

Historical Development and Artistic Characteristics of Foshan Woodblock Prints

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Abstract

Foshan woodblock prints are distinguished by their vibrant colors, particularly the “Wannian red,” expressive techniques like “writing color and tracing gold,” and their focus on deity paintings. This study examines the historical development, artistic characteristics, and cultural significance of these prints, tracing their origins from the Ming and Qing Dynasties to their peak in the Qing Dynasty, and their current status. The research explores how Foshan woodblock prints can be preserved, inherited, and innovated in modern society, highlighting their importance as both an artistic and cultural heritage. The paper proposes strategies for protection and development, aiming to offer guidance for preserving Foshan woodblock prints and other intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Foshan woodblock prints, “Wannian red” deity paintings, artistic characteristics, cultural heritage, inheritance, innovation, preservation.

Foshan, located in Guangdong Province, China, is renowned not only for its economic prowess within the Pearl River Delta but also as a cultural stronghold rich in traditional arts. Among its cultural legacies, Foshan woodblock New Year paintings hold significant historical and cultural value, serving as a vital representation of local folk traditions and Chinese cultural identity. Historically, these paintings thrived during the Ming and Qing Dynasties when Foshan became a pivotal center for commerce and handicrafts in southern China. Characterized by the distinctive “Wannian red” and deity themes, these prints were essential festive decorations symbolizing prosperity and protection. However, with the advent of modernization, traditional folk arts, including

Foshan woodblock prints, have faced a decline. the challenges posed by urbanization and the internet era, which have contributed to the erosion of rural cultural landscapes and the fading of these traditional practices. Despite the recognition of their cultural significance, there remain gaps in research regarding sustainable preservation methods and the integration of these art forms into contemporary society.

This research focuses on the current state of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, particularly the challenges and opportunities related to their preservation and innovation. The study examines the cultural, economic, and social contexts that influence the survival of these traditional arts. The research also explores the demographic characteristics of communities

that still engage with or remember these practices. The researchers bring a deep understanding of Foshan's cultural history and have engaged in prior studies on traditional Chinese arts and intangible cultural heritage. The target audience for this research includes cultural historians, policymakers, artists, and educators interested in cultural preservation, as well as community leaders in regions where traditional folk arts are at risk of being forgotten.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the methods and strategies necessary to preserve and innovate Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, ensuring their relevance in the modern era. The study will be conducted through field research in Foshan, where interviews with local artisans and community members will be supplemented by archival research and analysis of existing preservation efforts. The research aims to identify effective preservation techniques, explore ways to integrate modern technology with traditional practices, and propose models for sustainable cultural tourism that can support the revival of these arts. This research paper will present an in-depth analysis of the artistic characteristics and cultural significance of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, followed by a discussion of potential preservation and innovation strategies. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on cultural heritage preservation, offering practical insights for both academic circles and cultural policymakers.

Research Objectives

The study of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings has important artistic and historical and cultural value:

1. To analyze the artistic value of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings by examining their composition, color, and subject matter, enhancing the theoretical framework of traditional Chinese art, and highlighting their contribution to the broader woodblock New Year painting tradition.

2. To explore the historical and cultural significance of Foshan woodblock New Year

paintings, focusing on their reflection of social life, folk customs, and religious beliefs, and using these paintings as a resource for studying the history and culture of southern China.

3. To evaluate the protection and preservation challenges of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, in light of urban development, and propose effective strategies to safeguard this intangible cultural heritage in the face of modern threats.

4. To investigate innovative transformations and cultural integration of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, exploring how they can be revitalized and reintegrated into modern cultural life, thereby reinforcing their relevance to contemporary society and enriching academic research on folk art.

By structuring the research objectives in this way, it becomes clear how each focus area supports the overall understanding, preservation, and innovation of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings.

Literature Review

Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, as an integral part of China's intangible cultural heritage, not only reflect the unique style of local folk art but also carry rich historical and cultural connotations.

2.1 Origin and Historical Development

The Chinese art tradition is divided into two main directions: classical painting representing the upper-class art and folk art representing the culture of the common people. The former, exemplified by famous works like "Along the River During the Qingming Festival," showcases the thoughts and artistic achievements of the elite, while the latter, including folk New Year paintings, reflects the lives and beliefs of ordinary people. However, research on the latter, particularly Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, is far less in-depth than that on classical art. The origin of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings can be traced back to the late Ming Dynasty. Wu Dayu (2010) in his book

“The Origin and Development of Foshan Woodblock New Year Pictures in the Ming Dynasty,” points out that the rise of Foshan as a commercial and handicraft center during this period provided the material foundation for the development of New Year paintings.

This view aligns with Wang Shucun (2004) in his book *History of the Development of Chinese New Year Pictures*, where he emphasizes the role of economic prosperity in Foshan during the Ming and Qing Dynasties in promoting cultural and artistic prosperity. While these studies provide essential information on the historical background of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, they do not delve deeply into its regional characteristics and cultural transmission pathways. This indicates a need for further research to reveal the specific development trajectory of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings and their place in Chinese folk art.

2.2 Artistic Characteristics and Techniques

Foshan woodblock New Year paintings are renowned for their distinctive artistic style and techniques, which give them a noticeable regional characteristic in southern China. According to Li Ming (2019), the composition of Foshan New Year paintings is simple and clear, with bright colors that reflect the southern artistic style. This style not only made them popular domestically but also allowed them to be exported to Southeast Asia during their peak.

2.3 Preservation and Modern Challenges

Foshan woodblock New Year paintings face many challenges in the context of modernization. Zhang Wei (2022) points out that the accelerated urbanization process has led to the disappearance of traditional rural cultural environments, posing a severe threat to traditional crafts, including Foshan woodblock New Year paintings. Although some protective measures, such as digital archiving and cultural tourism promotion, have been implemented by the government and various social sectors, their effectiveness and impact on the sustainability of the craft still need further validation. Moreover, although policies

supporting the inclusion of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings in the cultural heritage protection framework exist, there is still a lack of systematic research on how these policies promote or limit its development in practice.

Summary of Literature Review

In conclusion, while existing literature offers valuable insights into the origins, historical development, and artistic characteristics of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, significant research gaps remain in areas such as regional characteristics, cultural transmission pathways, and modern preservation strategies. This study aims to fill these gaps through historical analysis and contemporary field research, exploring how to effectively preserve this traditional craft in the context of modernization, thereby providing new perspectives and practical solutions for cultural heritage protection and the modernization of traditional arts. This literature review incorporates an introduction that clarifies the research background and significance, supported by references to existing research literature, highlighting knowledge gaps and pointing out the direction for future research.

Conceptual Framework

This research is an in-depth study aimed at exploring the origins, artistic characteristics, and modern challenges associated with Foshan woodblock New Year paintings. The researcher defines the conceptual framework based on the theories of cultural heritage preservation and folk art evolution, combined with the practical challenges faced by traditional arts in the context of modernization. The framework is designed to analyze how these factors interact and affect the preservation and development of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings. The details are as follows:

3.1 Historical and Cultural Context:

Fig.1 The data information source is compiled from online information

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Name | Foshan Woodblock New Year Pictures |
| Region | Foshan |
| Category | Traditional Art |
| Project Protection Unit | Foshan Folk Art Research Society |
| Historical Origin | Yongle Period of Ming Dynasty, prosperous in Qing Dynasty |
| Heyday | From Qianlong and Jiaqing Period of Qing Dynasty to the early period of Anti-Japanese War, the annual output reached 8 million pieces |
| Number of related workshops | More than 200 |
| Main themes | Door god paintings, deity paintings, seasonal customs paintings, secular life paintings, etc. |
| Production technology | Monochrome woodblock New Year pictures, color woodblock New Year pictures, hand-painted paintings, etc. |
| Cultural influence | Influenced in Southeast Asia and areas where Chinese people gather in the world |
| Modern development | Restored after 1998, now mostly art collections |

The origin and historical development of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, as explored in the literature, highlighting their emergence during the late Ming Dynasty as a result of Foshan’s economic and cultural prosperity. The influence of local traditions and social functions on the content and themes of the paintings, reflecting the thoughts, emotions, and life needs of the working class.

3.2 Artistic Characteristics and Techniques:

The distinctive artistic style of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, including the use of “Wannian Red” and deity themes, as well as their unique composition and color schemes that resonate with the southern Chinese aesthetic [Li Ming, 2019]. Techniques such as color overprinting and monochrome printing, which

have contributed to the widespread popularity and export potential of these artworks.

3.3 Modern Challenges and Preservation Efforts:

The impact of urbanization and modernization on the survival of traditional folk arts, including the decline of the cultural environments that fostered Foshan woodblock New Year paintings [Zhang Wei, 2022]. Government policies and initiatives aimed at preserving these paintings as part of China’s intangible cultural heritage, and the effectiveness of these measures in the face of ongoing modernization

Research methodology

Historical analysis to trace the development and cultural significance of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings from their origins to the present day.

Field research, including interviews with artisans and cultural experts, to understand the current state of these paintings and the challenges they face.

Policy analysis to evaluate the impact of cultural heritage protection measures on the preservation and innovation of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings.

Target Audience:

Cultural heritage professionals, policymakers, and researchers interested in the preservation of traditional arts. Art historians and scholars focused on the evolution of Chinese folk art. Local communities in Foshan and other regions where traditional arts are at risk, as well as broader audiences interested in the sustainability of cultural heritage.

Dependent Variable:

Preservation and Innovation of Foshan Woodblock New Year Paintings: The research aims to determine how historical, cultural, and policy-related factors influence the preservation and potential modernization of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings. It seeks to provide actionable insights into how these

paintings can be sustainably preserved while allowing for innovation that resonates with contemporary audiences. This conceptual framework ties together the key themes identified in the literature review, providing a structured approach to exploring the research questions and guiding the study's methodology.

Research Results

To objective 1: Preservation and Challenges

The research results indicate that the preservation of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings faces significant challenges due to modernization and urbanization. Traditional workshops are gradually decreasing in number, putting this craft at risk of disappearing. However, local governments, cultural institutions, and individual artists are actively working to protect this art form. These efforts include the creation of digital archives, public exhibitions, and educational programs aimed at passing the skills on to younger generations.

To objective 2: Innovation and Economic Impact

Notably, the research found that innovative attempts to incorporate woodblock New Year painting designs into modern fashion and design have helped to rekindle public interest in this traditional art, allowing it to adapt to contemporary aesthetic demands while preserving its cultural essence. The advancements in economy and technology have had both positive and negative impacts on the sustainability of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings. On the one hand, the rise of e-commerce platforms has expanded the market reach of these paintings, allowing them to be sold globally, providing new revenue streams for artists and workshops, and helping to economically sustain the craft. On the other hand, the commercialization and mass production of replicas have diluted the authenticity and artistic value of the original works.

To objective 3: Technology and Future Prospects

The research also found that technological innovations such as digital printing and augmented reality (AR) have been utilized to create new experiences and interactions with the paintings, attracting younger audiences and deepening their appreciation of the art. These technologies have not only modernized the form of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings but have also expanded the ways in which this traditional art can be expressed and experienced by a wider audience.

In summary, the research emphasizes the ongoing efforts in preserving and innovating Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, highlighting the need to balance respect for tradition with the acceptance of modernization. The findings suggest that, despite the challenges, a clear path forward can ensure the sustainability of this cultural heritage, allowing it to continue benefiting future generations.

Discussions

1. Heritage and Innovation:

This research examines how Foshan woodblock prints can be inherited and developed in modern society. To understand and preserve this traditional art, the study involved field visits to Foshan, collecting firsthand information on production processes, current inheritance status, and protective measures.

2. Cultural exchanges and promotion ;

Contemporary efforts include government and cultural initiatives to train new artists and foster innovation. Artists like Liu Zhongping are exploring creative ways to integrate traditional elements into modern designs—the national intangible cultural heritage, in the face of modernization. Through literature review, field investigations, and interviews with inheritors, experts, and government officials, the study gathers insights and suggestions for effective preservation and inheritance strategies. By comparing Foshan woodblock prints with those

from other regions, the study identifies their unique artistic styles and protection experiences. These findings provide a scientific basis for developing effective preservation measures. International cultural exchange and promotion efforts are also explored to expand the global reach of Foshan woodblock prints, showcasing their artistic charm and learning from successful protection cases. The research aims to offer practical guidance for preserving and revitalizing Foshan woodblock prints, serving as a reference for safeguarding other forms of intangible cultural heritage.

Knowledge from Research

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Traditional Techniques | Historical Context Emerged Late Ming Dynasty Traditional Woodblock Printing & Iconography |
| Modernization & Innovation | Economic Impact E-commerce Expansion vs. Commercialization Technological Innovations Digital Printing & Augmented Reality (AR) |
| Cultural Preservation & Promotion | Government & Cultural Initiatives Digital Archives & Education Programs Artists' Contributions Modern Reinterpretations by Liu Zhongping |
| Market Dynamics & Consumer Trends | Traditional vs. Modern Market Impacts Shifts in Consumer Interests |

Fig.2

This research contributes to the understanding and preservation of Foshan woodblock New Year paintings by highlighting the challenges and opportunities they face in the modern era. Key findings include the following:

1. Cultural Significance and Artistic Techniques: Foshan woodblock prints are an essential part of China's intangible cultural heritage, known for their vibrant colors, intricate designs, and symbolic themes. The research underscores the importance of preserving these traditional techniques while adapting them to contemporary contexts.

2. Challenges of Modernization: The study identifies the negative impact of urbanization and commercialization on the authenticity and survival of this art form. Traditional workshops are dwindling, and mass production has diluted the originality and artistic value of these prints.

3. Innovative Preservation Strategies: The research highlights innovative approaches to safeguarding Foshan woodblock prints, including the integration of digital technology, such as augmented reality (AR), and the expansion of markets through e-commerce platforms. These strategies offer new avenues for the sustainability of this traditional art.

Overall, this research offers a comprehensive framework for preserving and revitalizing Foshan woodblock New Year paintings, providing practical guidance for safeguarding other forms of intangible cultural heritage as well. The study's findings contribute to the broader discourse on cultural preservation, highlighting the need to balance tradition with innovation in the face of modernization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Foshan woodblock prints, as a significant representative of Chinese traditional folk art, embody rich historical and cultural value while demonstrating remarkable vitality in the modern context. To ensure the continued preservation and development of this cultural heritage, a multifaceted approach is necessary. Firstly, the preservation of traditional techniques and the adoption of digital archiving are crucial for safeguarding Foshan woodblock prints. By passing down skills through apprenticeships and training programs, and utilizing modern technology to meticulously document the production process, the craft is kept alive. Furthermore, cross-disciplinary collaboration and international exchanges have broadened the channels for promoting Foshan woodblock prints, enhancing their influence by integrating with other cultural and artistic forms. Educational initiatives in schools and

communities have strengthened public recognition and appreciation of this traditional art. In terms of aesthetics and design, the incorporation of modern design elements and collaborative efforts with contemporary designers have revitalized Foshan woodblock prints, making them more appealing to modern tastes. On the technological front, the introduction of digital printing, augmented reality (AR), and 3D printing has not only improved production efficiency and quality but also provided new ways of presenting and interacting with these works. Finally, brand building and social media marketing have further elevated the visibility and impact of Foshan woodblock prints, attracting greater interest from younger generations. Through these strategic efforts, this ancient art form continues to play a significant role on the cultural stage, both domestically and internationally, with a renewed and vibrant presence.

Suggestion

1. Utilize Modern Technology for Preservation and Promotion: Employ digital technology to comprehensively document woodblock prints, including high-resolution

scanning, 3D modeling, and virtual reality exhibitions. This approach not only preserves the original works but also promotes them globally through digital platforms, attracting a broader audience and researchers to this traditional art form.

2. Encourage Innovative Design and Cross-disciplinary Collaboration: While respecting tradition, artists are encouraged to incorporate woodblock print elements into modern designs or collaborate with other cultural and creative industries (such as fashion and interior design) to develop products that align with contemporary aesthetics. This strategy can expand the market and integrate woodblock prints into modern life.

3. Promote Cultural Heritage Tourism: Combine Foshan's tourism resources with woodblock prints to create cultural heritage tourism centered around this art form, developing related travel routes and cultural experiences. This approach not only aids cultural dissemination but also stimulates local economic development, creating a positive cycle.

By implementing these recommendations, Foshan woodblock prints can be more effectively preserved and revitalized in modern society, ensuring that this valuable cultural heritage continues to shine in the future.

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