

Cultural Identity and Symbolism in Qing Dynasty Zhangzhou Woodblock New Year Paintings: A Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

This research explores the cultural identity and symbolism of Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings from the Qing Dynasty through a semiotic lens. Such vibrant folk arts, derived from the cultural traditions of Zhangzhou, have become visible representations of the community's values, beliefs, and aspirations. The aim of the paper is to decode symbolic meaning from these patterns, motifs, and colors in those paintings toward the expression of the regional cultural identity. The use of the methodological framework for the study is from the theoretical basis of semiotics. This study provides qualitative research based on some paintings focused on iconography, color symbolism, and recurrence in motifs. The findings suggest that these artworks encapsulate essential spiritual, social, and agricultural values, which manifest themselves in themes such as religious devotion, familial harmony, and the cyclical nature of life tied to agriculture. Not only are these paintings decorative art, but they also serve as cultural artifacts that communicate the socio-economic and spiritual dimensions of Zhangzhou's identity in the Qing era. Preservation of such folk art thus would embody a way to continue the cultural heritage in this globalized world. The research helps to contribute to the understanding in which way art functions as a visual kind of language for cultural expression and preservation of identity.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, Symbolism, Qing Dynasty, Zhangzhou Woodblock New Year Paintings.*

Introduction

Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings embody a rich cultural tradition with historical and identity roots in the Zhangzhou region of the Fujian Province in China. These brightly-hued paintings which reached their peak popularity during the Qing Dynasty from 1644-1912 are far more than just decoration (Zhao et al., 2023). They represent the open windows in the cultural soul of Zhangzhou, underscoring and showcasing the values, beliefs, and aspirations people employed and creating them held. The Festive Zhangzhou Woodblock Paintings, especially for the New Year, play a very important role in this big annual festival. According to tradition, houses and temples would hang pictures to bless and repel the malign, and open into the new year with the desire for smoothness and happiness. Possibly the content includes gods, mythological figures, or even some ordinary details. These are always ventilated with symbolic significance, and cultural messages are implied deeply. The New Year's paintings are often used for decorating lanterns which are called lantern paintings as the folk festivals of Zhangzhou have the custom of hanging lanterns (Li & Zhang, 2023). The value of these paintings lies not only in their appreciation but also in their value as cultural artifacts that provide the Zhangzhou area with identity and meaning. Religious figures, agricultural themes, and other seemingly random icons depicted in these paintings reveal to readers the socio-economic environment, spiritual beliefs, and social values in the community under the Qing regime of that era.

This paper investigates how Qing Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings reflect the cultural identity of the Zhangzhou area. The research attempts to decode the symbolic meanings that the visual elements in these paintings hold through the application of semiotic theory. Semiotics looks at symbols and their meanings and gives a strong analytical base to deconstruct how cultural meanings are passed on in art. In this research, we consider a selection of Zhangzhou woodblock paintings for cultural messages. The

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relevance of the study has gone beyond the Zhangzhou region since it gives much broader insight into the role of folk art for the sake of preserving and expressing cultural identity. Understanding cultural significance in folk art has become increasingly important as the world continuously undergoes rapid globalization, in which traditions are consistently under threat from homogenization. This research contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage by underscoring the importance of Zhangzhou's woodblock New Year paintings as expressions of regional identity. The study aims at analyzing three key areas, namely the iconography, color symbolism, and patterns and motifs of the woodblock New Year paintings created in Zhangzhou. From these features the study hopes to unearth more about the heritage carried and how they define the cultural personality of Zhangzhou.

Review of Literature

Zhangzhou Woodblock New Year Paintings

The woodblock New Year paintings created in Zhangzhou developed into a major subject in many studies because these paintings are regarded as the essence of Chinese folk paintings. Scholars in this field make great efforts, from exploration into the origin and development, stylistic features, historical evolution, and cultural significance of the paintings. The existing literature lays a foundation to understand the context in which these paintings were done, as well as how they functioned within the society of the Qing Dynasty. For example, the study conducted by Song (2015) provides a wide and comprehensive historical development of woodblock paintings during the Qing Dynasty. The study by Song (2015) discusses Yangzhou woodcut prints elaborately and highlights that the paintings have their root in the Tang Dynasty, where woodblock printing technology had been applied extensively in almost all forms of art and literature. The Qing Dynasty was the epoch of unprecedentedly huge and creative expansion in woodblock paint production where new themes and motifs were developed, according to changed socioeconomic conditions and cultural scenarios in different regions.

Another area of focus among scholars is the stylistic nature of Zhangzhou woodblock paintings. As Li and Zhang (2023) note, the vitality added to the intricate patterns and local myths and legends that were considered in the designs with the use of bold colours. The paintings are full of figures, animals, and landscapes in bright colours, often exaggerated but full of symbolism. Another trait common to Zhangzhou woodblock paintings is colour, with red playing a dominant role, followed by gold and green, among others, each connoting something particular to a culture. Zhangzhou woodblock paintings are not only patterns painted on something, rather, they carry their special place in the spiritual and social life of the community. The ritualistic items were believed to access the spiritual world and, for this reason, offer protection, prosperity, and good fortune to the viewer. The use of the day's paintings was a ritual made evident and signifies the value paintings held within the Zhangzhou community as cultural artifacts that express beliefs and values. However, despite the increasing number of studies related to Zhangzhou woodblock painting, there are still gaps in existing literature, especially concerning the particular symbolic meaning of the lines and patterns painting. At the moment, existing studies only talk about the symbolism of certain features as only little in-depth analysis was done of such symbols' functions in the overall cultural context. This research will hence fill the gap by conducting a thorough semiotic analysis of the symbolic meanings contained within Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings.

Cultural Identity and Folk Art

A large part of the representation and sustenance of a community's identity is contributed by folk art, as part of cultural expression, for it is through art, rituals, and various other activities that the cultural identity would be expressed and maintained. Womack (2005) expresses that cultural identity is most effectively presented through the use of symbolic forms, such as art and ritual. Womack (2005) states that folk art is a visual language whose concern or message is the values, belief system, and traditions of a community. This visual language is extremely relevant for societies where the major means of carrying cultural knowledge is through an oral tradition. For such societies, folk art is a major preserve and concern of cultural identity. The visual elements of Zhangzhou woodblock paintings, in this regard, may be taken as

symbols through which the culture of a given region speaks to its audience. Such representations as deities, mythological creatures, and agricultural scenes are not mere empty ornamentations; they are rich in the beliefs a community is steeped in and, at the same time, their values and aspirations. These symbols circumscribe the spiritual and social life of the Zhangzhou community and serve as part of the building and affirmation of regional identity. Lufkin (2016) goes further to discuss how folk art supports regional identity in the case of woodblock paintings. Lufkin (2016) finds that woodblock paintings generally contain regional customs, local imaginary concepts, social conditions, and regional symbols and play the role of the visual record of mass consciousness. The paintings see the localized climax of everyday life that is socially accepted and even embodied in its symbolized aspects of people and their values emotionally and morally in Zhangzhou.

The ability of folk art to encapsulate and transmit this cultural knowledge across generations is one of the significant contributions it has made toward cultural identity. The tradition of woodblock painting in Zhangzhou has flowed down through generations of artisans, each contributing to its preservation and evolution. It is through this continuity that the cultural identity of the region is maintained because the paintings become the values and beliefs to be preserved and handed down to the following generations. The increasing popularity and use of cultural symbols and icons of Zhangzhou woodblock paintings have made them widely recognizable.

Semiotic Theory and Visual Art

Semiotic theory, put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure in the twentieth century, gives a very strong framework for the analysis of visual arts. Semiotics is the area of philosophical inquiry wherein the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behaviour is undertaken (Sebeok, 2001). Within the scope of visual arts, it obliges an interpretation of what the visual elements stand for as signs in their input of meaning for a certain culture. According to the theory of the sign developed by Saussure, every sign has two aspects, namely the signifier and the signified (Sørensen & Thellefsen, 2022). Saussure also mentioned that the relationship of what is signified with any signifier is arbitrary. Roland Barthes extended the Saussure idea to cultural products, such as visual arts (Rudloff & Kjørboe, 2022). Barthes (Rudloff & Kjørboe, 2022) viewed the components of visual arts as signs for communicating a cultural message. He coined the term myth, which entails the naturalization or self-evidence of cultural messages where visual arts can thus be viewed as a sign system of passing across cultural values and ideologies.

In the case of Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings, semiotic theory helps to consider the inherent visual elements to be the signs through which the cultural meanings are implicated. For example, a Door-God in a painting will be a signifier in such a way as to convey the meaning of signification that relates to protection and good fortune. When used in a painting, just like red and gold, they can mean prosperity and wealth. Analyzing Zhangzhou woodblock paintings using semiotic theory can be used to place meanings in what other deeper cultural messages Zhangzhou work is alluding to. More essentially, this relates to how paintings can expound and reflect the cultural identity in Zhangzhou during the era of the Qing Dynasty.

Theoretical Framework

Semiotic Theory

The theoretical base of the current study is oriented along with the semiotic theory, which is a structural method used in the analysis of the signs and symbols in the Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings. It deconstructs the language these pictures visually speak and, in the process, brings the cultural meaning they hold. The sign is the central concept in semiotic theory and comprises two parts, the signifier, which points out the form of the sign, and the signified, referring to what it stands for (Aiello, 2020). In visual art, the signifier would be the visual element, such as a figure, a colour, or a pattern, while the signified would be the cultural meaning it conveys. This focus between signifier and signified, is one of the major contributions semiotic theories can provide to the analysis of visual art. In this respect, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary in nature and no intrinsic link exists between the form of a sign and that which it conveys (Cuxac, & Sallandre, 2007). Meaning arises from the social and cultural context in

which it is employed. For example, in the case of the Zhangzhou woodblock New Year painting, the visual elements in the paintings functioned as signs conveying cultural meanings. The image of a mythological creature in the painting can be a signifier carrying protection or good fortune signified meaning. In the same way, certain colours or patterns used in a painting can be read as signifiers with particular cultural meanings.

Roland Barthes' Notion of Cultural Myths

Another way to approach this question would be to return to Barthes' notion of "myth." Defining it, he says that myth is a word for the process of naturalization by which cultural meanings are made to seem self-evident (Bennett & McDougall, 2013). Relating this to the Zhangzhou woodblock paintings, the visual elements in the painting can be considered part of a more general system of signs conveying cultural values or ideology. This analysis of visuality can reveal the cultural myths hidden within these paintings and expose how they have contributed to creating cultural identity. There are three semiotic aspects, namely iconography, colour symbolism, and patterns and motifs used in discussing the Zhangzhou woodblock paintings. Iconography refers to the depiction of religious and mythological symbols in paintings. Most of this is about the study of pictures and meanings, mainly regarding the themes of religion and mythology. In the case of Chinese artwork, the depiction of gods, creatures from mythology, and other symbolic figures acts as a pictorial dialect that manifests meaning (Murray, 2000). The study can find out the deeper cultural messages through an analysis of the iconography in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings. Colour happens to be a very salient element in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings, wherein definite cultural connotations are attached to specific colours. For example, red usually connotes good fortune and gold usually connotes wealth or prosperity. By determining how colour is used within such paintings, one may presume some attempt on the part of the given artist to communicate a very specific type of meaning. For Zhangzhou woodblock paintings, the repeating visual elements will be patterns and motifs with symbolic meanings. Not only are such designs reflective of local customs, beliefs, and values, but the repetition from one painting to another strengthens their cultural meaning. Therefore, through an analysis of the patterns and motifs used, it would have been possible to understand the cultural messages embedded in the paintings. Specifically, the semiotic analysis conducted in this study is going to be centred around three aspects to reveal the cultural identity that is expressed through the Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings. Besides, through the analysis of the signs and symbols, we can more profoundly investigate the functions of these paintings as a sort of visual language that communicates the values, beliefs, and aspirations of the Zhangzhou community.

Methodology

The main intent of this paper is a qualitative study of semiotics as expressed through Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings during the Qing Dynasty. As such, a qualitative approach towards the research is ideal since it goes further than mere exploration to include an in-depth analysis of symbolic meanings hidden in the visual features of the painting. Therefore, through such an analysis of the paintings as cultural texts, the research aims to reveal the cultural identity reflected through the art.

Data Collection

The collection of this data for research is specific and focuses on carefully curated collections of Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings during the Qing Dynasty, in which pieces are chosen specifically for relevance to the Zhangzhou culture identity. A strict application of selection criteria was adhered to ensure the selected images are a representative sample and mirror the richness in themes and symbols. This process was meant to capture the diversity of themes, symbols, and cultural messages inherent in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings, all considering the historical and regional significance of the artworks.

Selection Criteria

The paintings were selected based on several key factors established to ensure the representations would cover a wide range of cultural elements typical of Zhangzhou woodblock art during the Qing Dynasty. The selection criteria included:

Historical Relevance: All the paintings chosen were from the Qing Dynasty period (1644-1912). There was a specific focus on the mid-Qing period, when the zenith of Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings was made. Only those made during this period were included in the dataset to maintain the cultural context of the study objective - analyzing the cultural identity during the Qing era.

Iconographic Representation: The chosen paintings had to represent cultural and spiritual emblems unique to the identity of the region. Examples are the image of religious people, mythological beings, agrarian life scenes, and favorable auspicious icons. Research has mainly focused on choosing paintings with these elements highlighted well as they are parts of what defines Zhangzhou spiritualism, agrarian society, and social culture.

Symbolic Significance: Those paintings that carried culturally significant motifs, like the Door Gods, Gods of Wealth, dragons, phoenixes, the lotus flower, and other symbols of prosperity, longevity, and spiritual protection were selected. Such inclusions play a significant role in communicating the greater cultural and spiritual meaning found in the works.

Regional Representation: The work selected also paid attention to the geographical and cultural setting of the artworks. Preferential treatment was given to works from the Zhangzhou region, for this would be the heart of the tradition known as Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings. Works emanating from other places that border the region, such as Fujian Province, also were included for a broad understanding of cultural exchange practices.

Cultural Context and Authenticity: The paintings need to reflect authentic depictions of the local customs, religious beliefs, and social structures in Zhangzhou during the Qing Dynasty. Selections were based on clear connections to the folk customs and traditional festivals of the region, including the Lunar New Year.

The selected works involve representative themes and motifs, including religious figures, mythological creatures, agricultural scenes, and auspicious symbols. The works are taken from collections in several institutions that possess key collections of Chinese folk art. The researchers selected three specific places, from where data was collected in digital format, depending on their cultural symbols and significance.

- **Wuqiang New Year Painting Museum:** Located within Wuqiang County along the Cangshi Road in the North China Plain, Wuqiang New Year Painting Museum is the first Chinese professional museum of New Year paintings, established in 1985. The museum includes vast and rich collections of New Year paintings, including Zhangzhou woodblock paintings. It contains paintings from the Qing era, thus providing great insight into the styles of the time. The researchers went to the museum themselves and selected the paintings based on the selection criteria.
- **The Library of Jiangxi Institute of Technology:** This library includes a Chinese art collection, of both folk and woodcut paintings. The Zhangzhou woodcuts housed here are remarkable for their very detailed recording of local customs and beliefs and serve as one of the most important sources for this study.
- **Fujian Provincial Museum:** Located at the central spot of the origin of Zhangzhou paintings, the Fujian Provincial Museum is very rich in its collection of works reflecting the traditional culture and history of the land. The collection of Zhangzhou woodblock paintings in this museum is very useful in understanding the region's cultural identity.

All the paintings recorded were properly documented, with high-resolution files taken for close observation. The documentation includes titles, dates, dimensions, and medium of each painting, along with the contextual information of interest provided by the museums. Permissions for using these images were obtained from the institutions concerned, making the research agreeable to the highest ethical standards regarding the use of cultural artifacts.

Data Analysis

The semiotic analysis of the paintings consisted of a close reading of the visual elements that would allow the identification of the signifiers (forms) and the signified meanings (cultural meanings). Such an analysis was based on the theoretical framework covered earlier, that is, on iconography, colour symbolism, and patterns/motifs.

Below are the steps followed in the analysis:

- **Visual description:** The paintings was first carried out at the compositional level. A detailed account was collected of the figures, colours, patterns, and motifs incorporated in the paintings. The visual description laid a base upon the subsequent semiotic analysis.
- **Identification of Signifiers:** All the signifiers in each painting were located and documented. These refer to the visual elements that function as signs such as figures, colours, and patterns. For example, a Door God painted will be the signifier that will connote a particular meaning from culture.
- **Interpretation of Signified Meanings:** Having established the signifiers, what ensued was the interpretation of their signified meanings. Relevant scholarship and the cultural and historical foundation of the visual elements from Zhangzhou woodblock paintings helped place in context the cultural meanings that such visual elements carry. For example, protection as well as good luck might be signified by the picture of a Door God.
- **Categorization under cultural themes:** The findings of the semiotic analysis are categorized under proper themes to provide an understanding of the elements referring to, say, religious or agricultural practices, social values, and so on; this categorization was aimed at carrying out a systematic analysis on the cultural identity that has been expressed through these paintings.
- **Synthesis of Findings:** The last step is to synthesize the findings into a full understanding of cultural identity as expressed by Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings. This synthesis was made through exploring how the visual elements in the paintings work as signs in connotation with cultural meanings and analyzing how these meanings worked to contribute to the construction and enforcement of regional identity.

The major focus throughout the analysis was on the cultural and historical context within which these paintings were done, as one can take from thematic concentration. This had largely been considered to provide a resting background that would help in appreciating the cultural inscriptions found in the paintings, representing the identity of the Zhangzhou community during the Qing Dynasty. Finally, to expand on the themes from the Findings and Discussion sections, the study will delve further into each of them with surrounding information and analysis. Specifically, it will elaborate on cultural and historical context with more examples and bring the wider implicational findings of the study to bear in support.

Results and Discussion

Spiritual Values

Spiritual beliefs are the original impulse for Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings that reflect the deep spiritual consciousness of Zhangzhou at that time during the Qing Dynasty. Gods, mythic animals, and

religious minorities, the adornments with lore pictures, are of importance to the daily life of the people (Yang & An, 2008). Religious themes in these paintings synthesize Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism together with folk religion, which, collectively, would provide a spiritual foundation for the people of Zhangzhou. One of the most iconic figures of Chinese folk religion, these Door Gods are commonly found depicted in artistic renderings of Zhangzhou and the earliest Door Gods were Shen Tu and Yu Lei in the period before the Qin dynasty (221-207 BC) (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.). People have long been used to pasting the protective deities at the front door of the house protecting against the evil spirit for long and avoiding disaster, especially during the Lunar New Year. Therefore, their existence in such paintings captures an understanding that everybody had in relation to the belief in protective deities and spiritual guardians. In the Zhangzhou woodblock paintings, the Door Gods are represented by powerful and intrepid warriors (refer to Figures 1 and 2). Their facial expressions are extremely exaggerated, and their poses and movements are highly dynamic. For example, in some famous works of the Wuqiang New Year Painting Museum, a pair of Door Gods is approached with weapons and symbolically on guard, with readiness to resist all activities of dark forces. The red colour, associated with fortune, protection, and celebration in Chinese culture, comes out as a very prominent reception to send way to their spectacular divine authorities. Their armour, weapons, and facial characteristics are all very detailed in the painting, thus enhancing the status of fierce protectors that the community banked on for safety and prosperity through spiritual intervention.



Figure 1. "The Door God."



Figure 2. "The Sword-Stabbing Door God Qin Qiong Jingde." Wuqiang New Year Painting Museum.

Another main character of the Zhangzhou woodblock paintings is The God of Wealth, also worshipped across China for the ability to bestow financial success and material abundance (refer to Figures 3 and 4). The image of the God of Wealth in these paintings is made as a brilliant figure in attire, which is usually ornamented in gold and red colours, symbolizing wealth and prosperity. Most often, he is seen with a gold ingot or a scroll with words of blessing written on it, to connote his authority to bring abundance and prosperity to the family. With this, the fact that the God of Wealth is constantly depicted in Zhangzhou woodblock prints connotes the dreams of the community for moneyed endeavours and prosperous life, especially in those times under the Qing Dynasty, when economic conditions were unpredictable. His image was a prayer in itself for the coming of prosperity in the new year, serving to attest to a fundamentally held belief that material outcomes could be impacted by divine favour; hence, his pictures were placed in homes to attract wealth and ward off financial misfortune. This illustrated how spiritual and economic concerns were thoroughly enmeshed in the culture of Zhangzhou.

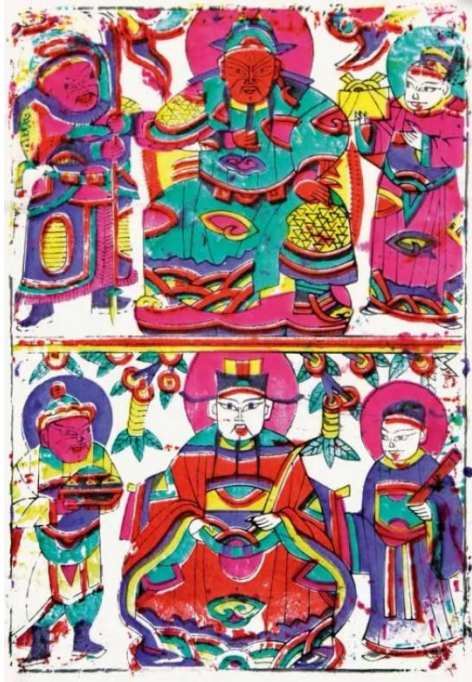


Figure 3. "Upper Pass and Lower Wealth." Shandong Oriental Chinese Folk Art Museum,



Figure 4: "The God of Wealth Brings Fortune." Jiangxi Institute of Technology Library.
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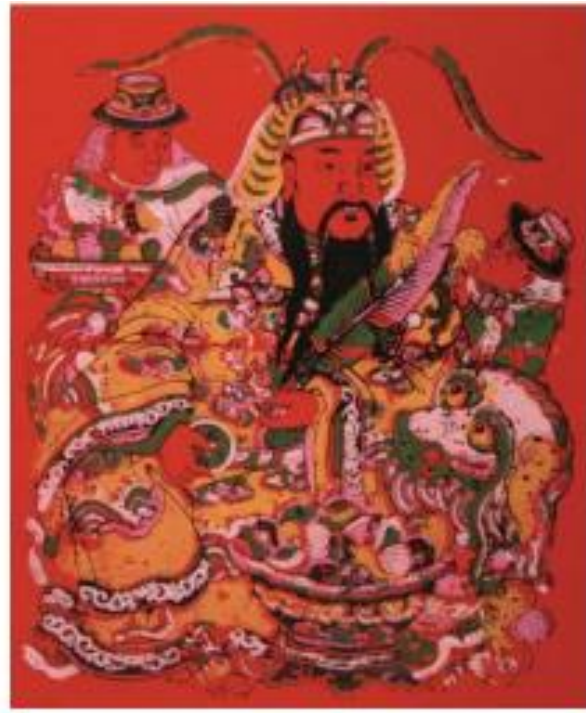


Figure 5. “Wealth God Offering Auspiciousness”

Buddhist symbols also have been used in these paintings in an elaborative manner, showing the strong mark of Buddhism in the spiritual landscape of Zhangzhou. In the custom of respecting heaven and earth, during festivals, the Chinese people burn incense and offer sacrifices to welcome the gods to come, which include gods of all sizes and shapes and integrated Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, reflecting the diversity of folk beliefs (refer to Figure 7). The gods in this painting are arranged in five different layers where the top reflects Taoist Yuanshi Tianzun along with the Three Yuans and Three Emperors; the next layer includes the Buddhist Sakyamuni, Guanyin and Manjusri Bodhisattva; the next layer displays the Taoist Jade Emperor and the gods of heaven, earth, thunder, and Guandi; the fourth layer is the three officials of heaven, earth, water, the city god, house god, and land god; while the last layer is Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and the gods and demons of the underworld (Jiangxi Institute of Technology Library, 2021). In addition, the often-used lotus, rollicking and unravelled from Zhangzhou woodblock paintings, is the symbol of decency and spiritual enlightenment in Buddhism (refer to figure 6). The lotus is often seen accompanying the Buddha and the bodhisattvas, which indicates that physical beauty and spiritual cleanliness are closely related. It is, therefore, this basic connotation: the lotus flower symbol represents the personal wishes of people for the growth of their spiritual and moral life, understood to be very important in the traditional society of Zhangzhou. In the audience of idols in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings are other Buddhist divine beings, including Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, and Maitreya, often also called the Laughing Buddha. Guanyin is a god who embodies the power of compassion and grace and who is capable of liberating people from all types of suffering. In such paintings, she is typically depicted seated on a lotus throne, holding in her left hand a vase of pure water, representing her ability to purify and bless. Representations of Guanyin reveal in full the ingenuity of the community in expressing the protection and the benevolent force of the Buddhist deity, which re-establishes the importance of spiritual devotion in Zhangzhou culture.



Figure 6. Golden Lotus



Figure 7. "All Gods of Heaven and Earth." Jiangxi Institute of Technology Library.

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Taoist symbols, among them the yin-yang, have also formed part of Zhangzhou woodblock paintings. It represents the concept of dualism, the positive and negative, opposing forces, interconnectedness and interdependence developing naturally. The purpose of these symbols that have been incorporated into the paintings is that the community believed in balancing forces and living in harmony with the cosmos. Also, they balance their personal lives through religion. The impact of Taoism on Zhangzhou woodblock paintings refers to spiritual diversity in the region, where coexistence and mutual influence of Buddhist, Taoist, and folk religious practices prevailed. For example, a painting that depicts a yin-yang symbol enclosed in boundaries that are constituted of elements representing the Five Elements, namely wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, which are basic elements of the Taoist cosmological system, symbolizes a holistic worldview, a view in which harmony between all the elements of nature is deemed essential for well-being.

The yin-yang's role in New Year paintings drives home further the belief that opposites, such as good and evil, light and dark, must be in balance with one another to make sure that the next year bodes well and stills. For example, mythological creatures, such as dragons and phoenixes, deeply rooted in Chinese mythology, seemed in many Zhangzhou woodblock paintings. That of a dragon would be represented as the duumvirate of power, strength, and good fortune, rising from the sea or going up into the clouds, rituals in which it controlled water and the weather, indispensable to agriculture. It symbolizes rebirth, renewal, and, along with the empress and the imperial family, peace and prosperity in folk religion. As Figure 8 refers, the sea and mountain are auspicious patterns that are found in many painting of Zhangzhou woodblock . They were powerful reminders of the community's existence in and with the natural world and divine forces governing it. Using expressions of formal religiosity and mythological bestiality, Zhangzhou wood-block paintings are a window into a multi-dimensional spiritual ambience in the region and how religious beliefs were ingrained in daily life.

Therefore, from the exhibited works of religious beliefs, Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings are testimonies to the very rich spiritual heritage characterizing the region. Deities, mythological creatures, and religious symbols are all mixed to express their dependence on spiritual protection, aspirations of prosperity, and their wish for endurance and harmony. Most distinctively with religious portrayals in bold colours, richness in details, and dynamic composition, there is more establishment of religion playing a significant role in framing cultural identity within the region during the Qing dynasty.



Figure 8. "The Classic of Mountains and Seas"

Agricultural Practices

There is a strong presence of agricultural practice in the Zhangzhou woodblock New Year's paintings, followers of which claim that it was an economic backbone, along with its past during the Qing dynasty. Some of the agricultural motifs are shown in the background of Chinese art and paintings, symbolizing the inseparable life of the community from the land, and farmed resources as a means of sustenance and prosperity (Bejarano, 2010). The agricultural scenes featured in the woodblock paintings not only boast the success of the community but also serve as a visual way of praying for a successful harvest in the eventual year to come. Among them, rice farming has been the constant theme of Zhangzhou woodblock paintings. Taiwanese aborigines traditionally worked in rice agriculture. The rice fields are portrayed with picturesque green paddies, working farmers, and hand tools in use for farming. It clearly reflects that the community holds a lot of regard for the hard work and persistence put at work into rice paddy fields and their dependency on agriculture for a living. Figure 9 captures the image of Shennong, who is revered as the ancestor of farming as he taught others how to plant and grow crops. Thus, farmers pray to Shennong for a good harvest during the New Year who is generally depicted wearing a robe and holding a seedling in his

hand with arm tools placed in front of him, showing the characteristics of a farming god. The water buffalo is another common motif in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings, which symbolizes the virtues of strength and endurance called for in farming. A water buffalo became an important means in rice lands both for field ploughing and for moving goods. In these paintings, the water buffaloes are found in a typical pastoral setting and very often with watering. The water buffalo in combination with farmers epitomizes the peaceful coexistence of human beings with natural elements involved in the process of cultivation and expresses the community's respect for nature.

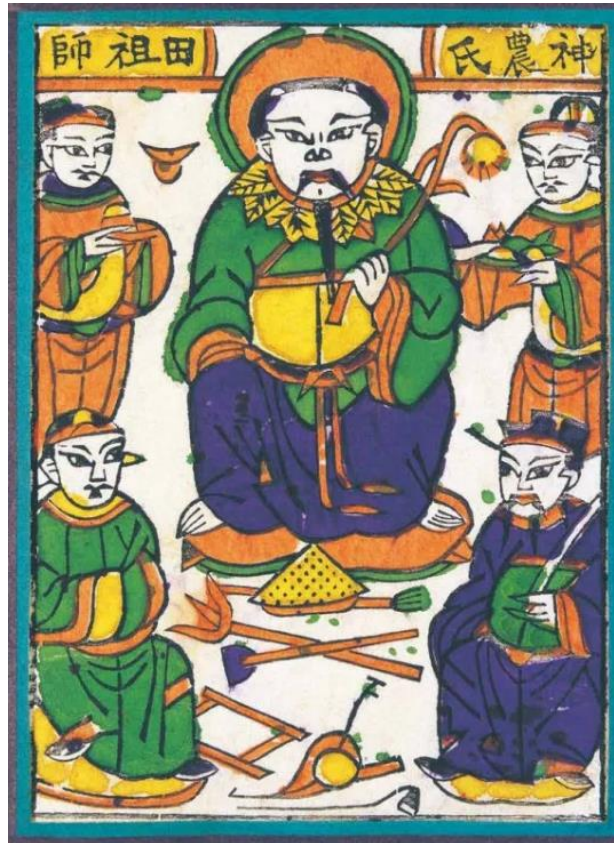


Figure 9. "Shennong's Ancestor of the Field." Central Academy of Fine Arts Library.

Besides rice cultivation, rice farmers also perform activities like planting, harvesting, and raising animals. These scenes represent images from agricultural life, reflecting the community's farming practices and attachment to the land. An illustration at Weifang Yangjiabu Woodblock New Year Painting Research Institute depicts a scene where farmers are working in their gardens with the depiction of a custom of beating the spring ox on the Spring Beginning Day (refer to Figure 10). This painting also shows that the community truly cares for farming and desires a good harvest because of the minute details of the plants, which the farmer looks after very carefully. The socio-economic conditions in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings during the Qing Dynasty are also depicted using agricultural motifs. Figure 11 further highlights the welcoming of spring times, that brings the time of wealth and auspiciousness. During the period of the Qing Dynasty, the society of China was mainly agrarian; therefore, the harvest season was very critical for the survival of rural communities. The concentration of agricultural scenes in such paintings reminds one of the community's reliance on the land and envisions hope for a good harvest the following year. In addition to depicting the physical aspects of agriculture, Zhangzhou woodblock paintings also convey the symbolic meanings associated with agricultural activities. For example, the depiction of a plentiful harvest is often used to symbolize prosperity, abundance, and good luck. In most of the paintings, baskets full of fruits, grains, and other vegetables are used to symbolize the desire of the whole community to have a bountiful year. These symbols of plenty underline the importance of agriculture to the welfare of the people in the community and their strong belief that the key to prosperous living is a successful harvest.

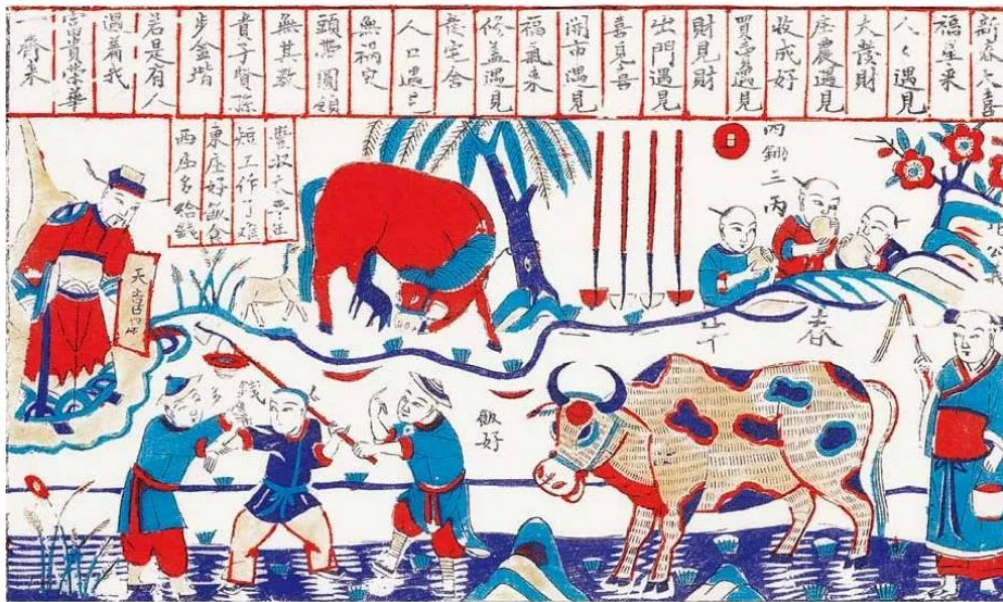


Figure 10. “The Big Spring Ox.” Jiangxi Institute of Technology Library.

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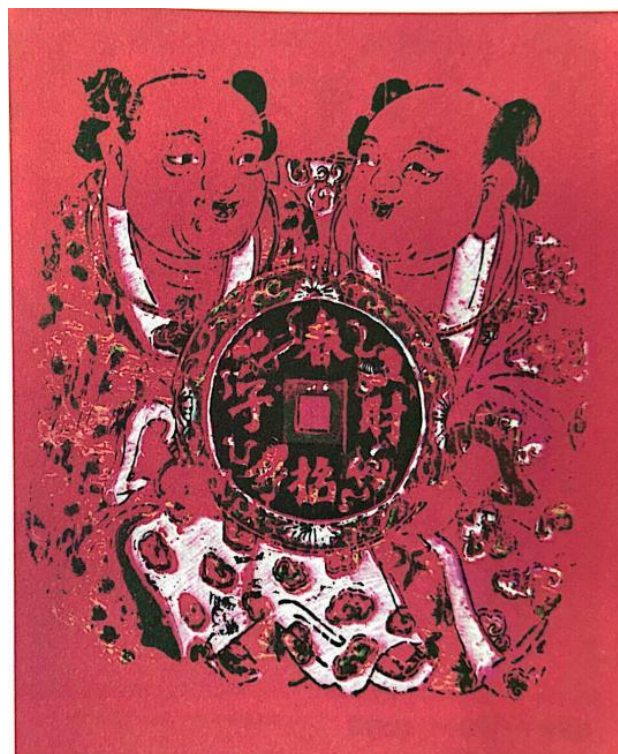


Figure 11. “Way Of Life”

Another important theme in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings is the cyclic nature of agricultural life. Rice fields being planted, cultivated, and harvested are symbolic in the expression of this cycle of life, renewal, and regeneration. This holds special importance in the case of the Lunar New Year because it indicates the beginning of a new agricultural cycle as well as a time for renewal and revival. These paintings bear strong cyclical themes, whether natural, philosophical reflections or a relation of the community with nature and the roles the latter has assigned to them within it; they emphasize renewal and continuity both in farming

and in life. The paintings depict a well-rounded life of the Chinese people, full of labour where men and women are both seen at work, cotton-picking, farming, spinning, thread-binding, and weaving, which is also often interspersed with other plots such as children playing with dogs and flying kites, creating a lively and joyful environment while portraying their daily lives of labour (refer to Figure 12). The religious and social themes of the agricultural motifs in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings are construed to underline the fact that spiritual, social, and economic life is interconnected in community life. For example, in any agriculture-related painting scene, there will always be some kind of auspicious symbols, such as peaches, pomegranates, or gourds, which connote longevity, fertility, and abundance. Such symbols combined with agricultural pictures back the idea that the prosperity related to agriculture ties into the concept of general well-being and happiness. In a nutshell, agricultural themes in the Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings serve as a graphical display of an agricultural society, respect for labouring, and hope for better times. Envisioning the scenes of rice cultivation, husbandry, and harvesting marks out the role played by agriculture within the cultural identity of the Zhangzhou region. The latter emphasizes the community's attachment to the land and the belief in the cyclical nature of life, while the former symbolizes abundance, renewal, and continuity.



Figure 12: “Busy Woman.” Jiangxi Institute of Technology Library

https://www.chinajob.com/city/detail.php?id=7S2SVLuqQWqTBC3RF&city_id=v02VrO7qYPV3MI4YUa

Social Values

Through the Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings, the social values become embedded, which enables the expression of the beliefs, aspirations, and social structure of the community. These values develop through the depiction of auspicious symbols, family scenes, traditional customs, as well as other portrayals that show the collective unconsciousness of a community. Of the leading social values listed through these pictures are longevity and immortality, which is often symbolized by peach. Among the Chinese, the peach tends to be associated with immortality and long life, mainly through the mythical character Xi Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, who is believed to own peaches giving life without end. The drawing of peaches in the Zhangzhou woodblock paintings is symbolic of a wish for longevity and good health of the community, which proves to be a highly valued value within Chinese cultural beliefs (refer to Figure 13). In this painting, the children are holding a peach in their hands to offer it as a gift as they are believed to be auspicious in Chinese culture. Other symbols of longevity include cranes and pine trees. Cranes are said to live for thousands of years, so they represent long life and wisdom while the pine tree, being evergreen even during harsh times of weather, represents the ability to endure adversity. Such symbols present in this painting form combinations that strengthen the dimension of the longevity theme,

which stands for aspirations of a long life of richness for the community. The prominence of nature in relation to human welfare is underlined in Zhangzhou culture through the representation of these symbols.



Figure 13. “Offering Birthday Gift.” Google Arts & Culture.

https://artsandculture.google.com/story/yangliuqing-new-year-woodblock-prints/XQLyk7g_b7C4JA

Success and perseverance are also portrayed in the woodblock paintings of Zhangzhou and are represented by the carp. In fact, the carp is a traditional Chinese symbol representing success and perseverance with the prevalence of the legendary story in which the carp at last swims upstream and transforms into a dragon after overcoming the strong currents (Laing, 2017). It portrays the situation from crossing through many obstacles to greatness through hard work and determination. Zhangzhou woodblock paintings often depict carp, which are swimming against the current, a condition that characterizes all the illustrations. How the carp is depicted in such paintings shows the appreciation of the community for those who reached success through more effort and difficulty and that there would therefore be a belief that perseverance is the key to getting out of trouble. This value was relevant to the Qing Dynasty period, which was full of social-economic challenges, hence, one had to be resilient with much determination to survive. The lotus flower, representing purity and moral integrity, is another great social value represented in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings. The lotus in Chinese culture serves as a strong symbol of moral purity and spiritual elevation since it rises from muddy water to bloom in pristine beauty. A combination of the lotus and other symbols, such as the Buddha or the bodhisattvas is painted in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings, pointing to the importance of spiritual purity and moral integrity. Here, such paintings illustrate the community's desire for a life that is not corrupt, and which is not stained because of moral decadence. This is regarding which the lotus and its meaning to pure and good virtue matter most. This is the one value most related to Confucianism, with the need to practice ethical conduct, and hence the role of cultivating personal virtue. The representation of the lotus in Zhangzhou woodblock paintings serves to remind society of the value of moral integrity in personal and social life.

Aside from themes of auspicious symbols, Zhangzhou woodblock paintings also depict scenes of families, which represent family value, harmony, and success in society. As family is the core of Chinese society, the portrayal of family scenes attests to the importance of familial relationships and social harmony (refer to

Figure 14). These scenes often contain depictions of families who have come together to celebrate the New Year, a very strong demonstration of unity, respect for the elders, and continuation. For instance, the painting in Figure 14 depicts a happy family, with a mother and her two children, seated at a table maybe for the New Year celebration to share food and exchange gifts. Such props depict abundance and good luck, symbolized by full dishes of food, red lanterns, and firecrackers. This explains why the painting has the unity of the family and sustenance of tradition that is omnipresent in the community. The commercialization of Zhangzhou woodblock paintings during the Qing Dynasty also helped shape the social values that are shown through these paintings. But, indeed, with the popularity and mass production of such paintings, certain motifs and symbols began to be standardized, democratizing access to such works. While this may have dulled the local specificity of the paintings to some extent, it had also distributed and in a sense rooted the cultural identity of Zhangzhou elsewhere.



Figure 14. "Baby Caressing." Jiangxi Institute of Technology Library

https://www.chinajob.com/city/detail.php?id=7S2SVLuqlQWqTBC3RF&city_id=v02VrO7qYPPV3MI4YUa

The social values articulated in these Zhangzhou woodblock paintings also show how the community's spiritual, social, and economic life was inseparably related. The integration of images representing religious symbols, agricultural motifs, and social values shows the all-encompassing nature of a community's cultural identity in these paintings. Since the visual elements can then be regarded as signs, we are driven further to explore how Zhangzhou woodblock paintings functioned as a visual language to communicate the values, beliefs, as well as aspirations of the community. The social values depicted in the Zhangzhou New Year woodblock paintings are, hence, a very rich source from which to learn about the collective awareness of a community. These auspicious symbols, family scenes, and traditional customs represent communal hopes for a long, successful, and harmonious life. The commercialization of these paintings during the Qing helped spread values beyond the region, reinforcing the cultural identity of Zhangzhou, thus assuring the continuity of its traditions.

Conclusion

The works of art in Zhangzhou woodblock New Year paintings of the Qing Dynasty serve as cultural icons that illustrate the identity and values of the Zhangzhou locality. Using religious symbols, elements of agriculture, and additional symbols of good fortune, the connectedness of such popular beliefs to the actual land can be seen, while semiotic analysis of the paintings has yielded an interest in the cultural significance behind the works' visual signs. The results of this study establish how Zhangzhou woodblock paintings portray the central place in spiritual and social life for the community. The representation of deities, mythological beasts, and religious symbols goes on to show just how much faith and belief the community had placed in the religious figures for their protection and prosperity. The art of the paintings reminds

people that they have hope of a good harvest in the next year and that the community's life depends on the environment. The other themes depicted are social values, such as family, harmony, and achieved social success, which builds the community's aspirations of prosperous and harmonious living. This research helped to bring out the profound cultural messages communicated with the application of the semiotic theory, to unravel the cultural card that the visual elements within the paintings, in typical fashion, act as, and upon semiotic reading of these signs, an insight into the cultural identity of the Zhangzhou community is made. The uses of iconography, colour symbolism, and patterns/motifs in the paintings express community values, beliefs, and aspirations, and they are parts of making and sticking to their cultural identity.

The significance of the study does not only reach out to the Zhangzhou area but also provides wider views of the role of folk art in the ways of expressing and preserving cultural identity. In this fast-globalizing world, most local traditions and customs are slowly becoming victims of homogenization; hence, the cultural relevance of folk art has never been of such importance. The paper contributes to the discussion on the significance of Zhangzhou woodcut New Year's paintings in maintaining cultural heritage and saving the specifics of local identity. This research thereby offers an analytical framework for the comprehension of other forms of folk art that function in the concretization and maintenance of cultural identity through the function of a visual language. Semiotic thinking applied to the other forms of visual arts unravels cultural meanings interwoven in the works and connotes how further art functions as its medium for expression and preservation of cultural heritage. The findings from this research could form the basis for future research to explore more Zhangzhou woodblock paintings in relation to production, the role of artisans within the community, and the influences of external factors of trade and cultural exchange on the art form development. Compared to other forms of Chinese folk art, investigations on the Zhangzhou woodblock paintings would go a long way in adding to the knowledge and understanding of regional diversity within the larger Chinese culture and how differently various regions remained and expressed themselves through art with cultural elements. In conclusion, Qing Zhangzhou New Year woodblock paintings are the epitome of decorative objects rich in their semiotic values, which echoes the identity and the inner radiance of Zhangzhou values. From this light and into a semiotic analysis, the deeper cultural meanings embedded in these paintings have been underlined, and important findings are related to the cultural heritage of the Zhangzhou community. The findings of this study complement the literature on how folk art maintains and expresses cultural identity and underlines the contemporary heritage of Zhangzhou woodblock paintings in creating and expressing cultural identity in the locale.

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