinjiang

In Southern Shanxi, especially in ancient Pingyang and Jiangzhou, Woodblock New Year prints, as a typical representative of traditional local folk art form, are not only decorations for festive seasons, but also encyclopedias reflecting folk social life. It is a folk art category that combines painting, carving, and printing, and also a product of the Chinese New Year culture. The themes of opera New Year prints are broad, and the carving techniques are exquisite, providing us with a lot of historical information about traditional Chinese opera performance and the enthusiasm of audience for opera. At the same time, it also provides enlightments for us to understand the appearance of traditional Chinese opera at that time and their social functions. Artistic language is the most fundamental material carrier and symbol medium for artists to create art, and it is the realistic existence of art. Shanxi opera New Year pictures, elaborately created by the folk artists, naturally have their unique artistic language for the themes. As a bridge for the masses of people to cultivate their artistic thinking in life, they can effectively integrate the subjective feelings, thoughts, etc. into the creation practice of opera prints, and are also regarded as the creation behavior at the spiritual level for both the artisans and audience. The earliest Shanxi opera New Year pictures might come into being in North Song Dynasty (960-1127AD) along with the development of block printing and popularity of Buddhist Scriptures according to discovered earliest record by now. Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China were the flourishing period of this folk art. The opera prints can reflect the social life of the people in those years. Therefore, the artistic language of the prints is inseparable from the long-standing prosperity of opera art in Southern Shanxi area, which has provided inexhaustible source for the vigorous development of various forms of this folk art, forming a relationship of mutual complement and mutual influence. Due to the Japanese occupation from 1937-1945 and political turmoil after the founding of People's Republic of China, many printed pictures of traditional themes and the engraved blocks were destroyed, lost or used for other purposes. After reform and opening to the outside world policy in 1978, some folk artisans and local cultural workers collected the printed old pictures and engraved blocks. Most of the works found are products during the period of Qing Dynasty and Republic of China (1636-1911A.D.). Therefore, our study will focus on this period, trying to find out the variations in artistic features of New Year opera Prints in Southern Shanxi.



### 3. The Artistic Characteristics of southern Shanxi Opera New Year Prints

As an important component of New Year pictures in China, Woodblock New Year prints in southern Shanxi reflect people's good wishes for the life in the coming year. The expression techniques of the opera prints in Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China were influenced by the continuous integration of regional customs. There were more diverse presentation methods since pictures presented real objects. The vast majority of people in Shanxi province meticulously decorate their homes at the end of each lunar year to express their aspirations for future life. In order to cater to the local people's psychological demands for long life and good harvest, various genres of Shanxi opera New Year pictures came into being, such as the picture for the central hall of the house with vertical scrolls of calligraphy hanging on the two sides, usually big in size, beautiful in colour, auspicious in meaning; bedroom opera prints, and those used to keep cupboard, beddings and shelves free from dust... with the implied meaning to say Good-bye to the old year and usher in the new. Relying on the strong decorative style of the prints and colorful overprinting with carved blocks with different colours, this kind of art form depicts and expresses the bold Yellow River cultural customs, as well as the opera art with regional features.

The engraved woodblocks with the designed patterns can be used to print many original works. There is a significant difference between their production techniques and hand-drawn New Year paintings. Because the operation pattern of the New Year Prints started from the master-apprentice transmission of skills in the workshops, and the pictures are hand-printed to satisfy the needs of the local people during festival seasons, it faces constraints in terms of artistic style such as production process, regional factors, and cultural traditions. The Southern Shanxi is far away from major cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, Suzhou, and Hangzhou, the geographical isolation helped to preserve its New year Prints distinct characteristics. The opera performance forms reflected from the pictures printed with the blocks engraved during the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China can be roughly divided into three categories.

First type of Shanxi opera New Year prints only depicted traditional Chinese opera characters, usually using typical images that are well-known to women and children as source materials. It is like the illustrations in the classical novel published in Ming and Qing Dynasties, presenting a pose of action. Every move and style were based on the stage performance as references. The audience could associate the drama story plots before and after according to the character modeling for understanding. The dressing up of the characters in such opera prints, such as costume, headdress, platform boots, hanging mouth and painted face, was consistent with the appearance of the stage performance. Moreover, the artisans also paid attention to capture the essence, spirit and expression of the opera characters. Therefore, the opera figure prints have a significant tendency of opera style from the dress, figure and manner. For example, Sun Shi, the wife of Scholar Zhang Wenda, Bai Shi, the wife of Scholar Zhou Ziqing, and Wang Tianhua, the wife

of Scholar Chang Tianbao, from the opera picture Three Top Scholars (story originated in Ming Dynasty. Guo Ai and Princess from the opera Beating the Princess (story originated in Tang Dynasty), and Xiao En, the old hero from the opera Fisherman's Revenge (story originated in Song Dynasty). The blocks for these plays were engraved in Qing Dynasty.



Fig 5: Three Top Scholars



Fig 6: Fisherman's Revenge

The second type of southern Shanxi the opera New Year pictures mainly reflect the real scenery of the stage performance. This kind of opera images paid more attention to the restoration of the live scenes on the stage, even the common stage properties such as chariots, tables and chairs were transplanted to the pictures. In the form of expression, there might be single image on the paper, as well as multiple images segmented from the exciting story plots. Most of these traditional Chinese opera pictures had words printed to illustrate story content, such as Yellow Crane Tower (block carved in Qing Dynasty) and Beauty Picture (block carved in Qing Dynasty) from Yisheng Cheng Picture Store in Jiangzhou (益盛, in present Xinjiang County), Shanxi, which belong to this type of expression in New Year pictures. The visual effect presented by traditional Chinese opera pictures was actually an objective representation of traditional stage live performances, similar to the posters of traditional Chinese opera produced after the Republic of China.



**Fig 7:** Yellow Crane Tower (Qing Dynasty)



**Fig 8:** Two Beauties (Qing Dynasty)

traces of their performances can still be discovered through the depiction of their expressions and body movements.



**Fig 9:** Baishui Beach (Qing Dynasty)

Thirdly, some of the collected opera pictures or blocks focus on reflecting real life scenes, which is different from the virtual, stage-like background of the first two kinds of opera images. This kind of drama images give full play to the characteristics of artistic modeling, and place the opera characters in specific natural scenes to create a real feeling for the viewers. Although the realistic scenes depicting pavilions, mountains, rivers and bridges are more like real scenery, the atmosphere created is different from that of traditional Chinese opera performances. For example, from the perspective of the overall atmosphere of the prints, such as *Baishui Beach* (story happened in Ming Dynasty), *Winged Steed from the Emperor*, (story happened in Ming Dynasty) and *Cowhead Mountain* (Story happended in Song Dynasty) from Xingchang Art Store in Pingyang, and *Selling Water* from Jiangzhou, in Shanxi Province, they are not traditional Chinese New Year prints depicting stage performances, but rather the depiction of natural scenes plus the opera characters. Although there are landscapes, buildings, and other scenes in these traditional Chinese opera prints, the



**Fig 10:** Winged steed from the Emperor (Qing Dynasty)





Fig 11: Cow-head Mountain (Republic of China)



Fig 12: Selling Water (Qing Dynasty)

The color expression of Shanxi Opera New Year pictures in the period of Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China is directly related to line carving, pigment types, paper materials and so on. The aesthetic image formed by line and color in the picture has a profound influence on the development of opera images. The color matching of the traditional prints shows a strong sense of oriental colour concept: bright red and green are used in strong contrast with an effect of property, excitement and luxury. The relationship between lines and colors in traditional Chinese opera images is bi-directional. On the one hand, the lines play the role of framing the shape to achieve the function of regulation in the picture, highlighting the outline of the main body of the opera image, while forming the basic style of the picture on the whole; On the other hand, color can achieve the effect of assisting the line. Different colors with lines as the boundary can set the area proportion and shape ratio between colors, to better highlight the image features of the picture's main body, and create a bright and colorful atmosphere in the picture. In Shanxi opera New Year pictures, the lines are its bones, and the colors are its muscles. They cannot be separated from each other. The color matching of opera images may be limited by the color block overprinting technology, and the number of blocks in different colours should be controlled within a reasonable range, but the overall color effect of the picture is very bright, avoiding monotony. These contributions are from the flexible lines and exquisite coordination of colors.

#### 4. Opera features of Shanxi Opera New Year Pictures

Traditional Chinese opera and New Year pictures both originated from folk life, and they thrived on this fertile soil and have a broad mass base. Woodblock New Year prints

depicted a large number of theatrical stories, the result of the integration and interweaving of two art genres. In the age when the application of video technology was not widespread, the opera New Year pictures left behind many lost opera performances for later generations, which not only has a high artistic value for the creation and research of folk art, but also provides a very precious historical data for opera researchers. As Professor Huang Zhusan commented: "Opera line carving, and depicting is also very valuable, reflecting the changes in social morality and customs brought by the flourishing of opera art.... The uniqueness of its content depicted is also of great help to the opera history researchers." During the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, Shanxi opera New Year prints depicted character costumes, reflected the plot of the opera, or presented stage scenes, enabling people to explore the performance situation in Shanxi from a sensory and cognitive perspective different from literature review. Therefore, although traditional Chinese opera New Year prints appeared relatively late in the development history of New Year pictures, they have an extremely important position in recording and continuing the artistic charm of traditional Chinese opera with their unique ethnic charm and aesthetic value.

Shanxi Opera New Year Pictures are classic carriers of stage performances and recording the beauty of opera. As typical opera cultural relics, they have the same function as words. Local New Year picture artists generally were opera fans, and also aware of the local people's appreciation preferences for opera. They are enthusiastic about selecting popular and familiar opera stories as creative themes to increase sales of their New Year pictures. In order to cater to the audience's taste, some New Year picture artists often went to the theatre personally to watch the stage performance to draw creative inspiration, enjoying the performance while sketching to record the ups and downs of the story plot and the costumes, body movements, and expressions of opera characters etc for further artistic processing after returning to their workshop based on the sketches. The story content of Shanxi opera New Year prints is mostly derived from the local popular clapper opera repertoire, with a strong local flavor. Its scripts, characters, storyline, character images, and facial makeup have all had an impact on the composition of Shanxi opera New Year pictures, forming unique artistic features of smart composition, skillful drawing and engraving, simple and vivid designing, and strong decorative effect.

Chinese Opera New Year pictures use the form of color printing and wooden engraving to express the content narrated by Chinese opera texts and wonderful scenes performed on stage. New Year pictures and traditional Chinese opera both belong to the category of traditional culture and are the essence of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation. Differences existed between the content of the story depicted in the opera New Year pictures and the live stage performances. The opera pictures can either be the objective representation of the stage performance scenes, or the subjective re-creation by the picture artists. To strengthen the charm of the opera, the typical symbols are selected as if reeling silk from cocoons.

In the early Qing Dynasty, most of the Shanxi opera New Year prints copied some section of the real opera performances, and often capturing the expressions and movements of character images of the most exciting moments, The costumes and stage props were all in a realistic style, striving to restore the pageantry of the stage

performance and provide viewers a visual experience that it was better to look at opera pictures than watching the live play. Consequently, many precious moments of the plays have been recorded.

As Shanxi traditional Chinese opera New Year pictures gradually became a popular form of entertainment among local people, the images of traditional Chinese opera also underwent changes quietly. The New Year picture artists regarded opera art more as a symbol, although it has been treated as the maternal DNA and source of their image depicting. Especially in the period of late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, Shanxi opera New Year picture artists did not directly copy from stage performances, but took picture drawing, engraving and printing as opportunities for creative activities and a medium for reflecting their ideas.

This change enables us to feel the rich diversity and unique conceptual nature of traditional Chinese opera art from another perspective. To express traditional opera in the form of New Year pictures can best reflect the beauty and charm of Oriental art, which has the uniqueness that other art forms can hardly replace. This is determined by the fact that the two forms of arts, both popular entertainment activities among the local people, were nurtured by the same fertile soil of Chinese culture. This soil contains the laws of inter-connection between New Year pictures and traditional Chinese opera. The particularities and stability under those laws always exist no matter how the two forms of arts develop and innovate.

## 5. Conclusion

Woodblock Prints of traditional opera of Southern Shanxi in the period of Qing Dynasty until the Republic of China presented many contents of the story of the local clapper opera. The common themes of the pictures included myths and legends, historical events, folk tales etc. The changes of social life and costumes and the flourishing development of the clapper opera are the objective conditions for the innovation and prosperity of Woodblock New Year Opera Prints in Southern Shanxi. The prosperity of the local clapper opera has contributed to the theme content, techniques and modeling of the Woodblock opera pictures, so that it gradually evolved into one of the treasures of Chinese traditional folk art with remarkable regional cultural and symbolic characteristics, reflecting the bold, rough and unrestrained characteristics of Chinese people in the north. In agricultural society with backward communication media, woodblock New Year prints transformed people's emotional interests into visual image symbols, using the expressive techniques of freezing momentary time and space, which is different from the spreading methods of traditional Chinese opera texts and stage performances. In the process of spreading opera art, the New Year pictures reflected the folk customs and life of local people with vivid images, and played an important role in conveying people's emotions and hopes for blessings.

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