

# The Rise and fall and Revival of Foshan New Year Woodblock Paintings as National Intangible Cultural Heritage

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**Abstract:** Foshan New Year woodblock painting is the national intangible cultural heritage with a long history, but it has been in danger of being lost with the change in the people's life style and aesthetics. This paper briefly introduces the process and reason of the prosperity and decline of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings, as well as the artistic features of these paintings, and then puts forward some methods for the innovation of these paintings.

## 1. Rise and fall of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings

Foshan New Year woodblock paintings are one of the four renowned New Year paintings in China, and included in the list of national intangible cultural heritage.

Foshan New Year woodblock paintings was created during the Yongle Regime of the Ming Dynasty, and flourished during the Qianlong and Jiajing regimes of the Qing Dynasty. It has a history of more than 600 years. According to historical records, in its heyday, there were as many as four thousand persons engaged in the production of New Year paintings in Foshan, and more than twelve million sets of New Year paintings and door god paintings were produced per year. The paintings were not only sold in Southeast China, but also exported to Southeast Asia, Japan, Europe and America and other regions inhabited by Chinese. The prosperity of these paintings lasted until the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China.

Later, due to the rise of modern printing industry and the influence of long-term wars, the number of the workshops for New Year woodblock paintings showed a slight decline in Foshan, but there was no depression in the industry.

After the founding of new China, with the recovery and development of national economic construction, Foshan's New Year woodblock paintings had been booming. In the 1950s, the number of New Year woodblock painting workshops increased to more than 100 in Foshan, and there were as high as over two thousand workers. The New Year Paintings Street was crowded with people and vehicles, where the businesses were booming all day long.

However, in the 1960s, the Foshan New Year woodblock paintings began to go downhill. In just a few years, the New Year woodblock paintings workshops in Foshan were closed and disappeared. The large New Year Paintings Street became deserted and quiet, where there was only the century-old shop named Fengbingji standing there alone, struggling to support itself and looking forward to a new business opportunity. The century-old shop, in spite of a solid foundation, could not stand the losses for years, and ultimately it had to close down like many of its peers.

In 1998, with the support of folk art society, Feng Jinqiang, the successor of the Feng clan expert in Foshan New Year woodblock paintings, reopened the old shop. The shop was supported by the government and publicized by the public, but the business languished. He lost more than 70,000 Yuan in the first business after the shop reopened. In order to revive the Foshan New Year woodblock paintings, Feng Jinqiang later went to Chen Clan Academy, a famous tourist attraction in Guangzhou, to set up a stall for half a year to market the Foshan New Year woodblock paintings to the tourists. However, there were few tourists making inquiries from the opening of the stall to the end.

Feng Jinjiang's failure is not due to his poor skills, the unsightness of the New Year paintings, or the lack of government support and public opinion support, but to his failure to reform and innovate this ancient folk art according to the circumstances.

Since the 1980s, Chinese society has entered a new era. The influx of large numbers of farmers into the cities has deprived the New Year woodblock paintings of the vast market in rural areas. The change of urban housing pattern leads to nowhere to post up the New Year woodblock paintings. But what's more important is that the obsolete content of these paintings in praying for blessings can no longer meet the aesthetic needs of the public.

## **2. The way out for Foshan New Year woodblock paintings**

The local government has done a lot of work in protecting intangible cultural heritage since the 18th and 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, but it is still difficult to revive Foshan New Year woodblock paintings, and there have been doubts for a long time.

Where is the way out for Foshan New Year woodblock paintings?

As a folk art used for auspiciousness and blessing in the farming society, New Year woodblock paintings seem to be eliminated by the new era, but the main reason for the elimination is its obsolete topics and themes, rather than the folk art itself. In fact, New Year woodblock paintings have been constantly absorbing, enriching and perfecting its forms of art from the life in the long process of development, reflecting the yearning and creation of the ancestors for a happy life. It combines the essence of public conditions, folk customs and folklore, with the following unique artistic features:

1. The application of symbolism is the biggest feature of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings. Its composition never imitates the object, but combines the mental image created by a special visual concept and the image created by the idea, and allows it to surpass the object by means of the random modeling of the folk visual symbols. For instance, the height of a man is reduced to the length four times the length of the human head in a door god painting, and the posture is exaggerated horizontally, which fills the whole space of the painting, forming a sense of volume as thick as a mountain.

2. Rough and bold lines are another feature of the folk art of Foshan New Year paintings. In general, the image of New Year paintings is extremely refined, but Foshan New Year paintings are different and it has more plump and stable composition with rough lines. Moreover, some New Year paintings have extremely thick lines, such as Cheongwan and Seven-star Door God, in which the cloth streakline of the figure is as wide as 3 to 5 mm. Such rough lines are rarely seen. The rough lines greatly enhance the decorative charm of New Year paintings, and make the figures more plump and stable.

3. "Filling in red" is the original creation of Foshan New Year paintings. The red color in the painting is the most prominent artistic feature of Foshan New Year paintings. Foshan New Year woodblock paintings are mostly painted in a large area with the materials based on cinnabar lunar caustic, a specialty of Foshan, as the bottom color. It is an ingenious color to set off the atmosphere of the festival. Especially in the door good paintings, the red paper dyed by cinnabar lunar caustic shows a dark red color, which lasts for a long time. It has the reputation of "Eternal Red", which is rarely seen in other folk New Year woodblock paintings.

4. "Painting in gold" is another feature of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings. Foshan New Year woodblock paintings are overprinted with the wood blocks in red, green, yellow and black. In addition to the red color as the bottom color, gold and silver lines are added to the clothing of the god in the painting, the silver and gold colors are painted with fine brushwork, which presents a marvelous effect of the painting inlaid with gold and silver.

The techniques of "filling in red" and "painting in gold" are combined to add the beauty and charming colors to the Foshan New Year woodblock paintings. Red is associated with fire, while gold and silver are bright and dazzling. The combination of fire and brightness gives people a sense of celebration and a highly prosperous and lively atmosphere.

All of these characteristics make up its Lingnan style. These precious articles should be inherited and publicized, not to mention that they once had a vast mass base.

Everything has been constantly changing. I believe that the New Year woodblock paintings can get a new life in innovation.

In 2017, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Implementing the Inheritance and Development Project of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture, which pointed out that carrying out the inheritance and development project of excellent traditional Chinese culture is a major strategic task of building a socialist cultural power. As an important part of intangible cultural heritage, traditional crafts can not only enlighten the mind and provide good enjoyment, but also play an important role in providing jobs, promoting income growth and promoting targeted poverty alleviation. Therefore, it is an important part of the implementation of the inheritance and development project of intangible cultural heritage.

Therefore, the way out for Foshan New Year woodblock paintings should be self-evident.

### **3. Innovation of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings**

How can we protect the folk art of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings, inherit and develop it, and finally get it revived? The only answer is innovation.

There is no doubt that the revival of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings should first rely on the advocacy and support of the government. But it is more important to rely on the heirs of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings to carry out the reform and innovation of these New Year woodblock paintings in terms of content and form.

In this paper, the following suggestions are proposed:

1. We should change their backward traditional themes, such as the traditional themes of the New Year woodblock paintings praying for good luck, create some themes of modern life, such as landscape, characters, stories, etc., and produce a number of paintings that meet the trends of the times and are favored by the public.

2. Their out-fashioned style should be changed. With the change of aesthetics, many of their styles have gradually become unpopular with the public, so we must add some new cultural elements to the paintings, so that these paintings will lay stress on academic or non-academic themes and appeal to both the more and the less cultured.

3. We should develop cultural and creative products themed by the New Year woodblock paintings in line with the tourism boom.

4. We should cooperate with TV series and games, and implant the traditional cultural elements in the Foshan New Year woodblock paintings into animation series and online games, so as to spread them among teenagers. For example, the Palace Museum and NetEase jointly developed the game “Huizhen Miaobi Qianshan” to reproduce the painting The Vast Land, and the unique texturing and dyeing techniques of the beautiful rivers and mountains, so as to revive the cultural heritage.

5. Artificial intelligence technology should be used to develop these processes into mechanical and automatic techniques. Before that, all the folk works of art and crafts were hand-made, which were complex in process and difficult to master. In addition, all kinds of folk arts tend to be unique to some extent, and these special skills are often only mastered by a few people, which make it vulnerable to inherit these skills. And they are handmade, involving great difficulties, long process of production and less likelihood of production in bulk, which restricts the development of the skills.

Some of the above methods and measures have been implemented and some are in operation.

We are delighted to see that Foshan municipal government has made a lot of efforts to revive the Foshan New Year woodblock paintings. With their efforts, the Foshan New Year Woodblock Paintings Museum and the Art Heritage Base of Foshan New Year Woodblock Paintings have been established. With their efforts, they have held the exhibitions of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings in Foshan Library, Foshan Museum and other places for many times. With their efforts, Foshan New Year woodblock paintings were listed in the first batch of national intangible heritage.

We are delighted to see that, after experiencing several setbacks, Feng Jinqiang has finally found a right way. He is working hard to explore the reform of New Year woodblock paintings and devoting himself to the innovation of the paintings. He is constantly exploring the derivatives of New Year woodblock paintings and expanding their business opportunities. In 2014, he successively raised funds to establish the New Year Woodblock Paintings Museum and the New Year Woodblock Paintings Gallery, in which he provides a series of services, such as production, exhibition and sales of New Year woodblock paintings and even the lunch services, in order to publicize and expand his innovative achievements.

In the Gallery, we can also see a group of post-90s teenagers studying hard at the painting, woodblock printing and printing technology of the New Year woodblock paintings under the guidance of their teachers. They are the successors of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings.

Looking forward to the future, Foshan New Year woodblock paintings have successfully embarked on the road of rejuvenation. Despite the fact that the brilliance of Foshan New Year woodblock paintings in history can no longer be reproduced due to the restrictions of the times, it will stand forever as a miracle in the history of folk arts in China, keep on innovations and shine with extraordinary splendor in Foshan, the fertile land of culture.

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