

LIVING AUSPICIOUSNESS: THE RESURGENCE OF MIANZHU'S
NEW YEAR PICTURE (*NIANHUA*) INDUSTRY

by

APRIL LIU

BA, Whittier College, 1999
MFA, Michigan State University, 2003

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Fine Arts)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

April 2012

© April Liu, 2012

ABSTRACT

Chinese *nianhua*, or “New Year Pictures,” refers to a broad category of popular prints and paintings displayed during the Lunar New Year but also throughout the year to mark seasonal festivals, life cycle rituals, and popular religious practices. Despite the widespread circulation of *nianhua* today, the scholarly literature has largely characterized it as a thing of the past, as that which died out with the state circumscription of the woodblock printing industry during the 1950s print reforms and the ban on *nianhua* during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Although the industry has since rebounded, the scholarship continues to relegate *nianhua* to the past, as a prescriptive tradition represented by historic works rather than those emerging in the marketplace.

Drawing on historic archives, interviews, and firsthand observations, I will critique the recent rise of *nianhua* in Mianzhu, Sichuan. The primary goal is to rethink *nianhua* as a “living archive,” an evolving body of works firmly embedded in its immediate contexts of production and use. Mianzhu is a powerful case study because its historic woodblock printing industry never completely died out during the upheavals of the 20th century. In the early 1980s, the industry was catalyzed by a resurgence of ritual practices and a state-led folk art revival, two competing and often conflicting discourses that have fought for prominence in the marketplace. These developments push for a performative view of *nianhua*, where meaning is not fixed in representation but continually innovated upon, appropriated, and activated *in situ* to meet specific ends.

Building on the “performative turn” in art history and ritual studies, this study challenges methodological approaches that treat *nianhua* as discrete visual texts or folk art objects belonging to a shared system of auspicious signs and symbols. Each chapter deploys a different strategy for rethinking *nianhua*’s attributed function to “pursue the auspicious, repel the portentous” as an open-ended site of contestation tied to ritual agency, lineage identity, and symbolic capital in the marketplace. Moving away from decoding symbols and towards analyzing practices, this study reveals the high stakes involved in recognizing *nianhua* as a living entity.

PREFACE

This study was conducted with the approval of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC, Canada. The certificate number is H06-03704.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Preface.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Glossary.....	ix
Acknowledgements.....	v
Dedication.....	vi
Chapter One:	
The Living Archive of Mianzhu <i>Nianhua</i>	1
“Little Chengdu” and the Historic Print Trade.....	11
Innovating the Auspicious: Mianzhu’s Door Deity Markets.....	25
<i>Nianhua</i> as a Living Archive?.....	38
Performing Engaged Research.....	50
Chapter Breakdown.....	54
Chapter Two:	
The Power of Ephemera: Ritual Praxis and the Contested Rise of the <i>Nianhua</i> Marketplace.....	58
Harnessing the Seasonal <i>Nianhua</i> Market.....	64
“Out With the Old, In With the New”: the Transformative Spaces of <i>Nianhua</i> Use.....	79
Reunion and Regeneration: <i>Nianhua</i> and the Lunar New Year.....	90
Lineage-making Strategies for Reclaiming Authority in the <i>Nianhua</i> Marketplace.....	98
Chapter Three:	
“The Picture Must Have Theater”: Performing Narrativity in Mianzhu <i>Nianhua</i>	128
The Medicine King: Performative Gestures and the Art of Storytelling.....	134
Transformations Between Theater and Print.....	151
Recovering Narrative Density in <i>Greeting Spring</i>	161
Chapter Four:	
To Build a Museum and a Village: the Race for Mianzhu’s <i>Nianhua</i> Heritage.....	174
Mianzhu <i>Nianhua</i> Museum: Putting the Past in its Place.....	180
Contesting Heritage: <i>Nianhua</i> Makers Stake Their Claims	195
Mianzhu’s <i>Nianhua</i> Village and the Rise of Intangible Heritage Tourism.....	202
Racing for the Intangible: the <i>Nianhua</i> Festival as Performative Statecraft.....	213
The High-End Heritage Industry: Replicas and Remakes.....	219
Chapter Five: Conclusion.....	
An Industry Based on Innovation.....	229
Demystifying the Auspicious	236
Future Directions and Post-Earthquake Reconstruction.....	242
Bibliography.....	332
Appendix: Mianzhu <i>Nianhua</i> Timeline, 1912-2011.....	347

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Street-level view of an urban residential neighborhood in Mianzhu.....	247
Figure 2. Comparison of multi-block printed colors and hand painted colors.....	248
Figure 3. Exterior view of an urban household doorway in Mianzhu.....	249
Figure 4. Exterior view of an urban household doorway in Mianzhu.....	250
Figure 5. Early 20 th century Shanghai <i>yuefenpai nianhua</i> or “calendar poster”.....	251
Figure 6. The inaugural state calendar of 1912 for the Republic of China.....	252
Figure 7. <i>Peasant Girl, Factory Boy</i> , woodblock print, 1950s, Mianzhu.....	253
Figure 8. Map of major <i>nianhua</i> production centers across China	254
Figure 9. Map of major woodblock printing areas and trade routes in Sichuan.....	255
Figure 10. Wang Tianbao’s <i>nianhua</i> workshop, 1962, Mianzhu.....	256
Figure 11. <i>Warrior Door Deities</i> , woodblock print, early 20 th century, Mianzhu.....	257
Figure 12. <i>Cat Deity</i> , woodblock print, early 20 th century, Mianzhu.....	258
Figure 13. <i>Journey to the West</i> , scroll painting, late 19 th century, Mianzhu.....	259
Figure 14. The labor-intensive phase of woodblock carving, 2006, Mianzhu.....	260
Figure 15. Detail of a carved woodblock, late 19 th century, Mianzhu.....	261
Figure 16. A painter applies colors and details over the printed outline with a brush...	262
Figure 17. Small size stamps and a detail of gold stamps applied to a print.....	263
Figure 18. <i>Warrior Door Deity</i> , woodblock print, late 19 th century, Mianzhu.....	264
Figure 19. Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, 2006, Mianzhu.....	265
Figure 20. Nianhua Village, 2006, Mianzhu.....	266

Figure 21. Outdoor nianhua market, early 1980s, Mianzhu.....	267
Figure 22. Outdoor nianhua market, 2004, Mianzhu	268
Figure 23. <i>Tianshuijiao</i> , woodblock prints, late 19 th century, Mianzhu.....	269
Figure 24. Exterior doorway of an urban residence, 2006, Mianzhu.....	270
Figure 25. Exterior doorway of an urban residence, 2006, Mianzhu	271
Figure 26. Exterior doorway of a well-to-do rural residence, 2006, Mianzhu.....	272
Figure 27. Exterior doorway of an urban residence, 2006, Mianzhu.....	273
Figure 28. Interview session with Wang Xingru in his studio, 2006, Mianzhu.....	274
Figure 29. Front cover of the Wang family genealogy chart.....	275
Figure 30. Arrangement of couplets on the Wang family genealogy chart.	276
Figure 31. The ancestral tablet on the Wang family altar.....	277
Figure 32. Detail of an inside page of the Wang family genealogy chart.....	278
Figure 33. Back cover of the Wang family genealogy chart.....	279
Figure 34. Detail of <i>Plowing and Weaving Pictures</i> , Jiao Bingzhen, commissioned by Kangxi Emperor, hand colored print, ca 1696.....	280
Figure 35. Detail of <i>Plowing and Weaving Pictures</i> , Wang Zhengfa, ink on paper, late 19 th cent.....	281
Figure 36. Wang Xingru's painted sketches from his box of lineage documents.....	282
Figure 37. <i>Double Longevity</i> , Wang Xingru, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 2004.....	283
Figure 38. Map of Mianzhu's historic <i>nianhua</i> sites.....	284
Figure 39. Interview with Li Fangfu in his studio, 2006, Mianzhu.....	285
Figure 40. Interior view of Li Fangfu's studio, 2006, Mianzhu.....	286
Figure 41. <i>Warrior Door Deities</i> , Li Fangfu, woodblock prints, 2006.	287

Figure 42. Interior view of the Chen family workshop at the Nianhua Village.....	288
Figure 43. <i>Boys Playing</i> , Chen family workshop, 2007.....	289
Figure 44. Yao Chunrong painting, early 1980s, Mianzhu.....	290
Figure 45. Interview session with Wang Xingru, 2007, Mianzhu.....	291
Figure 46. Wang Xingru hanging up his <i>Medicine King</i> painting	292
Figure 47. <i>Medicine King</i> , Wang Xingru, hanging scroll, 2004.....	293
Figure 48. Storytelling session with Wang Xingru	294
Figure 49. <i>Medicine King</i> , undated woodblock print, Yangliuqing, Tianjin.....	295
Figure 50. Interview with Chen Gang at the Chen family workshop, July 2006.....	296
Figure 51. Chen Gang explaining the process of carving.....	297
Figure 52. Sichuan theater performer as the female warrior Mu Guiying.....	298
Figure 53. <i>Warrior Door Deities</i> , woodblock prints, ca. late 19 th cent., Mianzhu.....	299
Figure 54. Sichuan's famous <i>bianlianxi</i> or “face-changing” theater	300
Figure 55. <i>Five Honourable Sons</i> , handscroll, late 19 th century, Mianzhu.....	301
Figure 56. <i>Greeting Spring</i> , Huang Ruigu, handscroll, ca. late 19 th cent., Mianzhu....	302
Figure 57. Detail from <i>Greeting Spring</i> showing the magistrate on a sedan chair.....	303
Figure 58. Detail from <i>Greeting Spring</i> showing the “Welcoming Spring” rites.....	304
Figure 59. Detail from <i>Greeting Spring</i> showing the “Beating Spring” rites.....	305
Figure 60. Comparison of a <i>Spring Ox Picture</i> from Shanxi and <i>Greeting Spring</i>	306
Figure 61. Detail of <i>Greeting Spring</i> showing a prominent shop sign.....	307
Figure 62. Detail of <i>Greeting Spring</i> showing the procession of “raised pavilions”...	308
Figure 63. Entrance lobby at the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum.	309
Figure 64. Upper level of the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum.	310

Figure 65. <i>Shinutu</i> or “beautiful maiden pictures” from Mianzhu’s early print trade....	311
Figure 66. <i>Bicycle-riding Maiden</i> , woodblock print, ca. late 19 th cent., Mianzhu.....	312
Figure 67. <i>Swan Cigarette Print Ad</i> , reproduction of a 1930s lithograph, Shanghai....	313
Figure 68. Press conference event at the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, 2006.....	314
Figure 69. <i>Bicycle-riding Maiden</i> , Chen family workshop, woodblock print, 2006.....	315
Figure 70. Interview with Li Fangfu in his studio, 2007.....	316
Figure 71. <i>Tianshuijiao</i> , Li Fangfu, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 2005.....	317
Figure 72. View of a rural household at the Nianhua Village, 2006.....	318
Figure 73. Bilingual sign installed at the Nianhua Village, 2007.....	319
Figure 74. Nianhua Village, winter 2007, Mianzhu.....	320
Figure 75. Exterior view of a private residence at the Nianhua Village in Mianzhu....	321
Figure 76. Local residents carrying out agricultural work in the Nianhua Village.....	322
Figure 77. Entrance to the Chen family workshop at the Nianhua Village, 2007.....	323
Figure 78. The street sign in front of Li Fangfu’s workshop.....	324
Figure 79. Dragon dance at the Nianhua Festival, 2005, Mianzhu.....	325
Figure 80. Central stage of the Nianhua Festival, 2005, Mianzhu.....	326
Figure 81. Souvenir shop in Mianzhu with <i>fuzhipin</i> replicas on display.....	327
Figure 82. Examples of <i>nianhua</i> in new media.....	328
Figure 83. <i>Straw Cutting Maidens</i> , Liu Zhumei, acrylic on canvas, 1995.....	329
Figure 84. <i>Door Deities</i> , Liu Zhumei, acrylic on canvas, 2001.	330
Figure 85. Damaged site at the Nianhua Village right after the 2008 earthquake.....	331

GLOSSARY

anzi 案子
bandengxi 板凳戏
bangpai 帮派
beipai 北派
bianlianxi 变脸戏
bing 冰
chang 场
changxi 唱戏
Chen Gang 陈刚
Chen Xingcai 陈兴才
Chengdu chuanju yuan 成都川剧院
chuangxin nianhua 创新年画
chuanju 川剧
chuanju yishu 川剧艺术
chuantong 传统
chuantong minjian yishu 传统民间艺术
chuantong nianhua 传统年画
chun 春
chunchang 春场
chunlian 春联
chunniu 春牛
chunniutu 春牛图
chunshen 春神
cijiu yingxin 辞旧迎新
dachun 打春
damao 大毛
Dongmen heba 东门河坝
Dou Yujun 窦禹钧
doufang 斗方
Du Fu 杜甫
ermao 二毛
ershisi xiao 二十四孝
fang 房
fei wuzhi wenhua yichan 非物质文化遗产
fengjian mixian 封建迷信
foshou 佛手
fu 福
Fu Wenshu 傅文淑
fudao 福倒
Fuxihui 伏羲会
fuzhipin 复制品

gailiang nianhua 改良年画
ganshuihuo 赶水货
gecaonü 割草女
Gengzhitu 耕织图
Gong Jinlan 巩金兰
gongbi hua 工笔画
Gongxian 珙县
guonian 过年
guapimao 瓜皮帽
guaqian 挂钱
Han Gang 韩刚
He Qufa 何去发
heihu 黑虎
hexie shehui 和谐社会
Hou Shiwu 侯世武
Hua Mulan 花木蘭
Huang Ruigu 黄瑞鹄
Huang Zonghou 黄宗厚
huanletu 欢乐图
hu 护
Hu Guangkui 胡光葵
huashi 画师
huatiao 画条
huatie 画贴
huazhang 画张
hulu 葫芦
ji 吉
jia 家
Jiajiang 夹江
Jiao Bingzhen 焦秉贞
Jin Pingding 金平定
jishi 集市
jiujiu xiaohantu 九九消寒诗图
jiunianhua 旧年画
jixiang 吉祥
kaixiang 开相
kan chun 看春
kan fengshui 看风水
kongzi wenhua jie 孔子文化节
laji 蜡祭
laoyiren 老艺人

Li Fangfu 李方福
 Liang Hongyu 梁红玉
 Liangping 梁平
 linmo 临摹
 Liu Zhumei 刘竹梅
 lu 禄
 Lu Shengzong 吕胜中
 Magu 麻姑
 menshen 门神
 menshen bang 门神帮
 menshen shi 门神市
 menqian 门签
 Mianzhu 绵竹
 minjian huajia 民间画家
 minjian wenhua 民间文化
 minjian yishu 民间艺术
 minjian yishu yichan 民间艺术遗产
 mingzhang minggua 明展明挂
 mixin 迷信
 mo 摹
 Mu Guiying 穆桂英
 muban nianhua 木板年画
 nafu yingxiang 纳福迎祥
 Nanhuagong 南华宫
 Nanjishouxing 南极寿星
 nanpai 南派
 Nanxuanci 南轩祠
 nian 年
 nianhua 年画
 nianhua chuangxin 年画创新
 nianhua cun 年画村
 nianhua jie 年画节
 niannian youyu 年年有余
 Ning Zhiqi 宁志奇
 pai 派
 paogehui 袍哥会
 pingan 平案
 qiangjiu nianhua yichan 抢救年画遗产
 Qiche shinü 骑车仕女
 Qin Liangyu 秦良玉
 Qin Shubao 秦叔宝
 Qingdaozen 清道镇
 Qingming shanghe tu 清明上河图
 Qingtongxiang 清通乡

qipao 旗袍
 quji bixiong 趋吉避凶
 qunzhong wenhua 群众文化
 quxie nafu 驱邪纳福
 saishen 赛神
 sandiaoshen 三掉身
 Sanguoyanyi 三国演义
 sanheyuan 三合院
 sanmao 三毛
 Shen Hong 沈泓
 Shenfang 什防
 shentai 神台
 shi 世
 shi 势
 shi 氏
 Shi Weian 史维安
 shinütu 仕女图
 shou 寿
 Shouxing 寿星
 shuangshou 双寿
 shuochun 说春
 siheyuan 四合院
 Sun Simiao 孙思邈
 taige 抬阁
 tangwu 堂屋
 taofu 桃符
 taofu shi 桃符市
 Tianjinwei 天津卫
 tianshuijiao 添水脚
 tingxi 听戏
 tu 土
 Wang Tianbao 王天保
 Wang Xingru 王星儒
 Wang Zhengfa 王正发
 weigu 围鼓
 weihua 卫画
 wenhua duoyangxing 文化多样性
 wenhua shi 文化石
 wenhua yichan 文化遗产
 wenwu 文物
 wuzi duokui 五子夺奩
 xi 喜
 xiandai nianhua 现代年画
 xiao 孝
 xiaohantu 消寒图

xibao yangchun 喜报阳春
xie 鞋
xie 谐
xin nianhua 新年画
xiqian 喜钱
Xiyouji 西游记
Yangjiajiangyanyi 楊家將演義
yangke 阳刻
yanyuedao 偃月刀
Yao Chunrong 姚春荣
Yaowang 药王
yaowanghui 药王会
yaowangmiao 药王庙
yingchun 迎春
Yingchuntu 迎春图
yinhua 印花
Yiwan 医王
youchun 游春
youtou youwei 有头有尾

youyin 油印
yu 鱼
yu 余
Yu Chigong 尉迟恭
yuanyangbi 鸳鸯笔
yuefenpai nianhua 月份牌年画
Yunxi 云西
Zaoshen 灶神
Zhang Xianfu 张先富
Zhang Xianzhong 张献忠
Zhang Zeduan 张择端
zhenxing chuanju 振兴川剧
zhiguai 志怪
zhong 忠
zhongguo minjian huihua 中国民间绘画
Zhongkui 钟馗
zong 宗
zu 族
zuochang 坐唱

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not be possible without the dedicated efforts of my lead supervisor, Dr. Hsingyuan Tsao, who provided me with the invaluable learning experiences, contacts, and research opportunities that led to its fulfillment. I am also deeply indebted to Dr. Katherine Hacker for directing me towards many of the key debates between art history and anthropology that have shaped this study. A special thanks goes to Dr. Catherine Swatek, for imparting her profound knowledge of Chinese vernacular literature and drama, to Dr. Leo Shin for sharing his expertise in the history of late imperial China, and to Dr. Diana Lary, Dr. Marvin Cohodas, and Dr. Sharalyn Orbaugh for their insightful comments during the final stages of this project. I am also very grateful to Dr. Ellen Johnston Laing, a leading expert in Chinese popular art and *nianhua* who provided invaluable suggestions for polishing this study.

I must extend my gratitude to Dr. Elizabeth Johnson for assisting with the preliminary research conducted at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, BC, and to Dr. Daniel Overmyer and Dr. Paul Crowe for guiding me in the study of Chinese popular religion. I am also indebted to artist and professor Gu Xiong, who shared his hands-on knowledge of Sichuan's printmaking traditions and who invited me to study his private collection of Mianzhu *nianhua*. A most heartfelt thanks goes to Jean Kares and Dr. Nate Bohy for their diligent efforts in copyediting and proofreading this text, to Dr. Emily Beausoleil for leading me to key texts in critical theory, and to Yanlong Guo for helping me locate research materials in China.

In Sichuan, I am ever grateful to my mentor Liu Zhumei, an accomplished artist and researcher at the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, and to Ning Zhiqi, the lead researcher and director of Mianzhu's Cultural Relics Bureau. With the support of Liu and Ning, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews in Mianzhu's printshops and to gain access to many historic archives of Mianzhu *nianhua*. I am also indebted to Hou Rong, editor-in-chief at Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing, for providing out-of-print resources on Sichuan's *nianhua* history and for arranging my visit to the Sichuan Theater Research Institute. I am grateful to art historian Gao Wen for showing me his private collection of Chinese woodblock prints and paintings, and to Han Gang, Si Daoan, Jinlan Gong, and Gao Hongzhu for their warm hospitality during my travels and for their superb translations of the Mianzhu dialect and its many obscure references. A very special thanks goes to Kris Balfe and Wang Hong for assisting with photography.

I am truly honored to attribute the credit for this project to this excellent community of friends and colleagues on both sides of the great Pacific Ocean.

DEDICATION

For my loving parents, Stephen and Shirley Liu, who raised me in two cultures and who taught me the value of the old adage, “read ten thousand books, walk ten thousand miles”
读万卷书, 行万里路.

Chapter One: The Living Archive of Mianzhu *Nianhua*

Nestled against the mountainous edge of the Chengdu plains in southwest China, the rural township of Mianzhu 绵竹, Sichuan lies roughly 150 kilometers north of Chengdu, the provincial capital. Reflecting about thirty years of steady urbanization, Mianzhu is a work in progress, with small farming communities interspersed with high-tech factories, unfinished development projects, and scattered billboards announcing future construction. The urban core is a complex web of historic cobblestone alleys pressed against wide boulevards and sleek shopping centers (**fig. 1**). I visited Mianzhu several times in 2006 and 2007 to study its historic *nianhua* woodblock printing and painting industry, which has thrived there since the Song dynasty period (960-1279 CE). Although the existing literature on the topic tends to characterize *nianhua* as a thing of the past, I soon discovered that Mianzhu's *nianhua* industry is very much alive and growing rapidly. Reflecting the thick palimpsest of old and new spaces in the region, Mianzhu's *nianhua* now appear in variety of rather incongruous contexts - as ritual ephemera displayed on the doors and walls of local households but also as folk art objects found in gift shops, museums, or touristic heritage attractions.

The term *nianhua* 年画, commonly translated as “New Year Pictures,” refers to a broad range of popular prints and paintings produced in the many historic woodblock-printing centers across China. The works are most visible during the Lunar New Year season, when mass quantities of *nianhua* circulate through markets and households. Inexpensive and ephemeral, these are annually renewed on household doorways, walls, and windows, a widespread act of renewal that coincides with a rich repertoire of ritual practices tied to the “passing of the year” 过年. However, the term *nianhua* also

encompasses many temporary and permanent works consumed throughout the year for seasonal festivals, life-cycle rituals, gift giving, and popular religion.

Making and using *nianhua* has made a tremendous comeback all across China since the early 1980s, yet the existing scholarship has characterized it as a tradition that has disappeared or is on the verge of disappearing. Art historians Wang Shucun 王树村 and Bo Songnian 薄松年, the foremost authorities on the topic, have each written a comprehensive history of Chinese *nianhua*, which they define as a type of “folk art” 民间艺术 produced in regional woodblock printing centers. The notion of “folk” refers to the non-official realm, so that “folk art” is distinguished from official art. In both texts, the authors recount the “golden age” of *nianhua* in the late nineteenth century and its rapid decline in the early twentieth century. The decline is attributed to mechanized printing technologies introduced from the West and a slew of state-led print reforms carried out by the Republican state in the 1910s and 1920s, and again by the Communist government during the 1950s and early 1960s.¹ For Wang and Bo, the state’s rigorous circumscription of local printing activities in the 1950s marked “the end of *nianhua* as a folk custom,” as it is no longer possible to distinguish between the non-official and official realms.² If there were any surviving vestiges of traditional *nianhua*, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) dealt the final blow, with the official ban on *nianhua* as a form of “feudal superstition.” This narrative of *nianhua*’s spectacular rise and fall from roughly the mid-

¹ Wang Shucun 王树村, *Zhongguo nianhua shi* 中国年画史 [Chinese *nianhua* history] (Beijing: Beijing gongyi meishu chubanshe, 2002), and Bo Songnian 薄松年, *Zhongguo nianhua shi* 中国年画史 [Chinese *nianhua* history] (Shenyang: Liaoning meishu chubanshe, 1986).

² Wang, *Chinese Nianhua History*, 290.

nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries is also widely repeated in the Western scholarship, which builds on the foundational writings by Wang and Bo.³

A key problem here is that the existing scholarship has relied primarily on the historic *nianhua* archives collected in the north and east, near the urban centers of Beijing and Shanghai. Prior to the early twentieth century, there were very few efforts to collect and preserve *nianhua*, which were mostly designed for temporary use in a variety of ritual practices. Early twentieth-century Christian missionary scholars and Sinologists were among the first to collect large quantities of popular prints and paintings.⁴ These pioneering Orientalists brought their own ideological agendas to the task and collected many works from the street markets of Beijing and Shanghai, where they had access to the everyday objects of the common people. During the 1950s print reforms, state supported research activities spurred more collection activities, with many *nianhua* entering into state archives around the nation.⁵ At this time, Wang Shucun and Bo Songnian established their careers as leading folk art historians based in Beijing and put together some of the most extensive collections of Chinese *nianhua*. As both scholars are

³ Key examples that deal specifically with this timeframe include Tanya McIntyre, *Chinese New Year Pictures: The Process of Modernization, 1842-1942*, (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 1997), and James Flath, *The Cult of Happiness: Nianhua, Art, and History in Rural North China* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004).

⁴ The earliest efforts to collect *nianhua* include studies by French Sinologist Eduoard Chavannes and his student V. M. Alekseev, a Russian Sinologist whose research on *nianhua* have been published in V. M. Alekseev, *The Chinese Gods of Wealth: a lecture delivered at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, 26th of March 1926* (London: School of Oriental Studies and The China Society, 1928), and V.M. Alekseev, Maria Rudova, and L.N. Menshikov, *Chinese Popular Prints* (Aurora Art Publishers, 1988). These works were soon followed by the writings of missionary scholars interested in printed depictions of Chinese popular religion, including Henri Dore's *Researches in Chinese Superstition* (1914-38), Clarence Burton Day's *Chinese Peasant Cults* (Shanghai, 1940; repr., Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Publishing Co., 1974), and Anne Goodrich's *Peking Paper Gods: A Look at Home Worship* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1991). The German-American Sinologist Berthold Laufer also collected a significant number of *nianhua* during his 1901-1904 China Expedition; these works are now held in the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

⁵ For in-depth discussions of the Communist's 1950s print reform activities see Chang-tai Hung, "Repainting China: New Year Prints (Nianhua) and Peasant Resistance in the Early Years of the People's Republic," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no.4 (2000): 779-810.

based in northern China, their *nianhua* collections and writings also tend to reflect the historical developments of that region.

Thus far, no in-depth studies have been conducted on the rapid recovery of the *nianhua* industry after the Cultural Revolution, although there have been official campaigns to “revive” and “rescue” *nianhua* as part of China’s “folk art heritage” 民间艺术遗产. Relaxed policies around cultural production coupled with the state-led revival of the industry has spurred the revitalization of several well-known *nianhua* centers in China, including Mianzhu in Sichuan, Yangliuqing near Tianjin, Wuqiang in Shandong, and Zhuxianzhen in Henan.⁶ While many have dismissed these developments as another round of state restrictions tied to the reinvention of tradition, I will argue that the situation is far more complicated than a restaging of traditional practices.⁷

The rise of Mianzhu’s *nianhua* industry departs dramatically from the development of the print centers of the north and east, lending significance to this case study. The historic records and contemporary print practices in Mianzhu debunk the notion that *nianhua* is a dead or dying tradition completely overtaken by official activities. The evidence points to a vibrant and thriving body of printing and painting activities that did not simply disappear, but continue to evolve in tandem with the changing conditions of everyday life, adapting and developing alongside the prolonged periods of print reform as well as the outright ban on *nianhua*. This is documented in the interviews, photos, and collected *nianhua* archives held in state institutions and collected during the 1950s and

⁶ State-funded *nianhua* museums have been spreading across China, with the first built in Wuqiang, Hebei in 1985, followed by Mianzhu’s Nianhua Museum in 1996, the Tianjin Yangliuqing Nianhua Museum renovation in 2011, and shortly thereafter the Zhuxianzhen Nianhua Museum in Henan.

⁷ A recent essay by Bo Songnian reiterates the demise of *nianhua* at the hands of failed state-led revival activities and commercial printing practices since the early 1980s. Bo Songnian, “Xingshuai cunwang zhongde nianhua yishu” 兴衰存亡中的年画艺术 [The Rise, Fall, Preservation, and Loss of Nianhua Art] *Art Observation* 美术观察 2 (2005): 8-10.

early 1960s print reform movements. In reading against the grain of this material, I found compelling evidence that Mianzhu's *nianhua* industry was not completely stifled under state controls. In this study, I draw on firsthand observations and interviews with contemporary *nianhua* makers and users to reveal the close ties between the *nianhua* industry and the "living history" of the region including such customs as theatrical storytelling, the sharing of auspicious speech, *fengshui* activities, and lineage-making practices.

While the scholarly literature on *nianhua* focuses on archived materials of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, this study makes its contribution by examining contemporary *nianhua* as they appear *in situ*, seamlessly integrated with cycles of production, circulation, and consumption. Thus far, the methodology for archival research has focused predominantly on issues of production and representation. In the influential *nianhua* history by Bo Songnian for instance, a central unifying feature of *nianhua* is its attributed power "to attract the auspicious, repel the portentous" (趋吉避凶 or 驱邪纳福), a concept that is visually conveyed through "artistic" and "aesthetic" means.⁸ Bo accordingly interprets a wide variety of works by decoding the representation of auspicious signs, symbols, or motifs. In treating *nianhua* as the visual texts of a shared iconographic system, the tendency has been to characterize *nianhua* as a rather rigid and unchanging tradition with timeless designs. In a joint study, Bo Songnian and Sinologist David Johnson have stressed a community's rigid adherence to established *nianhua* iconographies: "presumably once a god's iconography had been fixed, some devotees rejected any but the smallest changes in it, much as village women balked at changes in

⁸ Bo, *Chinese Nianhua History*, 1-5.

funeral rituals.”⁹ They go on to explain how print shops had little motivation to introduce change because of “perennial favorites” in the marketplace and the costly price of making new designs that might be rejected by customers. Furthermore, the collective production process itself is framed as conformist in nature: “when block carvers *did* have to make a new design, they frequently relied on pattern books, which by definition preserved older styles.”¹⁰

An important departure from the folk art paradigm is a recent study by historian James Flath, who focuses on the popular prints of rural north China of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹¹ Flath situates *nianhua* as “print culture,” which he summarily defines as “a means of understanding the world through print” that includes the physical dimension of “producing, disseminating, obtaining, displaying, and reading print” as well as a social dimension where “print culture is the abstraction of the world created by the repeated and systematic application of ink to paper, and the penetration and transformation of social relations by print.”¹² In his effort to write a “cultural history” of rural northern China, Flath draws attention to the active role of *nianhua* within various social and political discourses tied to modernity, domesticity, nation building, and gender. In short, Flath resituates *nianhua* as a historical text rather than a distinctly visual one, to examine how “perceptions of the social and physical world were put into print, and how print, in turn, configured perceptions of the social and ethical world.”¹³

Flath’s approach provides an important foundation for this present study,

⁹ Bo Songnian and David Johnson, *Domesticated Deities and Auspicious Emblems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹ James Flath’s *Cult of Happiness: Nianhua Art, and History in Rural North China* focuses on the print centers in Shandong, Hebei, and Henan provinces.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

especially in pushing beyond the purely aesthetic or artistic aspects of *nianhua* and in acknowledging the regional specificities of the industry. However, in focusing on issues of production and representation, Flath makes the central argument that “the single most important aspect of the village-based print industry was that it engaged in prescriptive mass production—a process by which a uniform object was collectively produced using a defined set of tools and techniques and in deference to collectively defined social values.”¹⁴ Flath expands this view to include the realm of consumption as well, where the “prescriptive ethic was carried by *nianhua* through markets and into the homes of their consumers.”¹⁵ Picking up on Bo and Johnson’s argument, this prescriptive view reflects the widely held consensus that *nianhua* are the mass produced products of a traditional social system that resisted creative agency and change.

This study will press for an alternate perspective that acknowledges the innovative aspects of the *nianhua* industry, which has continuously developed and adapted to the changing conditions of the marketplace. Existing studies have focused on the print centers in the north, where multi-block printing techniques prevailed as a common method for applying multiple layers of color to a print.¹⁶ In Mianzhu however, the colors and finishing details of a print are all applied by hand with a brush (**fig. 2**). Whereas a prescriptive approach might be an appropriate description of a multi-block printing process, Mianzhu’s workshops display variation and experimentation in brushwork, especially in the final stages of painting in the colors, surface outlines, and facial details. Neither collective nor individual forms of authorship can be easily used to characterize Mianzhu’s workshops, as both concepts are simultaneously deployed.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the multi-block color printing process, Ibid., 18-20.

Historic records describe the signature traits of individual master designers, carvers, printers, and painters as well as the unique skills of a workshop as a whole.¹⁷

Since Flath's notion of "print culture" focuses solely on the particular medium of print, it is perhaps more fitting to describe Mianzhu *nianhua* as a "print and painting culture." In both the past and present, Mianzhu's printmakers have been motivated to come up with novel designs and fresh production methods to survive in a competitive and sometimes hostile marketplace. This has carried forth in Mianzhu's *nianhua* industry today, where experienced and emerging *nianhua* producers jockey for status and authority in the marketplace by innovating works on a regular basis. Using a variety of creative marketing tactics, Mianzhu's *nianhua* makers are also continually performing the auspicious or portentous meanings tied to their products. This involves the strategic use of propitious sites such as shrines or temples to set up outdoor markets and the selection of favorable dates of the lunar calendar to conduct business activities.

The processes of experimentation and appropriation are not only aspects of *nianhua* production, but also evident in the evolving modes of consumption and display. The preoccupation with auspicious time and space is evident in the diverse configurations of household *nianhua* displays, which are strategically arranged and renewed to protect vulnerable passageways and to activate positive interactions in the home. The most widely seen works are protective "door deities" 门神 posted on the exterior of household doors to guard the home from all negative influences. These are usually balanced with "spring couplets" 春联 on either side, two vertical strips of paper with auspicious phrases

¹⁷ For a list of the established names and workshops in Mianzhu's historical print trade, see Hou Shiwu 侯世武 and Liu Zhumei 刘竹梅, *Mianzhu nianhua gailun* 绵竹年画概论 [Introduction to Mianzhu's *nianhua*] in *Mianzhu nianhua jingpin ji* 绵竹年画精品集 [Selected works of Mianzhu *nianhua*], ed. Hou Rong 侯荣 (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2005): 11-17.

inscribed on them. A third strip with an auspicious phrase often hangs above the center of the door as a “lintel hanging” 门签. In this example of an urban household in Mianzhu, two door deity prints showing the popular demon-queller Zhongkui 钟馗 are posted up on either side of a double-leaf doorway, framed by a set spring couplets and lintel hanging (**fig. 3**). While the door deity prints are instances of machine-printed *nianhua*, digitally designed and produced in mass quantities by the latest computerized technologies in commercial printing, the spring couplet and lintel hanging are hand-painted works. This combination of machine-made and handmade *nianhua* is a common sight in Mianzhu and across China, reflecting diverse practices of display. Furthermore, an extremely wide variety of works appears on doorways as door deities and spring couplets, including advertisements and posters designed for other purposes (**fig. 4**).

Outdoor *nianhua* displays often appear faded or torn because they are renewed only once a year during the Lunar New Year then left undisturbed until the following year. As works that capture a continuous cycle of timed renewal and decay, these ephemeral *nianhua* resist being analyzed as fixed objects outside of their contexts of use. Thus the different modes of *nianhua* display push for a rethinking of *nianhua*’s attributed power to “attract the auspicious, repel the portentous” in distinctly spatial and temporal terms.

A major contribution of this study is that it theorizes the larger body of *nianhua* that are in perpetual motion beyond the confines of the archive, circulating in markets and lived spaces as a “living archive,” a term I will unpack as an evolving body of *nianhua* radically embedded in a repertoire of embodied practices tied to everyday life and livelihood. In addition to archival research, this study draws on firsthand

observations and interview sessions with Mianzhu's *nianhua* makers and users. The push to recognize *nianhua* as a *living* entity is an urgent issue for the industry. As this study will show, the valorization of historic archives has legitimized a range of state-led campaigns to collect, salvage, and rebrand *nianhua* to suit the interests of official institutions. In Mianzhu, the official agenda to "rescue *nianhua* heritage" 抢救年画遗产 is bolstered by folk art discourses that relegate *nianhua* to the remote past, as that which needs state intervention to be preserved and resuscitated. This has led to the state's large-scale collection of prints and paintings from the community and the building of *nianhua* heritage attractions such as folk art museums and commercialized theme parks. I will argue that contemporary *nianhua* activities continue to challenge or destabilize these activities, including everyday practices that re-appropriate and reclaim the historic *nianhua* held in state collections.

In the sections below, I will first situate the regional and historical background of Mianzhu *nianhua* within the existing scholarship on *nianhua*, which has been largely focused on centers of the north and east. I will then address the need to rethink *nianhua* as a living archive, a concept that points to the developing body of objects and practices that continually *perform* the significance of *nianhua*. While philosopher J. L. Austin first used this term in 1962 to describe performative forms of speech that not only "say something" but also constitute some form of action, feminist philosophers such as Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick have elaborated on it to stress the "performative fluidity" of gender as embodied acts that are continually rehearsed and recast to achieve specific results.¹⁸ The term has since come to signal a broad paradigmatic shift in anthropology

¹⁸ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre*

and art history, where scholars focus less on “ritual systems” or “sign systems” and more on analyzing specific practices and cultural performances as forms of social *action*.¹⁹

This study builds on these developments to address the ongoing contestations of meaning in Mianzhu’s growing *nianhua* industry, where high stakes are attached to defining and performing *nianhua*’s auspicious or portentous significance.

“Little Chengdu” and the Historic Print Trade

The term *nianhua* did not come into regular use until the late nineteenth century, when it first gained widespread popularity with a new print format emerging from Shanghai, the *yuefenpai nianhua* 月份牌年画.²⁰ These mass-produced “calendar posters” combined auspicious portraits of beautiful women to market a variety of urban commodities, including foreign products, lottery announcements, and theater advertisements²¹ (**fig. 5**). These works were primarily produced using the newly introduced technology of lithography although woodblock printed versions also circulated. With the fall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republican state in 1912, the term *nianhua* gained even wider currency in reference to the first printing of the state calendar. Commemorating the first year of the Republic of China, a

Journal, 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531; and Eve K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ The “performative turn” in anthropology has been advanced in Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen and Jason L. Mast, *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For a view of how performativity theory has shaped recent studies in art history and visual culture, see Mieke Bal, “Performance and Performativity,” in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

²⁰ According to Wang Shucun, the earliest documented use of the term *nianhua* appears in the *biji* 笔记 writings of the mid-nineteenth century that discuss the ritual activities of the Lunar New Year. It later appears in greater frequency in urban periodicals such as the *Beijing Daily Journal* 京话日报 and in reference to Shanghai’s lithographed calendar posters. Wang, *Zhongguo*, 9-12.

²¹ Ellen J. Laing, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 29.

state-sponsored *yuefenpai* poster bears the nation's "five colored flag," a portrait of the founding president Sun Yat-sen, and the newly adopted Gregorian calendar alongside the traditional luni-solar calendar (**fig. 6**).²²

With the rise to power of the Communist Party in 1949, the term *nianhua* was again tied to nation-building activities as the state set in motion a series of print reforms during the 1950s and early 1960s. These reforms sought to mobilize cultural agencies and rural communities across the nation to produce "new *nianhua*" 新年画, a revised version of popular woodblock prints that conveyed the messages of the new nation, including "the grand victory of Chinese people's war for liberation and the people's great revolution, the establishment of the People's Republic, the Common program [for China], and the recovery and progress of industrial and agricultural production."²³ Against this backdrop of ideological reform, the term *nianhua* was used as a blanket category to unify a wide range of print formats produced across China. These diverse works were collectively labeled "old *nianhua*" and relegated to the past to make way for the state sponsored "new *nianhua*" that sought to capture the revolutionary patriotism of the working classes and the rural peasants. In Mianzhu, the new *nianhua* often displayed anonymous and patriotic laborers such as peasants or factory workers in the place of door deities (**fig. 7**). This new category of works set forth the national character of *nianhua* by subsuming the local and regional into the national. As Sue Tuohy noted in her study of Chinese folklore scholarship, "the notion of traditions is used to help explain the overall

²² For a discussion of the role of *nianhua* in disseminating the newly adopted Gregorian calendar during the early twentieth century, see Zhang Shaoqian, "The Supremacy of Modern Time: Reshaping the Image of China in Early Twentieth Century Calendar Posters," *Modern Art Asia* 6 (March 2011), <http://art.okstate.edu/faculty/zhang.pdf>.

²³ From Chang-tai Hung's translated excerpt of the November 26, 1949 directive on *nianhua* reform released by the PRC Ministry of Culture: Chang-tai Hung, "Repainting China," 779.

unity of the apparent diversity” and “thus, the unity of China is explained through processes of assimilation, amalgamation, and melting of peoples, and its greatness, as the crystallization of the best contributions of each.”²⁴

In his comprehensive history of Chinese *nianhua*, Bo Songnian also defines *nianhua* as a form of “traditional folk art” 传统民间艺术, a category that replaces the reactionary “old *nianhua*” with the notion of “tradition.” For Bo, the notion of “folk” is also explicitly expanded beyond the worker or rural peasant to include the vast realm of non-official cultural production. Bo also explain that *nianhua* are unified by their attributed power to “pursue the auspicious, repel the portentous,” an open-ended concept that encompasses the pursuit of success, prosperity, and harmony in all its forms while dispelling danger, discord, and sickness. According to Bo, the origins of *nianhua* can be traced to ancient times, when pairs of warrior-like door deities were painted on either side of Han dynasty tomb entrances, serving the apotropaic function of protecting the site from negative influences while attracting desirable ones through the depiction of virtue and strength.²⁵ With the spread of inexpensive woodblock printing technology in the Song dynasty, these tomb guardians appeared in print form on the household doorways of the common people. As the print trade continued to flourish up to the twentieth century, different regional print centers developed a variety of prints geared towards pursuing the auspicious in the various lived spaces of the home, such as fertility prints for the bedroom or stove deity prints for the kitchen.

²⁴ Sue Tuohy, “Cultural Metaphors and Reasoning: Folklore Scholarship and Ideology in Contemporary China,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 50, no. 1 (1991): 199. Tuohy discusses “boundedness,” “continuity,” “homogeneity encompassing diversity,” as key aspects of the cultural reasoning in Chinese folklore studies to construct China as an unified cultural and historical entity with diversity. Tuohy argues that these assumptions merge in the idea of cultural heritage that is at the heart of contemporary folklore studies in China.

²⁵ Bo, *Chinese Nianhua History*, 1-7.

Wang Shucun, in his written history of Chinese *nianhua*, similarly defines *nianhua* as “a unique type of ‘traditional Chinese folk painting’ [中国民间绘画]” that encompasses all the works produced in regional printshops, “reflecting their folk customs and unique production methods.”²⁶ For Wang, *nianhua* are not limited to works related to the Lunar New Year because these regional printshops produce works for year-round use, including printed and painted pictures for “weddings, funerals, acts related to well-wishing, gift-giving, auspicious customs, ancestral worship, and theater and entertainment.” Like Bo, Wang argues that these works share a common preoccupation for attracting positive influences while repelling negative ones so that their regional and local characteristics are largely relegated to stylistic differences. In the writings of both Bo and Wang, this unifying feature serves as a powerful rationale for drawing together a wide range of works across time and space under the blanket category of *nianhua*.

The need for regional perspectives beyond *nianhua*’s stylistic differences reflects a broader problem in Sinological studies, as pointed out by historian Prasenjit Duara: “The power and impact of the centralized imperial state on Chinese historiography has been such that there have been few studies conducted of regional or provincial identity through the long history of China.”²⁷ A map of key historic printing sites across China reveals the diversity of *nianhua* across space and time (**fig. 8**). A few of the lost names subsumed under *nianhua* include the “dispelling cold pictures” 消寒图 of the Yuan era and the “pasted pictures” 画贴 or “double-nine cold dispelling poetry pictures” 九九消寒

²⁶ Wang, *Chinese Nianhua History*, 12.

²⁷ In calling for regional perspectives, however, Duara argues against any form of intrinsic or fixed identity in provincial communities and examines instead how the elite intelligentsia used provincial traditions as materials to construct and assert alternative political identities within the existing national discourses. Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1995), 179.

诗图 of the Ming era.²⁸ During the Qing period, the markets circulated Tianjin's "wei pictures" 卫画, named after the historic name for the Fort of Tianjin, or "Tianjinwei" 天津卫. Other well-known print traditions include Hangzhou's "joyful pictures" 欢乐图, Suzhou's "picture leaves" 画张, and Mianzhu's "square prints" 斗方. Each center had its own unique repertoire of works that reflected its regional history, climate, architecture, theater, and cultural make-up.²⁹ Scholars such as Wang Shucun and Bo Songnian have acknowledged these differences, but their emphasis on *nianhua* as a unified category tends to downplay the role of regional discourses as vital sources of meaning making.

While this study seeks to recuperate the regional and local histories that have shaped Mianzhu's *nianhua* industry, I do not mean to characterize the industry as a totally unique or isolated phenomenon. In comparing Mianzhu with other print centers across China, one finds many common themes and subjects tied to the seasonal round of lunar calendar festivals and major lifecycle events such as birthdays and weddings. Door deities, spring couplets, and lintel hangings, to name just a few widespread formats, are produced in virtually every *nianhua* center across China. Keeping these shared qualities in mind, this study will draw forth the regional and local aspects of Mianzhu *nianhua*, especially the vibrant ritual and oral practices that bring *nianhua* to life in the home and marketplace.

To a certain extent, the print centers in Sichuan have a unique place in Chinese printing history because they are among the oldest in China and in the world. In the Chengdu region, evidence of papermaking dates to the 3rd cent. BCE, and the earliest

²⁸ Maggie Bickford, "The Symbolic Seasonal Round in House and Palace: Counting the Auspicious Nines in Traditional China," in *House Home Family: Living and Being Chinese*, ed. Ronald Knapp and Kai-Yin Lo (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 349-372.

²⁹ Wang, *Chinese Nianhua History*, 10.

extant prints of Buddhist prayers and charms date to the Tang dynasty (618-907), when Chengdu was among the most prosperous cities in China. By the end of the tenth century, Chengdu was undoubtedly one of the most developed printing centers in China, as the Song court commissioned Chengdu's woodcarvers to print many important historical and religious compendiums, including the first edition of the *Kaibao Tripitaka* in 971, a famous set of Buddhist scriptures comprised of some 130,000 woodblocks that took ten years to cut.³⁰

Several early documents give a glimpse of the various types of printed matter that appeared in Chengdu's markets. In the preface to *Liu Family Rules*, the Tang Dynasty author Liu Bi recounts his visits to Chengdu's vibrant book markets, which were full of miscellaneous literature tied to Yin-Yang theory, geomancy, and divination.³¹ In *The Ancient and Present Records of Chengdu*, an imperial censor of the Northern Song lists the seasonal round of markets in Chengdu, including "the lantern market of the first month, the flower market of the second month, the liquor market of the tenth month, the plum market of the eleventh month, and the print market of the twelfth month."³² The term used for the print markets is *taofu shi* 桃符市, where *taofu* may refer to either the protective door deity prints or spring couplets that were annually renewed on household doorways during the Lunar New Year. The term derives from the practices of engraving and/or painting peachwood planks with auspicious phrases or the names and images of

³⁰ Endymion Porter Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 450. Other major volumes printed in Chengdu during the Song period include the *Thirteen Classics* and *Seventeen Histories*, along with many other kinds of literature. The earliest known example of printing in the world is a printed Buddhist spell in the form of a miniature scroll in Sanskrit, found in a tomb in Xian, and dated to 650-70.

³¹ Wang Shucun 王树村, *Zhongguo menshen hua* 中国门神画 [Chinese door deity pictures], (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2004), 35.

³² Cited in Hou and Liu, "Introduction to Mianzhu's Nianhua," 11.

protective door deities.³³ With the invention of printing, the peachwood planks were replaced by inexpensive paper ephemera, allowing a much larger portion of the lower classes to participate in the annual rite.

The Chengdu region underwent a period of warfare and disintegration during the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty, with Zhang Xianzhong's 张献忠 (1605-47) rebellion in the late Ming and the subsequent Manchu invasion. However, as the Qing state provided economic incentives to encourage mass migration to Sichuan, the provincial population grew dramatically from approximately 100,000 in 1685 to 3,250,000 in 1736 and to an impressive 21,400,000 recorded in the 1812 state census.³⁴ The influx of permanent settlers from Hunan, Hubei, Shaanxi, Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangxi, and other surrounding areas boosted the regional economy and brought a fresh wave of skilled artisans. By the early eighteenth century, Chengdu regained its status as a major printing center, with at least ten large publishing houses to rival the top printing centers in the nation.³⁵ While Chengdu's publishers specialized in printing books, the outlying print centers specialized in the wholesale production of paper and single sheet prints, including Mianzhu, Jiajiang 夹江, and Liangping 梁平. These centers were linked together by waterways and well-established trade routes for the export of goods to surrounding provinces (**fig. 9**).

³³ The origins of the term *taofu* appear in Han dynasty records as a legal contract between two parties who would each take one half of an engraved document. For a discussion on early *taofu* and other auspicious objects, see Tiziana Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 2001).

³⁴ Sun Xiaofen 孙晓芬, *Qingdai qianqi de yimin tian Sichuan* 清代前期的移民填四川 [The populating of Sichuan by migrants in the early Qing period], (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue, 1997), 9.

³⁵ Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-Wing Chow, eds. *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 28.

Chengdu's success as a printing stronghold over the centuries is largely due to the region's abundance of high-quality natural resources for making paper and mineral pigments. Historic records and archaeological evidence point to Mianzhu as a major supplier of fine papers to Chengdu since early times. Mianzhu's paper making industry began as early as the Eastern and Western Han period, when the site was named after the "silky bamboo" forests that supplied supple, absorbent, and highly durable bamboo fibers for paper production.³⁶ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the paper industry in Mianzhu reached a high level of development, with over one hundred large workshops producing at least nine different varieties of paper.³⁷ Mianzhu's printing industry flourished in tandem with the paper industry, as the nearby mountains provided the minerals needed for mixing brightly colored pigments.

Although rural Sichuan is often characterized as a remote and inaccessible hinterland, its various printing centers exported their goods across the nation and abroad. Mianzhu's strategic location and proximity to Chengdu afforded it a great advantage in the industry, along with its production of luxury goods such as its famous sorghum liquor, tobacco, medicinal herbs, smoked meats, tea, and raw lacquer. Located near the Min and Tuo rivers, Mianzhu's traders distributed their wares along waterways that linked up with the Yangzi river transport networks (**fig. 9**). Local records document the transport of prints, papers, and tobacco via wooden boats from the Sheshui tributary near

³⁶ Sichuan Mianzhu County Gazetteer Editing Committee 四川绵竹县志编纂委员会, *Mianzhu Gazetteer* 绵竹县志, (Mianzhu: Sichuan kexue jishu chubanshe, 1992), 27.

³⁷ Details concerning Mianzhu's early twentieth-century paper industry are based on a 1938 interview with a local paper maker named Chen Jiru 陈继儒, recorded by local official Zhou Boqun 周伯群. The details are summarized in Zhao Jiliang 赵继良, "Jiefangqian Mianzhu shangye jingji qingkuang diandi" 解放前绵竹商业经济情况点滴 [A brief discussion of Mianzhu's pre-liberation economy] in *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑第十三辑 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies vol.13], ed. Wang Peisheng 王培生 and Zhang Changlu 张昌禄, (Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1994), 51-55.

Qingdao village as well as the dissemination of paper goods via human carriers who walked to Chengdu and surrounding villages.³⁸ In an interview, Mianzhu's renowned painter and printmaker Zhang Xianfu 张先富 (1919-2000) recounted his early memories of walking with his father to distant markets every year, carrying their prints and paintings on their backs to sell in Chengdu and the surrounding temple fairs, sometimes walking as far as Yunnan province and back during the warm months.³⁹ In mid-summer, merchants from surrounding provinces also arrived in Mianzhu in large donkey caravans to trade their silver for fine paper products and other items.⁴⁰

Affectionately known as “Little Chengdu” during the late Qing period, Mianzhu's temples, teahouses, liquor shops, and print shops replicated on a smaller scale the cosmopolitan street life of the provincial capital and kept apace with its fashions, trends, and political life. Mianzhu's bustling markets and scenic walkways have been praised in “bamboo stick” poems of the nineteenth century and in a verse by the famous poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770), who praised its bamboo-lined rivers during one of his visits in the eighth century.⁴¹ These writings establish Mianzhu as an idealized pastoral getaway for Chengdu's wealthy and cultured elites.

³⁸ Zhao, “A brief discussion of Mianzhu's pre-liberation economy,” 51.

³⁹ Liu Zhumei 刘竹梅, “Re ai nianhua shiye de Zhang Xianfu” 热爱年画事业的张先富 [Zhang Xianfu's passion for the nianhua industry] in *Mianzhu nianhua ziliao xuanbian* 绵竹年画资料选编四 [Mianzhu nianhua selected research documents volume 4] (Mianzhu: Mianzhu nianhua she, 1982), 1-6.

⁴⁰ A detailed description of the annual *nianhua* trading schedules during the early twentieth century is documented in interview records put together in the 1950s by officials in Mianzhu leading the print reform activities. See Wei Chuanyi 魏传义, “Mianzhu nianhua diaocha cailiao” 绵竹年画调查材料 [Mianzhu nianhua interview records] in *Zhongguo Mianzhu nianhua* 中国绵竹年画 [China's Mianzhu nianhua], ed. Yu Jundao 于俊道 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 136-140.

⁴¹ For a comprehensive collection of bamboo stick poems written in Mianzhu during the Qing period, see Zhang Zhaoyuan 章肇源, *A selection of Mianzhu poetry* 绵竹诗颂, (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1998). For Dufu's poetic dedication to Mianzhu, see Han Chenwu 韩成武, *Shisheng: huanyou zhong de Dufu* 诗圣: 忧患中的杜甫 [The Sage-poet: Dufu's world of adversity and sorrow], (Baoding: Hebei daxue chubanshe, 2000), 134.

The evolution of Mianzhu's printing industry is thus characterized by this unique combination of being both geographically remote yet still connected to the nation's larger flows of information and goods. The reasons that have been cited for *nianhua*'s decline in the early twentieth-century primarily reflect developments near Beijing and Shanghai. For instance, the displacement of woodblock printing is often attributed to the introduction of mechanized printing technologies from the West. The rise of industrial printing during the early twentieth-century was largely centered in Shanghai, sparking a "Gutenberg revolution" that transformed the region's politics and printing industries. Historian Christopher Reed has documented in detail the dramatic rise of "print capitalism" in Shanghai, leading to the gradual displacement of traditional block printing methods that could not keep up with the speed and affordability of mechanized presses.⁴² Similarly, Leo Ou-fan Lee, Ellen J. Laing, Laikwan Pang, and others have written extensively on how Shanghai's changing print culture of the early twentieth century served as a locus of Chinese modernity, giving rise to an emergent "advertising art" and an urban visual culture that activated new modes of viewing and consumption.⁴³

At the same time, reform-minded urban intellectuals in Beijing began leading various print reform movements that further transformed the woodblock printing practices in the region to support the "Self-Strengthening Movement". The Republican leadership institutionalized these print reforms during the 1910s and 1920s as part of their

⁴² Christopher Reed, *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 8. Reed uses the term "print capitalism" to draw attention to the role of technology in a capitalist system, as it developed after the Industrial Revolution. The term also demarcates a distinct shift from craft-based handmade books and printing to the use of mechanized printing machines.

⁴³ These studies include: Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Ellen J. Laing, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2004); and Laikwan Pang, *Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2007).

broader efforts to secularize and modernize the nation. These unevenly enforced campaigns banned and confiscated certain images of popular religion, such as prints of the wealth deity, the stove deity, and various minor and demigods. Ellen Johnston Laing and James Flath have discussed in detail the reformed *nianhua* of this period, which were known as *gailiang nianhua* 改良年画. These reformed *nianhua* reflected a range of political themes, including representations of historic wars, current affairs, and the changing social status of women.⁴⁴

In the Chengdu region, Shanghai's commercially printed goods arrived long before the large mechanized presses infiltrated the region's printing industry. While Flath documents the displacement of traditional woodblock printing methods by lithography as early as 1909 in Hebei, there is no evidence that Mianzhu's printshops adopted mechanized printing until after the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁵ While Japanese incursions of the 1930s forced Shanghai's industrialized printing industry to move inland to Sichuan, records show that the new technology did not immediately replace handmade paper production and woodblock printing. In his study of Sichuan's handmade paper industry based in Jiajiang, historian Jan Eyferth has argued that traditional techniques continued to dominate because they could be easily expanded at a low cost. In addition, the industrial

⁴⁴ Flath, *Cult of Happiness*, 126-149; Ellen J. Laing, "Reform, Revolutionary, Political and Resistance Themes in Chinese Popular Prints, 1900-1940" *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 123-176.

⁴⁵ Flath's study discusses the introduction of manual or electric lithograph presses to the print shops of Yangjiabu in Hebei and Yangliuqing near Tianjin, where most of the larger workshops were using these methods by 1927; Flath, *Cult*, 20. Christopher Reed's study addresses the destruction of the printing machinery in Shanghai during the Japanese attacks of the early 1930s and the subsequent transfer of the industry inland; Reed, *Gutenberg*, 155-157.

paper mills used wood pulp from soft timber, which was more expensive and not as readily available as the native grasses and bamboo used for handmade paper.⁴⁶

The early twentieth-century print reform campaigns were also rarely implemented in Sichuan, as regional warlords fought amongst themselves and against Republican forces for control of Chengdu. In 1916, Sichuan declared independence from the Republic, immediately sparking open fighting in Chengdu. Between 1916 and 1937, there was frequent warfare and a changing of hands in the Chengdu region.⁴⁷ Coerced into survival mode, local communities formed street militias and the powerful trade guilds took over many state functions, including the settling of disputes, famine relief, and the repair of key infrastructure.⁴⁸ The chaotic upheavals of warlordism and lawlessness forced many of Mianzhu's paper and print shops to shut down, although production never completely ceased.⁴⁹

During the Japanese occupation of 1937-1945, Mianzhu's economy actually received a brief boost as large waves of migrants fled the Japanese from other parts of China to seek refuge in Sichuan, where the new wartime capital was established in

⁴⁶ According to Eyferth, in 1943, after the relocation of large paper mills to Sichuan, mechanized production accounted for less than one-quarter of Sichuan's paper output. See Jan Eyferth "Socialist Deskilling: The struggle over skills in a rural craft industry, 1949-1965," in *How China Works: perspective on the twentieth century industrial workplace*, ed. Jan Eyferth (New York: Routledge, 2006), 48.

⁴⁷ The complex power struggles occurring in Chengdu at this time are documented in Kristen Stapleton, *Civilizing Chengdu: Chinese Urban Reform, 1895-1937*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁴⁸ Feng Tiren 封体仁, "Mianzhu shanghui shihua" 绵竹商会史话 [Historical accounts of Mianzhu's trade associations], in *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao ji* 绵竹文史资料辑 14 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies vol. 14], ed. Wang Peisheng 王培生 and Zhang Changlu 张昌禄 (Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1995), 112-19.

⁴⁹ According to the elder printmakers I spoke with for this study (to be discussed in later chapters), *nianhua* production never ceased in Mianzhu although the number of shops declined dramatically in the early 20th century. Production levels reached their lowest point during the Cultural Revolution, yet even in the worst economic conditions, simple prints were made for the Lunar New Year season. The continuity of production in Mianzhu over the course of the 20th century is further confirmed by interviews conducted by print reform officials during the 1950s. A key document is: Wei Chuanyi 魏传义, "Mianzhu nianhua diaocha cailiao" 绵竹年画调查材料 [Mianzhu nianhua interview records] in *Zhongguo Mianzhu nianhua* 中国绵竹年画 [China's Mianzhu nianhua], ed. Yu Jundao 于俊道 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 136-140.

Chongqing in 1938. The collaboration between rural printmakers and intellectual elites is a phenomenon that is perhaps best documented in the woodblock print movement led by the writer Lu Xun in the 1930s, although there is no evidence that Mianzhu's printmakers were involved in wartime propaganda.⁵⁰ Upon the withdrawal of the Japanese in 1945 and the outbreak of a civil war between Nationalist and Communist forces, Mianzhu's workshops fell into decline again. When the Communist forces officially declared victory in 1949, the number of Mianzhu's surviving paper makers and printmakers had declined dramatically. According to one count, there were still eighty-four paper shops functioning in Mianzhu in 1943, a number that dropped to about thirty in 1948. There is no estimate for the number of printshops that remained open, although it is documented that roughly seventy printmaking families joined up with the Communist print reform programs that were launched in 1949.⁵¹

Contrary to the prevailing view of *nianhua*'s demise, the winter street markets in Mianzhu never ceased to take place and small quantities of auspicious prints and paintings continued to circulate during the 1950s print reforms, even during the outright ban on *nianhua*. Mianzhu's print reform officials often complained in their bureau reports that traditional *nianhua* prints continued to be produced and circulated in the community despite the reform efforts of 1950s and 1960s.⁵² This was often cited as a reason for increased efforts in "reeducation" and "training" so that local printmakers were properly equipped to make reformed prints. Photographs taken by officials in the 1960s also show

⁵⁰ For in-depth discussions of the Lu Xun woodblock print movement, see Shirley Hsiao-ling Sun, "Lu Hsun and the Chinese Woodcut Movement, 1929-1936" (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1974) and Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 11-27.

⁵¹ Zhao, "A brief discussion of Mianzhu's pre-liberation economy," 54-55.

⁵² In his 1957 report, Wei Chuanyi cited the continued production of traditional *nianhua* in Mianzhu's workshops as a sign that local printmakers lacked the ability to conceive and produced the desired forms of reformed *nianhua*. Wei Chuanyi, "Mianzhu *nianhua* interview records," 139.

traditional prints being sold alongside reformed ones (**fig. 10**). Interview accounts also point to the continuous circulation of simple mimeographs of household deities in the winter street markets throughout the years of the Cultural Revolution. This is corroborated by studies that document how a number of state-sanctioned prints were regularly appropriated for ritual use as door deities or as other household divinities during the Cultural Revolution.⁵³ In short, ritual print activities did not cease but continued to adapt to the changing conditions of life before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution.

Not long after the Cultural Revolution drew to a close in 1976, there were signs of a return to ritual industries in Sichuan. By 1978, *nianhua* were widely available in the street markets and state-led efforts were already underway to revitalize woodblock printing to launch a folk art export industry. All over Sichuan, a broad resurgence of ritual goods and services sprang forth to support lunar calendar festivals, processions, pilgrimage, geomancy, divination, temple building, ancestral worship, life-cycle rituals, and lineage rituals. Under Deng Xiaoping's programs for "reform and opening," liberal economic reforms and relaxed policies around cultural production led to the decollectivization of land and the decentralization of economic decision-making power that increased the influence of local and provincial governments.⁵⁴ It is likely that Sichuan's distance to the capital allowed these reforms to take hold sooner, as it was among the first provinces in China to begin dismantling communal farms in favor of

⁵³ Anthropologist Stefan Landesberger has studied how printed images tied to the "Mao cult" of the Cultural Revolution were ritually displayed and used in ways that combined the powers of "the many protective and auspicious deities that were traditionally revered in the household." Stefan R. Landesberger, "The Deification of Mao: Religious Imagery and Practices During the Cultural Revolution and Beyond," in *China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives*, ed. Woei Lien Chong (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 155. These issues are also discussed in Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2011): 128-148.

⁵⁴ Him Chung, *China's Rural Market Development in the Reform Era* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 35-45.

contracting land to individual households or groups of households, a process that would later take shape as the “household responsibility system.”⁵⁵ Launched on a national scale in 1981, the policy implemented a series of free-market reforms that led to a rapid growth in home-based handicrafts and the peddling of specialty goods such as *nianhua* during the seasonal festivals of the lunar calendar.

Innovating the Auspicious: Mianzhu’s Door Deity Markets

The growth of various ritual industries in China since the 1980s has attracted much scholarly attention as a litmus test for judging the extent to which traditional practices have been lost, revived, or reinvented to suit the emerging social realities. Anthropologist Helen Siu, for instance, has argued that ritual beliefs and practices at the local level were so transformed and “diluted” by the pervasive effects of state policies that they could only be understood as “cultural fragments recycled under new circumstances.”⁵⁶ Similarly, anthropologist Emily Chao uses the term “ritual bricolage” to describe a fragmented and reinvented version of tradition that arose among the Naxi people of Yunnan province.⁵⁷ On the other end of the spectrum, scholars have pointed to ritual practices that have survived the attacks on tradition during the Cultural Revolution,

⁵⁵ Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 157.

⁵⁶ Helen Siu, “Recycled Rituals: Politics and Popular Culture in Contemporary Rural China,” in *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People’s Republic*, ed. Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul Pickowicz (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 134.

⁵⁷ Emily Chao “The Maoist Shaman and the Madman: Ritual Bricolage, Failed Ritual, and Failed Ritual Theory,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 14, no.4 (1999): 504-43.

acting as sites of “cultural resistance” against state policies or even the incursions of global capitalism.⁵⁸

Recent studies have started to challenge this rather polarized view that splits the ritual revival into continuities and discontinuities, where the “traditional practices” of the present are inevitably pitted against the “singular, all-encompassing belief systems” of life before the Maoist era.⁵⁹ Anthropologist Adam Chau has warned against imposing a rigid division of past and present ritual practices that would “assume that what existed before Maoist suppression was a tradition that was more coherent and authentic.”⁶⁰ Chau goes on to emphasize how the “apparent coherence” of earlier traditions is equally a result of “invented” and “recycled” practices:

The ‘feudal tradition’ that came to be suppressed or destroyed during the anti-traditionalist campaigns during the Maoist period and reinvented in what appears to be a piecemeal or haphazard manner in the reform era is a complex, dynamic, ever-changing cluster of institutions, practitioners, and consumers, knowledge and practices fully amenable to innovations, inventions, and reinventions all the time...It can also endure suppressions, lie dormant for a long time, go underground, minimalize, and reemerge in new forms in response to new historical conditions.⁶¹

Chau’s research begins to move away from a notion of revival that reifies this past/present divide, and towards the concepts of “revitalization” and “innovation” as a

⁵⁸ Influential studies on this issue of rural resistance, resilience, and agency in the post-Mao era include Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, “Putting Global Capitalism in Its Place: Economic Hybridity, Bataille, and Ritual Expenditure,” *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (August/Oct 2000) and Edward Friedman, Paul Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Resistance, Resistance, and Reform in Village China* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 6.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

way of reframing the discussion. I will build on Chau's approach to argue that the contemporary *nianhua* industry is not simply a recuperation of a lost art, which is often suggested by the notion of "revival." Instead, notions of revitalization or resurgence are more adequate here in acknowledging the evolving forms of *nianhua* production and consumption. Mianzhu's *nianhua*-producing families produced a diversity of works during the print reforms of the 1950s and up until the Cultural Revolution, when the industry went through a dormant phase. A handful of elder painters and printmakers returned to work in the early 1980s, with at least seven families reasserting their place within multi-generational lineages of printmakers. Three of these lineage-holding workshops are active today, with many new workshops and self-fashioned "folk artists" emerging on the scene. The ritual practices tied to *nianhua* consumption have also continued to adapt and change according to the conditions of everyday life and livelihood.

In emphasizing Mianzhu's living *nianhua* practices, I do not mean to suggest that the practices have survived intact and unchanged by the many profound effects of the state-led print reforms and the Cultural Revolution. It is undeniable that all aspects of *nianhua* production and consumption in the region were transformed by the prolonged periods of upheaval. The goal here is to acknowledge innovation and adaptation as an inherent aspect of the *nianhua* industry. It is certainly possible to examine the evolution of *nianhua* practices in people's daily life without declaring its total demise at the hands of state circumscription. In reviewing the historic development of Mianzhu's early print trade, it is also evident that the industry was never isolated from the official and elite realms although scholars have characterized it as a rural folk tradition. Mianzhu's early print trade challenges the idealized image of naive rural artisans working in remote

isolation, as it was always profoundly shaped by the dialectical interactions of the rural/urban and official/nonofficial realms.

Mianzhu's urban printmakers were often educated elites who jostled for influence in the region and formed powerful trade guilds, including a printers' guild known as the Fuxi Association 伏羲会, named after the guild's patron deity Fuxi, a mythical emperor credited for creating fishing, trapping, and writing.⁶² The guild regulated all aspects of production, pricing, and trading, and convened regularly in the center of town, where they built a meeting hall with a shrine to Fuxi at the Nanhua Palace 南华宫.⁶³ In addition to producing ritually efficacious works, these guilds actively competed for auspicious sites such as temples and shrines to hold their markets and banquets. They also claimed propitious dates of the traditional calendar to conduct their business and hired theater troupes to perform at their gatherings. The practice of adopting a patron deity further enhanced the unified identity and prestige of the print guild. These guilds were active up to the mid-twentieth century and competed with those from Jiajiang and Liangping, print centers that adopted their own patron deities. These activities speak to a strong preoccupation with harnessing auspicious time and space as powerful sources of symbolic capital to support livelihood and trade.

Mianzhu's historic print trade produced three main categories of prints, including door deities (*menshen* 门神), square prints (*doufang* 斗方), and picture strips (*huatiao* 画

⁶² As early as the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1050-221 BCE), Fuxi appears as an archetypal figure in the myths of ancient sage kings. In these early writings, his reign is dated to the 3rd millennium BCE and he is credited with establishing kingship and inventing many forms of human technology, including the calendar, the fishing net, and written language. During the Han period (206 BCE -220 CE), Fuxi is often depicted with a carpenter's square and his female counterpart, the goddess Nüwa 女娲. For an account of Fuxi's early mythology, see: Mark E. Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 197-209.

⁶³ Hou and Liu, "Introduction to Mianzhu's Nianhua," 11-17.

条). The door deities were by far produced in the largest quantities and in the greatest variety. As a result, the local print trade was referred to as the “door deity trade” 门神帮 and the winter print markets were widely known “door deity markets” 门神市, although a variety of prints were sold there. At its height in the late Qing period, an estimated 300 print shops were based in Mianzhu, producing an estimated twelve million prints a year, of which ten million were door deity prints. These were distributed for domestic consumption as well as export to Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Guizhou, Hubei, and abroad to Burma, India, Hong Kong, Macau, Vietnam, and the countries of Southeast Asia.⁶⁴

As the most popular category of prints, Mianzhu’s door deities were sold as single sheets or in pairs, for display on either single leaf or double leaf doors. They came in three standardized sizes designed for different sized doors, designated as “large format” 大毛, “medium format” 二毛, and “small format” 三毛. Larger works adorned the exterior doorways of a home while smaller ones were reserved for the interior doors of the living room, kitchen, pantry, or bedroom. A wide range of figures appeared as protective door deities, with martial warrior types guarding the outer gates of a home and civil figures, such as scholar-officials or baby boys, protecting the doors to interior spaces (**fig. 11**). Individual workshops would develop their own repertoires of door deity prints and the large print guilds were known to encourage innovation by holding banquets every year to critique the emerging designs.

The second most popular category was the square prints, which were printed on the smallest format papers. These depicted a wide range of auspicious images for ritual

⁶⁴ Gao Wen 高文, Hou Shiwu 侯世武, and Ning Zhiqi 宁志奇, *Mianzhu Nianhua* 绵竹年画 [Mianzhu new year pictures] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990), 3-8.

display, including a host of minor deities, beautiful maidens, and theatrical scenes geared towards activating specific spaces in the home. For instance, fertility deities were displayed in bedrooms while protective cat deities guarded the pantry from hungry rodents (**fig. 12**).

The third and smallest category was printed scrolls, collectively known as picture strips. While the door deities and square prints were designed as ephemeral and inexpensive works for annual renewal during the Lunar New Year, the picture strips were more expensive, labor-intensive works designed for permanent display in interior spaces. They came in both vertical and horizontal formats and often depicted popular deities for display above altars. They also depict action-packed scenes from mythology, history, and theater, as well as genre painting themes such as scenes of everyday life, street processions, or festivals. For instance, a late 19th century example of a picture strip from Mianzhu depicts a scene from *Journey to the West* 西游记, the famous vernacular novel and drama from the Ming dynasty (**fig. 13**).

Mianzhu's workshops sold all of these works in the periodic door deity markets, which also included other types of ephemera such as spring couplets and lintel hangings. Spring couplets were produced by both amateur and professional calligraphers who inscribed auspicious phrases on two vertical strips of paper to be displayed around doorways and flanking the images of door deities. Paper cut artisans sold auspicious lintel hangings, usually a string of five red paper-cut money designs to be hung from door lintels.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Jiang Jingchen 姜敬沉, "Jiefang qian Mianzhu chengguan gehangye shichang de fenbu gaikuang" 解放前绵竹城关各行业市场的分布概况 [Overview of Mianzhu's pre-liberation urban industries], in *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao ji* 绵竹文史资料辑 14 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies vol. 14], ed. Wang Peisheng

The competitive environment of the industry shaped Mianzhu's unique carving, printing, and painting methods, which were often guarded as precious trade secrets passed down within a family line of printmakers. In the standard workflow procedure, a print designer is responsible for composing and painting the original design of the print. The print designer must be highly trained in brushwork and knowledgeable in the use of iconography for a variety of ritual images. They are often educated individuals who paint for a living all year-round, producing original print designs, scroll paintings, temple murals, and painted coffins, fans, and screens. Once the print design is finalized, it is passed to a carver, who recreates the lines of the drawing in a block of hard pear or cherry wood by removing the negative spaces of the design. This labor-intensive phase requires great precision to ensure smooth and fluid lines, capable of withstanding multiple printings (**fig. 14**). Once the block is carved, the printer brushes the block evenly with black ink and presses the paper against the block to produce a monochrome outline of the image (**fig.15**). Finally, the printed outline is passed to a team of painters who apply colors, facial features, and finishing details by hand (**fig. 16**). In a technique known as “flower stamping” 印花, the painters also use many small stamps that are usually coated in gold or silver leaf and stamped on the painted print as a finishing touch (**fig. 17**).

Mianzhu's print shops ranged in size from large, year-round print factories that employed skilled laborers in every aspect of print production, to small household cottage industries that only worked on a seasonal basis. The print industry followed a rigorous schedule punctuated by a seasonal round of periodic markets and temple fairs that rotated

王培生 and Zhang Changlu 张昌禄 (Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1995): 120-134.

through Chengdu and the surrounding villages and townships. The winter off-season of agricultural labor marked the high season of the print trade, when large quantities of prints were in demand for the Lunar New Year festival, when virtually every household took down the prints from the year past and posted new ones. At this time, the farming community turned to the production of prints as a vital form of additional livelihood. Rural households would often purchase original designs from a designer working in the urban center then reproduce the print in their home workshops. If there were not enough skilled family members, the household could bring in hired hands to complete the work in time for the winter print markets.

In contrast to print centers that use multiple-block printing, Mianzhu's printmakers apply all the colors and details by hand, primarily with brushwork but also with small patterned stamps and the application of gold leaf. Although the prints are mass-produced, they bear the subtle variations of this final stage of production. The technique of multiple-blocks is certainly not unknown to Mianzhu's printmakers, since nearby centers use the technique. Hand-finishing appears to be a conscious marketing decision that was most likely regulated by the local print guilds. Bo Songnian has commented on the unique emphasis on brushwork found in Mianzhu's prints, which he traces to the painting traditions brought by the traveling court painters who arrived in large numbers during the Tang dynasty (618-907), when the An Lushan and Huang Chao rebellions forced the Tang court to flee to Chengdu. Chengdu became an active painting center that continued to flourish throughout the Song dynasty (960-1279), laying an important foundation for the development of popular painting and printing in the

region.⁶⁶ Bo's study provides only a few examples from over the centuries to support this claim, yet it is certainly an area that warrants greater research.

Today, Mianzhu's printmakers continue to exploit brushwork as a way of developing a competitive edge in the marketplace. This includes the use of "mandarin duck brushwork" 鸳鸯笔 where a brush is loaded with just enough moisture at the base and color at the tip to produce alternating shades of light and dark when pressure is applied.⁶⁷ Another characteristic technique is known as "bright displays" 明展明挂, which involves the use of white pigment to outline major brush strokes, making them pop out of the picture plane with high contrast. These lines are often thickly applied and physically raised off the surface of the paper, creating a custom embossed feel to the print (fig. 18). These approaches and many others have continued to evolve, and they distinguish Mianzhu's prints from those of other print centers.

The winter print markets never ceased to take place in Mianzhu and are still timed with the rhythms of the lunar calendar. As in the past, the greatest number of prints circulating in these markets are door deities, spring couplets, and lintel hangings, ephemeral works that come into large demand during the Lunar New Year when families renew these works on the exterior of their household doors. However, the handmade works are now far outnumbered by the flood of digitally printed *nianhua* entering these markets. The widespread circulation of inexpensive ephemera, both digitally printed and handmade, has catalyzed the rapid recovery of the *nianhua* industry in the region.

⁶⁶ Bo Songnian 薄松年, "Fuyou xianming difang tese de Mianzhu nianhua 富有鲜明地方特色的绵竹年画 [Mianzhu nianhua with strong local characteristics]," in *Mianzhu nianhua jingpin ji* 绵竹年画精品集 [Selected works of Mianzhu nianhua], ed. Hou Rong 侯荣 (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2005), 18-23.

⁶⁷ The vivid reference to mandarin ducks may call up the contrast of their light and dark feathers and/or their fluid movements through water.

Local and provincial officials also began taking actions in the early 1980s to launch a folk art export industry based on the historic *nianhua* held in Mianzhu's Cultural Affairs Bureau and Cultural Relics Bureau. These works quickly attained a high profile as the privileged representatives of traditional Mianzhu *nianhua*. During the Cultural Revolution, two directors at the Cultural Affairs Bureau secretly hid some 200 historical works that are roughly dated to the 18th and 19th centuries. First collected in 1960 by state researchers Shi Weian 史维安 and Fu Wenshu 傅文淑, the works are poorly documented and difficult to date although they are now considered the most complete and high-quality set of historic Mianzhu *nianhua*.⁶⁸ From 1978 to 1984, the works were exhibited as folk art treasures in a series of touring exhibitions designed to market *nianhua* as a folk art export commodity.⁶⁹ In the 1990s, the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum was built with state funds to house the expanding state *nianhua* collection and to attract tourists to Mianzhu (**fig. 19**). This folk art tourism grew, and in the early 2000s, state funds were used to build an entire Nianhua Village with large painted murals of historic *nianhua* adorning shops, restaurants, and residential neighborhoods (**fig. 20**). In contrast to the seasonal markets that sold *nianhua* as inexpensive ritual ephemera, this state-led folk art industry circulated *nianhua* as permanent collector's items, souvenirs, and replicas.

The few scholarly writings addressing the recent rise of the *nianhua* industry have taken a rather negative stance on these developments, especially with regard to the introduction of digitally printed works. In a recent essay, Bo Songnian announced the

⁶⁸ These clandestine activities are documented in a published interview with Hou Shiwu 侯世武, the former director of Mianzhu's Cultural Affairs in Shen Hong 沈泓, *Mianzhu nianhua zhi lü* 绵竹年画之旅 [Touring Mianzhu nianhua] (Beijing: Zhongguo huabao chubanshe, 2006), 64-70.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the early 1980s touring exhibitions of Mianzhu *nianhua* and the filming of the feature documentary, *Curiosities of Sichuan* 四川奇趣录, see Pan Peide 潘培德, "Sichuan Mianzhu nianhua huigu u u zhanwang" 四川绵竹年画的回顾与展望 [Reflections on Mianzhu nianhua's past and future], *Meishu Tongxun* 美术通讯 2 (1990): 12-14.

failure of official programs to revive traditional *nianhua* industry since the early 1980s.⁷⁰

According to Bo, poorly implemented revival programs and the low quality of digitally printed works made on commercial presses have damaged *nianhua*'s reputation as a viable art form. Bo concludes that despite the many efforts to revive the industry, *nianhua* has somehow failed to "keep up with the times." Recounting his visit to Mianzhu in the mid-1990s, art historian Lu Shengzong 吕胜中 also lamented the widespread display of "vulgar" digitally printed *nianhua* on household walls and called for renewed efforts to salvage whatever was left of traditional woodblock prints, which he claimed could only still be seen in rural areas and in the homes of the elderly.⁷¹

The problem with these assessments is that they impose a set of aesthetic standards established by folk art discourses that align "tradition" with the specific production methods and print designs found in historic *nianhua* archives. In doing so, they dismiss the evolving forms of ritual print consumption that form a vital part of *nianhua* tradition, including its ties to a broader array of ritual industries harmonized with the lunar calendar. The digitally printed *nianhua* may appear vulgar to an urban scholar, but that does not reveal much about the shifting perceptions, tastes, and needs of those who actually buy and use *nianhua* in their lived spaces. Since much of the existing scholarship has been focused on issues of production and representation in the *nianhua* archive, the issue of *nianhua* consumption is an area that requires more critical inquiry, especially for those inexpensive and ephemeral works that never make it into an archive.

⁷⁰ Bo Songnian, "The Rise, Fall, Preservation, and Loss of Nianhua Art," 8-10.

⁷¹ Lu Shengzong 吕胜中, "Hometown of Chinese New Year Pictures? A Museum? A Book?" in *Mianzhu Nianhua jingpin ji* 绵竹年画精品集 [Selected works of Mianzhu nianhua], ed. Hou Rong 侯荣 (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2005), 24-34.

The few studies that have addressed *nianhua* consumption focus primarily on the role of *nianhua* in domestic rituals of the rural household. For instance, one of the only studies to examine contemporary *nianhua* as they appear in their lived environments is a study on Chinese vernacular architecture by cultural geographer Ronald Knapp. He argues that the auspicious significance of *nianhua* can be understood as part of the “social template” of the dwelling, where building practices, spatial arrangements, and the strategic placement of ritual objects continually shape the social relations within the home.⁷² As such, *nianhua* play a role in upholding a Confucian worldview based on “harmonious hierarchy,” where the display of images and objects directly shapes the relations “between parents and children, men and women within the living family, those between dead forebears and their living descendants; and those between the family unit and the world beyond the dwelling’s wall.”⁷³ For instance, door deities and spring couplets mark out the social significance of the household doorway as a vulnerable boundary between the inner sanctum of the family and the potentially dangerous elements of the street. These works deter negative influences from entering the home while serving as catalysts for auspicious or felicitous speech between family members and visitors.

In a short essay, art historian Ellen J. Laing describes a similar “persistence of propriety” in urban apartments of the 1980s, where certain nineteenth-century practices of arranging auspicious objects within the home continued to shape the domestic spaces, including “the strict rows of furniture, the centralized symmetrical arrangement of the centerpiece paintings along with their proper subject matter and representational style, and the brightly colored, auspicious New Year’s pictures.” These visual displays point to

⁷² Ronald Knapp, *China's Living Houses: Symbols and Household Ornamentation*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), 1999, 7-14.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 11.

the survival of certain moral values as maintained through “what is considered appropriate and correct in the house and its decoration.”⁷⁴ Laing also addresses how these practices adapted to the changing conditions of life in the 1990s, including the new limitations in space found in apartment buildings and the growing variety of old and new images available in the marketplace.

These studies provide strong evidence for the resurgence of ritual print activities in peoples’ everyday lives after the Cultural Revolution, in both rural and urban areas. However, the danger in examining the role of *nianhua* within domestic spaces is that the home is constructed as an insular or impenetrable space, where certain traditional activities are safely preserved against the profound social upheavals and events happening beyond its walls. The domestic realm of the rural household has long been characterized by folk stereotypes, as an idealized haven for time-honored values and practices or as a site of cultural backwardness trapped in the past. In either case, the domestic sphere is constructed as static and resistant to outside influences, a powerful foil to the space of the marketplace, which is often imagined as the dynamic site of exchange.

This study argues for the need to examine the *flows* of ideas, goods, and practices that actually connect and blur the boundaries between home and marketplace, especially to acknowledge the evolving nature of *nianhua* in contemporary China. In a recent book-length study on the contemporary pasted-paper sculpture industry of Taiwan, co-authors Ellen J. Laing and Helen Hui-ling Liu provide a useful model for examining the

⁷⁴ Ellen J. Laing, “Persistence of Propriety in the 1980s” in *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People’s Republic*, ed. Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul Pickowicz (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 160.

interconnected circuits of supply and demand that shape a ritual industry.⁷⁵ Laing and Liu draw important connections between the evolving materials, methods, and designs produced in the paper sculpture workshops and the changing funerary practices of burning of paper goods as offerings to the deceased. The authors point to the paper sculpture industry's quick response to the growing demand for new types of paper goods that reflect contemporary life, where "air conditioners replace electric fans, which replaced handheld fans; thus for his modern clients, the modern craftsman no longer makes paper handheld fans or electric fans, but paper air conditioners."⁷⁶ Although industrially mass-produced items are gradually replacing handmade sculptures in Taiwan, this actually coincides with the growth rather than the decline of ritualized funerary practices. In documenting these changes, the study concludes, "the making of paper sculpture will survive by adapting and incorporating new elements and serving new needs as it has historically done."⁷⁷ The trends studied here parallel the developments in Mianzhu's *nianhua* industry, with new works emerging in the marketplace every year.

***Nianhua* as a Living Archive?**

The great diversity of painted, printed, and industrially mass-produced works that now fall under the rubric of *nianhua* call for a rethinking of the term, which has long been synonymous with the historic woodblock prints preserved in *nianhua* archives. I will thus propose using an alternate lens that conceives of *nianhua* as a "living archive," a concept that underscores both the changing nature of the works themselves and how they

⁷⁵ Ellen J. Laing and Helen Hui-ling Liu, *Up in Flames: The Ephemeral Art of Pasted-Paper Sculpture in Taiwan*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁷⁶ Ibid., 165.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 167.

are embedded within a range of practices geared towards “pursuing the auspicious, repelling the portentous.” The notion of a living archive underscores the inseparable relationships between objects and practices, and seeks to acknowledge the different ways in which *nianhua* are presented as ritual ephemera, folk art, national heritage, kitsch, or tourist souvenir. Instead of privileging one discourse over the other, the idea is to recast *nianhua* as a contested terrain that involves an ongoing negotiation of meaning.

In recasting *nianhua* as a living archive, I will argue that meaning is not only represented but also *presented* in different modes of production and consumption. I will draw on the work of cultural theorist Diana Taylor, who has argued for the urgent need to reconceptualize the relationship of “the archive and the repertoire.” While the archive is valued as the tangible evidence of knowledge, it is often constructed as a stable and unchanging collection of documents and objects. In contrast, the repertoire is often “banished to the past” because it refers to embodied activities, the “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”⁷⁸ Taylor challenges the privileging of the archive at the expense of the repertoire by pointing to the continual interactions between the two. For Taylor, this requires new methodological strategies that acknowledge the value of the repertoire without simply reducing it to the archive:

Instead of focusing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might think about them as scenarios that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description. This shift necessarily alters what academic disciplines regard as appropriate canons, and might extend the

⁷⁸ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 20.

traditional disciplinary boundaries to include practices previously outside the purview.⁷⁹

Along similar lines, the critical interventions advanced by visual culture scholars over the past twenty years have reshaped the field of art history by challenging the perceived authority and stability of the material archive. Launched as an interdisciplinary movement or “de-disciplinary exercise,” visual culture scholars have been questioning art history’s role in shaping and disseminating artistic canons by imposing Eurocentric standards of value on diverse forms of cultural production around the world.⁸⁰ Visual culture theory has substantially reshaped the field of art history, as many visual culture scholars and art historians alike have shifted away from formal, object-oriented methodologies and towards a critical analysis of visibility itself. Situated firmly in postmodern scholarship and its debates around the “death of the author,” visual culture writings have drawn attention to the circulation and consumption of cultural products as critical sites of meaning-making, where visibility may be shaped by diverse “practices of looking” or “scopic regimes.”⁸¹ According to art historian Deborah Cherry, the significant implications for the field are that:

Visual culture questions art history’s conventional procedures, its connoisseurship and enthusiasm for “a good eye,” offering instead “an understanding of embodied knowledge, of disputed meanings, of the formation of scholastic discourses of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁰ In his seminal writings on the study of visual culture, Nicolas Mirzeoff sets forth its aims to move beyond academic disciplines as a “postdisciplinary” endeavor and “fluid interpretive structure” that is “centred on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups.” Nicolas Mirzeoff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 4.

⁸¹ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 1-10.

material value, of viewing subject positions within culture, and of the role of vision in the formation of structures of desire.⁸²

A key point of tension I wish to explore here is the uneasy relationship between object and practice that arises in these discussions, especially in terms of the disciplinary divides that shape modern scholarship. Chinese *nianhua* have been examined in different fields of study, especially anthropology and art history, with each discipline bringing a different contribution and focal point. While scholars in anthropology tend to privilege the role of human activities as the site of agency and knowledge formation, *nianhua* are often passively situated as the facilitating objects of popular religion or ritual practices. On the other hand, the art historical approach has focused on decoding and objectifying *nianhua* as a visual or historical text, with less attention given to its broad repertoires of ritual activity. In short, these disciplinary divides still reflect what Taylor has identified as the seemingly unsurmountable boundary between the archive and the repertoire.

In recent years however, the disciplines of anthropology and art history both reflect the growing influence of post-structuralist approaches and a “performative turn” that moves away from “ritual systems” or “sign systems” to address the active and agentive dimensions of both ritual practices *and* objects. The performative view of ritual practice has been set forth in the theoretical and anthropological writings of Pierre Bourdieu, Talal Asad, and Catherine Bell. Notably, Talal Asad has historicized the concept of “ritual” in nineteenth-century European scholarship, when early anthropologists approached ritual as a symbolic activity to be decoded for meaning. For Asad, this modern definition of ritual should not be taken for granted as a universal

⁸² Irit Rogoff cited in Deborah Cherry, *Art History: Visual: Culture*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 4.

framework but as a cultural construct that reflects Western assumptions about the self and state. Building on the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, Asad argued against “reading symbols” in ritual behavior and towards a performative view of ritual practice as forms of direct action: “Ritual is therefore directed at the apt performance of what is prescribed, something that depends on intellectual and practical disciplines but does not itself require decoding.”⁸³ Thus, Asad’s approach redirects attention from abstracted values or beliefs towards embodied actions aimed at producing a desired *result*.

In response to Asad’s argument, Catherine Bell contends that ritual practices should be differentiated from other practices by processes of ritualization, which she defines as “a way of acting that distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does; moreover, it makes this distinction for specific purposes.”⁸⁴ In staking out the key methodological implications of such a definition, Bell argued that a practice-oriented approach to ritual should address “how a particular community or culture ritualizes” and “when and why ritualization is deemed the effective thing to do.”⁸⁵ Significantly, Bell’s model stresses an inclusive view of ritual in its lived contexts, as reflecting “the full spectrum of ways of acting within any given culture, not as some a priori category of action totally independent of other forms of action.”⁸⁶ An understanding of how and why people choose to ritualize certain activities requires an acknowledgment of the field of options that are available in the first place. Instead of approaching rituals as “clear and autonomous rites,” Bell points to a more dynamic

⁸³ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 62.

⁸⁴ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

conception of ritual activity as unfolding processes, as “methods, traditions and strategies of ‘ritualization.’”⁸⁷

Recent studies in Chinese popular religion have also taken up this performative view of ritual practice, including Adam Chau’s study of contemporary popular religion in Shaanbei. Chau argues for a “person-centered” approach that focuses on what he calls “doing popular religion,” a phrase that captures the active and conscious dimension of religious practices. Moving away from the “anthropological search for meanings behind symbols and symbolic behavior,” Chau engages in “a search for the cultural basis (cultural logic) of social intercourse and cultural performance.”⁸⁸ In doing so, Chau critiques the many tensions between ideas and practices as they are played out in social life. Similarly, in a study that addresses the inexpensive prints of the stove deity 灶神, popular religion scholar Richard Chard reveals the discrepancies between the actual practices of the stove deity cult and the written scriptures that contain ritual instructions for worshipping the deity. In particular, the widespread practice of making offerings to the image and renewing it during the Lunar New Year period is not mentioned in the majority of the written texts.⁸⁹ Chard’s study is a powerful reminder that the repertoire of embodied practices can often push for a rethinking or reinterpretation of the archive.

With a renewed focus on human agency and diversity in ritual practices however, these studies tend to downplay or gloss over the specific features and powerful roles of efficacious sites/objects in activating ritual practices just as they are being shaped by them. At the other end of the spectrum, a debate has been launched between

⁸⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁸⁸ Chau, *Miraculous Response*, 126.

⁸⁹ Richard Chard, “Rituals and Scriptures of the Stove Cult,” in *Rituals and Scriptures in Chinese Popular Religion*, ed. David Johnson (Berkeley: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995), 3-54.

anthropologists and art historians concerning “object agency,” a notion that foregrounds the active and performative role of objects in shaping social relations.⁹⁰ An influential theory of object agency was set forth in 1998 by anthropologist Alfred Gell, who challenged Saussure’s linguistic models that treat cultural objects as “sign-vehicles,” or “texts” to be decoded for meaning.⁹¹ Rejecting aesthetic analysis, Gell states: “In place of symbolic communication, I place all the emphasis on agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation. I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.”⁹² Further, Gell rejects the notion of art as a distinctly separate “visual” language and argues for an analysis of “‘things’ as social agents” with the capacity to initiate causal events. This action-oriented interpretation of objects displaces the privileged position of the visual and sets the stage for examining the different “states of mind” or “intentions” an object may facilitate in certain social settings.

Art historians and visual culture scholars have responded to Gell’s approach with varied critiques. In a recent volume, Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner have been quick to point out that other scholars have already addressed the issues raised by Gell, if only not in the language of anthropology.⁹³ The authors cite Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal as scholars working in the realm of art history and visual culture studies who do not adopt the same analogies of art and language used by structuralist anthropologists. They point to Bryson’s bold challenges to the uncritical adaptation of the “Saussurean sign” for art historical interpretation, which leaves the scholar in danger of “a perspective in which the

⁹⁰ Janet Hoskins, “Agency, Biography, and Objects,” in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Tilley et al. (London Sage, 2006: 74-84); Robert Layton, “Art and Agency: A Reassessment,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9, no. 3 (2003); Maruska Svasek, *Anthropology, Art, and Cultural Production* (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007).

⁹¹ Alfred, Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹³ Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner, introduction to *Arts Agency and Art History*, ed. Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 1-27.

meaning of the sign is defined entirely by formal means, as the product of oppositions among signs within an enclosed system.”⁹⁴ Like Gell, Bryson is concerned with situating the work within its immediate social domain and on its own terms: “having relocated painting within the social domain, inherently and not only as a result of the instrumental placing there by some other agency, it becomes possible to think of the image as discursive work which returns into society.”⁹⁵

Osborne and Tanner also note that despite his critical stance towards symbolic analysis, Gell is not completely distanced from issues of aesthetics and symbolic communication in his supporting case studies. For instance, they point to his analysis of apotropaic patterns, such as Celtic knotwork and labyrinths, which lend themselves to protecting thresholds, buildings, or bodies by virtue of their cognitive indecipherability or “enchanting” technologies. Gell describes how these complex patterns are used to attract demons, who in their fascination, ending up getting “stuck” like insects on a sticky surface and thus diverted from acts of malevolence. Osborne and Tanner critique this as an ahistorical and universalist understanding of cognitive processes. They argue that Gell’s alternative to symbolic analysis is to replace it with “some kind of transcendental aesthetics” or a “universal perceptual-cognitive basis for visual response” that explains the ability of certain objects to mediate agency.⁹⁶

Historians of Chinese art appear divided on the issue, with some scholars defending aesthetic and symbolic analysis and others adopting certain aspects of Gell’s theory of object agency. Art historian Jessica Rawson, for instance, has critiqued Gell for

⁹⁴ Norman Bryson quoted in Osborne and Tanner, *Arts Agency*, 5 (from Bryson’s *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Osborne and Tanner, *Arts Agency*, 7.

failing to acknowledge how different cultures might variously construct the notion of agency as it relates to objects, reflecting different values, beliefs, and worldviews. In her study of ritual portraits made for the Chinese court under the Ming emperor Shenzong (1573-1620), Rawson maintains that the ritual power of these imperial objects exists in multiple social spheres, including the relationship between the emperor and his court, and between the emperor and the spirit realm. While arguing for a more nuanced view of agency in these different social spheres, Rawson defends the use of aesthetic and symbolic analysis as strategies that can be situated and qualified within a cultural context: “what is missing in Gell’s approach is an understanding that systems of symbols or iconography, and even traditional methods of painting and carving, are not isolated systems. They are integrated with, and are maintained in use by, complex and, usually unquestioned, quite other systems of both practice and belief.”⁹⁷

In defending the structuralist models that situate Chinese art within shared systems of belief and iconography, Rawson’s approach reifies the assumption that meaning can be fixed in the objects themselves. More critically, it is an approach that places the focus on the *representation* of auspicious meaning rather than its multivalent modes of meaning in *presentation*. Other scholars have used the debate around object agency to raise new questions and issues concerning the study of Chinese art. Art historian Craig Clunas, who has criticized approaches that focus solely on aesthetic or symbolic issues in Chinese art, begins his study of the “visual and material cultures” of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) with a chapter on “Time, Space, and Agency in Ming

⁹⁷ Jessica Rawson, “The Agency of, and the Agency for, the Wanli Emperor,” in *Arts Agency and Art History*, ed. Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 111.

China.”⁹⁸ Moving away from issues of symbolic representation and towards issues of circulation and use, Clunas examines how the timed circulation of many commodities reinforced imperial time, seasonal time or family time.

In revealing how different notions of time, history, and space could be “handled and seen” in everyday objects, Clunas situates his discussion of object agency within their spatio-temporal contexts of circulation and consumption.⁹⁹ This may include coins and bowls marked with reign dates that move through different social spheres to enforce imperial time or auspicious paintings designed for seasonal display during lunar calendar festivals. In doing so, Clunas stresses the need to keep in mind both the “visual” and “material” aspects of Ming culture, a strategic move to challenge “a too easy acceptance of a material past and visual contemporary.”¹⁰⁰ In keeping these two “unstable and perhaps ultimately unsatisfactory categories” in the foreground, Clunas’ research maintains a critical edge at the interdisciplinary intersection of art history and material culture studies without reducing all forms of cultural production to the visual and aesthetic domains.

Clunas’ study brings an important interdisciplinary perspective to the study of Chinese art history that maps a way forward for addressing the archive and the repertoire without privileging one over the other. In a separate study on the Ming dynasty painter Wen Zhengming, Clunas explicitly states his commitment to this task:

I am writing from a conviction that the relations between agents, relations in which the work is embedded, illuminate the object, but that equally the object enacts those social relations. In this dialectical engagement neither enjoys

⁹⁸ Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 21-52.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 14.

unquestioned primacy. This is Appadurai's point that *methodologically* we must pay close attention to the social life of the actual individual object, even as we accept that its multiple meanings are not inherent from the time of creation but are reinscribed on it by its movement through time and between social actors.¹⁰¹

Taking a cue from Clunas, my study advances the notion of a living archive to emphasize the dialectical engagement between objects and the social practices in which they are embedded. Many objects are *only* recognizable as *nianhua* through their specific modes of display and use. This includes everyday objects, ads, and posters that are regularly appropriated for ritual use as *nianhua* as well as the state collections of *nianhua* that continually adopt new prints and paintings under the category of *nianhua*. A living archive therefore draws attention to the repertoire of practices that continually shape our understanding of *nianhua*. In taking this view, it is possible to critique *nianhua* as an unstable category shaped by competing discourses instead of imposing a single disciplinary lens such as “folk art,” “popular religion,” or “visual culture.”

The notion of a living archive comes with its own risks however. As an open-ended and highly suggestive term, it may be argued that virtually any form of cultural production may be understood as a living archive. What then sets *nianhua* apart from other forms of printing or painting? Why is it critically necessary to examine *nianhua* in particular, as a living archive? In this study, I am not only deploying this term to avoid the use of disciplinary lenses and fixed definitions. I will argue that the notion of a living archive actually allows for a more nuanced understanding of two defining features that set *nianhua* apart from other media. The first is *nianhua*'s attributed power to “pursue the

¹⁰¹ Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 13.

auspicious, repel the portentous,” a unifying feature that sets *nianhua* apart from many other forms of printing and painting. As mentioned earlier, this concept has largely been studied in terms of visual representation rather than in terms of presentation, circulation, and ritual use. As a living archive, I will argue that *nianhua*’s auspicious or portentous associations are no longer limited to the picture plane; they can be analyzed in time and space.

A second important characteristic of *nianhua* is its widespread status as an ephemeral ritual object. Since existing studies have focused primarily on decoding the visual symbolism of *nianhua*, the central issue of its ephemerality has largely gone untheorized. The notion of a living archive draws attention back to this critical aspect of *nianhua* production and use, which is intimately linked to the seasonal cycles of the lunar calendar and periodic rites of renewal that activate the auspicious power of *nianhua* through proper timing and placement in the home or business. The social significance of *nianhua* is therefore inseparable from their cyclic movement through time and space, as highly transitory entities rather than stable objects.

The notion of a living archive therefore serves as an important departure point for delving into that which makes *nianhua* a unique realm of cultural activity in contemporary China. In addition to this, I am underscoring this concept in direct response to specific developments in the folk art revival movement that has spread across China and gained momentum since the early 1980s. As this study will show, the increasing involvement of state agencies in collecting, exhibiting, and commodifying *nianhua* has played a powerful role in relegating *nianhua* to a remote and rural past. In rethinking *nianhua* as a living entity, as an archive without walls, the goal is to critique these state-

led revival activities and to reveal *nianhua*'s continued resistance to being kept under "house arrest," to borrow from Jacques Derrida's description of the modern archive.¹⁰² I will argue that these issues carry high stakes for Mianzhu's growing *nianhua* industry and all those who depend on it for a living.

Performing Engaged Research

To tackle these issues, the chapters that follow draw heavily from firsthand observations and interview sessions with Mianzhu's *nianhua* makers and users. The field research for this project was carried out during the summer months of 2006 and several weeks in the winter of 2007. In the summer of 2006, I came under the guidance of the artist and scholar Liu Zhumei, a researcher at the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum who has published extensively on the history of Mianzhu *nianhua*. Through Liu's guidance and support, I gained access to the many historic *nianhua* and archived documents held in the museum. Before conducting any recorded interviews in Mianzhu, I spent many weeks following her lead in obtaining the necessary research permissions and establishing social relations with Mianzhu's *nianhua* workshops. As an artist herself, she had close ties and long standing relationships with the *nianhua* producers I interviewed. This process of engagement, shaped by local custom and many shared meals, provided opportunities for me to conduct several in-depth interviews in the community.

Instead of imposing a rigid interview questionnaire, I chose instead to document the natural flow of informal and open-ended conversations with *nianhua* makers and users in Mianzhu. However, a guiding point of inquiry revolved around *nianhua*'s

¹⁰² Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

attributed function to “pursue the auspicious, repel the portentous,” a topic that seemed to come up in conversation quite naturally. As an open-ended concept, it often sparked the sharing of personal histories, memories, stories, or popular sayings tied to *nianhua* production or use.

From the many hours of interviews, I selected excerpts that best exemplify the range of varied perspectives shaping Mianzhu’s *nianhua* industry. I include conversations with both urban and rural residents who have displayed *nianhua* in their homes. I also draw attention to excerpts that reveal the high stakes involved in the presentation of *nianhua*’s ritual efficacy. This is particularly the case for the three established lineage-holding *nianhua* workshops in Mianzhu, where the notion of a *nianhua* “lineage” (*pai* 派) refers to a familial line of *nianhua* producers who construct and assert their lineage-holding status through a variety of means, including their family genealogy, signature production skills, and territorial claims to a particular production site that may or may not belong to the family. Currently, the Wang, Chen, and Li family workshops are the only lineage-holding workshops still active in Mianzhu. With the support of my mentor Liu, I had the fortune of interviewing the three elders leading these workshops.

When directly relevant, my position as an outside researcher becomes a part of the analysis of these interviews. The self-reflexivity of the researcher can be an asset here, as it serves as a continual reminder of the power relations and institutional agendas that inevitably come into play when “research” is conducted in a living community. In this regard, I will turn to the lessons of critical ethnography that illustrate how transparent research methods and a participatory approach to data collection can lead to greater collaboration between researcher and subject as well as a sensitivity to the impact of

research on local communities. In practice, this translates into a documentation of my interaction within the local hierarchy of social relations. While this study is not designed as ethnography, it will bring certain ethnographic strategies to bear on *nianhua* research.

As discussed above, my study emerges out of the intersection of anthropology and art history in an effort to critique disciplinary divides and to blur the constructed boundaries between the archive and the repertoire. The interview sessions included in this study play a central role in this endeavor, as they vividly demonstrate the dynamic interactions between *nianhua* and the embodied gestures, stories, and discourses that activate the object while simultaneously being *activated by* the object. A key challenge here is the question of how to represent the interview sessions in written research without erasing the embodied forms of meaning making. What is lost in translation when one writes about the irreproducible repertoire of living practices? In probing this question, I draw attention to the non-verbal modes of communication in the interviews, including gestures, the use of props, and shifts in vocal intonations or rhythms. I have thus included video stills and photographs of the interview sessions throughout the chapters to capture the situated nature of such embodied interactions and their implications for the study of *nianhua*.

In dealing with this problem of representation, oral history scholars have recognized the co-creative nature of the interview process itself, a “transformational process” that involves the “mutual embedding of one’s vision of the world in the other’s.”¹⁰³ In other words, the oral history researcher cannot occupy an objective position because these histories arise as a result of their direct participation. In speaking to different *nianhua* makers and users, it is inevitable that their responses will reflect

¹⁰³ Della Pollock, *Remembering: Oral History Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

what they perceive as “research” and what they think my expectations are as an outside researcher visiting their community. The conversations are also colored by my institutional ties and affiliations, as I have adopted a fully transparent approach to requesting consent where all interviewed subjects have prior knowledge of how the research will be used.

It is therefore critical to keep in mind that these interviews may not be representative of the entire *nianhua* community. They are highly situated interactions that provide only fragmentary snapshots of a wide range of debates occurring in Mianzhu today. Yet these momentary engagements may point to a continual unfolding of meaning around *nianhua*, where present conversations build on ones from the past. Oral history scholars such as Della Pollock and Sam Schragar have argued that the sharing of orally transmitted knowledge bears “the dialogical imprint of many voices and perspectives” because they are “cultivated in narrative environments” and not in isolation.¹⁰⁴ An oral history interview is not completely idiosyncratic, as “no one person ‘owns’ a story. Any one story is embedded in layers of remembering and storying.”¹⁰⁵

It is therefore possible to critique the oral history interview as part of a broader network of unfolding discourses, continually remade by its participating speakers and listeners. Drawing from what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls the “politics of engagement” rather than the “politics of transcendence,”¹⁰⁶ the researcher’s position consequently becomes part of the narrative of this study, as it contributes to the notion of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁵ Linda Alcoff. “The Problem of Speaking For Others,” in *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*, ed. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 5-32.

¹⁰⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003).

a living *nianhua* archive that continually evolves within different social spheres, including that of academic research.

Chapter Breakdown

This study is organized thematically into three chapters with each one illuminating a different aspect of the *nianhua* industry in Mianzhu today. Each chapter provides a set of theoretical strategies for unpacking the living archive, especially in response to the question of how to bridge the divide between the archive and repertoire. Organized in a loose chronological order, the chapters build on each other to reveal the ongoing contestations of meaning that occur in the industry, especially around *nianhua*'s attributed function "to pursue the auspicious, repel the portentous."

Chapter Two, "The Power of Ephemera: Ritual Praxis and the Contested Rise of the *Nianhua* Marketplace," lays the foundation for this discussion by rethinking *nianhua*'s ritual agency in everyday life and livelihood. In responding to the interdisciplinary debates around object agency launched by Alfred Gell, I will argue for a view of agency that does not blindly privilege human agency in a universalist or objective framework but rather acknowledges the culturally constructed and contested nature of agency itself as it is shaped by different performative practices. Drawing on recent theories of distributed agency as set forth by cultural theorists such as Jane Bennett and Deleuze and Guattari, I will argue that agency is negotiated within specific spatio-temporal configurations of objects and practices, such as a winter street market, a *nianhua* workshop, or a household *nianhua* display. In taking up the cyclic movements of *nianhua* through these interconnected spaces, I will argue that *nianhua*'s ritual efficacy is not simply fixed in the object or "mediated" by it because the object is always changing

and ephemeral. Instead, it is the timed processes by which *nianhua* are circulated, destroyed, and recast that perform their social significance. As attention is shifted away from fixed representation and towards the lifecycles of *nianhua*, it is possible to see how *nianhua* activate auspicious time and space in ways that fulfill the everyday needs of its makers and users alike.

Building on a performative view of ritual practice, Chapter Three, “The Picture Must Have Theater”: Performing Narrativity in Mianzhu *Nianhua*,” raises questions around narrativity and the oral transmissions of *nianhua* knowledge. I will examine the performative roles of *nianhua* storytelling within local printshops and of auspicious speech in people’s everyday interactions with *nianhua*. The chapter challenges existing methodologies that categorize *nianhua* archives according to narrative content, as images based on narratives drawn from theater, historical episodes, or legends and myths. Drawing on recent scholarship by art historians such as Julia Murray and Efrat Biberman, this chapter exposes the problems around imposing a “core narrative” upon *nianhua* that actually call up multiple narratives depending on the viewer(s).¹⁰⁷ I will argue that many *nianhua*, including those that are not usually examined as narrative illustrations, serve as sites of “narrative density”: packed with layers of mnemonic, and aural cues that give rise to a range of narrative possibilities for knowledgeable viewers to deploy according to their immediate aims.

In doing so, I will also point to some of the parallels between Sichuan’s ritual theater traditions and the *nianhua* industry that have been concealed by folk art typologies. For instance, the notion of narrative density pushes for an alternate

¹⁰⁷Julia Murray, *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustration and Confucian Ideology*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 10.

interpretation of a high profile *nianhua* “treasure,” a set of late Qing dynasty scroll paintings titled *Greeting Spring* 迎春图 that depicts a “Welcoming Spring” Lunar New Year procession in Mianzhu, where the country magistrate appears with a ritual street theater troop. While existing studies impose a linear narrative based on the thrice-repeating figure of the magistrate, I will argue that the prevalent use of rebus imagery suggests that the painting was designed and used as a ritually efficacious image to activate auspicious speech. Historical documents also provide evidence that the painting was given as a New Year gift between business associates, an occasion that would have been greatly enhanced by the sharing of auspicious wishes for the year to come. The key goal here is to recover the role of narrativity within *nianhua*’s different ritual contexts, including the ritual significance of many historic *nianhua*.

Chapter Four, “To Build a Museum and a Village: the Race for Mianzhu’s *Nianhua* Heritage” situates ritual practices within the bigger picture of the state-led heritage industry from the mid-1990s and onward. As local and provincial authorities turn towards staging *nianhua*’s “intangible cultural heritage” (ICH), state agencies move beyond merely collecting and exhibiting historic *nianhua* to building *nianhua* tourist attractions. To critique these developments, I respond to heritage studies that move away from theorizing heritage as a set of tangible assets (such as objects, sites, and monuments) and towards evaluating it as a “cultural process.” This includes Laurajane Smith’s declaration that “heritage is not a thing” and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s assertion that heritage is “metacultural production.”¹⁰⁸ I will argue that this shift towards interpreting heritage as a cultural process often relegates objects and sites to a passive

¹⁰⁸ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006) and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production,” *Museum International* 56, no. 1-2 (May 2004): 52-65.

role, where meaning is simply projected or imposed upon them by human activities. While I agree that the notion of heritage is indeed a cultural construct, the contested objects taken up in heritage discourses need to be kept in mind and examined within the specific cultural discourses and forms of livelihood that depend on them. The danger in dematerializing the notion of heritage is that it risks losing sight of the dialectical interactions between objects and practices that undergird and legitimize both the state's institutional claim to heritage as well as the counter claims that arise in response.

In the concluding chapter, I draw together these discussions to assess the advantages and disadvantages of approaching *nianhua* as a living archive. In particular, I comment on its implications for nuancing and demystifying *nianhua*'s attributed function to “pursue the auspicious, repel the portentous” in everyday life. I also stress the key contributions of this project to both the field of Chinese art history and to the ongoing urbanization of Mianzhu and other rural townships with strong claims to “cultural heritage” 文化遗产.

Finally, I will reflect on the significance of this study in light of the Great Sichuan Earthquake that occurred on May 12, 2008, a year after I completed my field research. Located on a major faultline just 86 kilometers from the epicenter in Wenchuan, Mianzhu was severely damaged by the earthquake that measured 8.0 on the Richter scale and left an estimated 69,000 dead. This study therefore offers the most complete documentation of Mianzhu's *nianhua* industry just before the devastating effects of the earthquake. In light of these developments, I will address the important implications of this study for the ongoing efforts to rebuild Mianzhu and its centuries old *nianhua* industry.

Chapter Two: The Power of Ephemera: Ritual Praxis and the Contested Rise of the *Nianhua* Marketplace

Although Mianzhu is often touted as one China's "four great *nianhua* centers" of the Qing dynasty, its historic printing industry was actually known as the "door deity trade" 门神帮 before the term *nianhua* was nationally popularized during the twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ The door deity trade earned its name by producing a far greater number of door deity prints compared to any other type of print. According to one estimate, Mianzhu's printshops collectively produced twelve million door deity prints per year during the late nineteenth century, compared to just two million prints produced in other formats.¹¹⁰ Today, the works designed for temporary display on the household door are once again the most widespread and dominant commodities in the winter *nianhua* markets. These works fall under the broad category of *nianhua*, yet they are still referenced in Mianzhu by their specific names, as door deities, spring couplets, or lintel hangings. This chapter will focus on the resurgent production, circulation, and consumption of these seasonal *nianhua*, which adorn the doorways of virtually every neighborhood in Mianzhu. They form a distinct body of works linked together by certain shared rhythms and spaces, yet they also reveal the changing trends in the marketplace where new modes of production and use are continuously being introduced.

The majority of these works are now digitally printed in mass quantities using a variety of printing machines, while a smaller number are still being produced using

¹⁰⁹ Feng Tiren 封体仁, "Mianzhu shanghui shihua" 绵竹商会史话 [Historical accounts of Mianzhu's trade associations] in *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao ji* 绵竹文史资料辑 14 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies vol. 14], ed. Wang Peisheng 王培生 and Zhang Changlu 张昌禄 (Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1995), 13.

¹¹⁰ Gao Wen 高文, Hou Shiwu 侯世武, and Ning Zhiqi 宁志奇, *Mianzhu nianhua* 绵竹年画 [Mianzhu new year pictures] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990), 11.

woodblock printing and hand-painting techniques that have been kept alive in Mianzhu's lineage-holding workshops. Although many leading folk art scholars have lamented the disappearance of the traditional woodblock printing industry as a result of state circumscription and the introduction of mechanized printing technologies, the situation in Mianzhu resists such reductive assessments.¹¹¹ As discussed in the introduction, the increased circulation of commercially printed *nianhua* did not destroy the industry but actually *catalyzed* and *revitalized* it, spawning a rich repertoire of ritual print activities in the community. It is this unique amalgam of old and new practices that sets Mianzhu apart from other historic printing sites in China, as it presents a complex picture of an evolving industry that never completely died out, but continued to evolve and adapt to the changing conditions of the marketplace. By limiting the discussion to these works, I will be able to hone in on how these developments are taking shape on the ground.

In critiquing the resurgence of these seasonal *nianhua*, I am primarily interested in how the very notion of *nianhua* is being reshaped and recast within these winter markets and their ritual use in the home. I will argue that the door deities, spring couplets, and hanging money that flood the markets every year are not necessarily fixed categories defined by their production methods or modes of representation. Showing up in both urban and rural neighborhoods, these works come in a wide variety of printed and painted formats, including handmade prints and paintings, glossy mass-produced prints, and homemade strips of calligraphy. At times, even works that are not designed for ritual use

¹¹¹ As discussed in the introduction, the two comprehensive and authoritative histories of *nianhua* written by Wang Shucun and Bo Songnian locate the demise of the traditional *nianhua* industry in the 1950s, with the state circumscription of the popular printing industry. These texts are: Wang Shucun 王树村, *Zhongguo nianhua shi* 中国年画史 [Chinese *nianhua* history] (Beijing: Beijing gongyi meishu chubanshe, 2002), and Bo Songnian 薄松年, *Zhongguo nianhua shi* 中国年画史 [Chinese *nianhua* history] (Shenyang: Liaoning meishu chubanshe, 1986).

end up *displayed* as door deities, including advertisements or household objects that bear some kind of association with the auspicious. In other words, a wide range of images and objects are made to *perform* the role of *nianhua* when they are strategically positioned and renewed in the home or marketplace.

When examined in their lived contexts, these works push for a dramatic rethinking of what constitutes a work of *nianhua*, which has been largely defined around modes of *representation* rather than modes of *presentation*. By recasting *nianhua* in terms of its performed roles, this chapter addresses the many ephemeral goods that have been long excluded from *nianhua* studies as either vulgar or imitative versions of the real thing. To assist in this effort, I will draw on Catherine Bell's theory of ritual practice, which stresses the agentive and performative dimensions of ritualizing processes, which are always evolving and geared towards achieving specific results. Shifting away from the structural analysis of "ritual systems" and towards a study of "ritual praxis," Bell argues for an examination of "how a particular community or culture ritualizes" and "when and why ritualization is deemed the effective thing to do."¹¹² Bell's emphasis on ritualizing processes is particularly useful for examining how *nianhua* are continually redefined and recast by ritual practices that are geared towards livelihood and other daily needs.

In particular, Bell's model stresses an inclusive view of ritual in its lived contexts as reflecting "the full spectrum of ways of acting within any given culture, not as some a priori category of action totally independent of other forms of action."¹¹³ Instead of approaching rituals as "clear and autonomous rites," Bell therefore stresses a conception

¹¹² Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 82.

of ritual activity as unfolding processes, as “methods, traditions and strategies of ‘ritualization.’”¹¹⁴ In the case of the *nianhua* industry, this translates into a more inclusive perspective on the range of ritual goods and activities that continue to shape the industry despite periods of social upheaval and reform. In posing the questions of when and why certain images are taken up in ritualizing processes, it is possible to examine the evolving nature of the *nianhua* industry, rather than judge it against a seemingly coherent and untroubled past.

The ephemeral *nianhua* of the winter markets require great attentiveness to how meaning is continually performed, rather than fixed in the physical object itself. The highly unstable status of these fleeting works resists fixed interpretations of any kind, as they are radically embedded within a flow of ongoing practices and processes tied to both human activities, as well as exposure to the natural elements of wind, sun, and rain. The fragile door deities, spring couplets, and hanging money are continually caught in a cycle of renewal and decay, making it almost impossible to pin down a reliable “object” of analysis. Instead of attempting to resolve this by isolating or “freezing” certain works in time and space, I am more interested in how the *movement* and transformative *lifecycles* of the works acquire social significance and agency in different situations. In other words, how can *nianhua* be reformulated as agentive processes, trajectories, or propensities? When and how are they harnessed or deployed to support people’s everyday needs and livelihood?

In his study of Ming dynasty visual and material culture, Craig Clunas emphasizes the agency of objects in marking out temporal and spatial regimes in the

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Ming marketplaces.¹¹⁵ Clunas points to how the timed production and circulation of many everyday goods (prints, paintings, bowls, vases, textiles, coins, clothing) reinforced imperial time, seasonal time, or the family time of progressive generations. These objects activated different ritual activities at different times of year and usually bore visible markers of these temporal regimes. Clunas thus points to how the overlapping temporal cycles could be “handled and seen” at all levels of society from the social elite to the very poorest, so that “no one body of thing occupied the time and the space of the Ming without contest.”¹¹⁶ In taking up issues of timed circulation and consumption, Clunas emphasizes both an object’s visible “marks of agency” as well as its physical movement through time as space as part of its potential effect.¹¹⁷

Taking Clunas’ work as a cue, I will also stress how Mianzhu’s seasonal *nianhua* circulate in ways that reinforce temporal and spatial regimes. Most significantly, the annual influx of *nianhua* in markets and homes marks out the auspicious dates and rhythms of the lunar calendar in ways that directly support livelihood. The flow of ephemeral works also transforms everyday spaces into sites of ritual activity, be it the temporary street market, household doorway, or *nianhua* workshop. While Clunas focuses primarily on the visual markers of temporal agency, such as reign dates and painted depictions of seasonal imagery, I will also examine processes of appropriation, where images and objects intended for one use are redeployed and re-circulated as ritual items. I will thus focus more closely on evolving processes of ritualization, to highlight

¹¹⁵ Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 1368-1644.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 32, 52.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 32.

the active, conscious, and performative dimensions of these activities within Mianzhu's winter *nianhua* markets.

In shifting the analytical focus onto the role of *nianhua* within ritual practices, I do not mean to downplay the significance of the object or relegate it to a passive role within ritual activity. Instead, I will argue that the fleeting and ephemeral nature of these works blurs the boundaries between the material and mental realms, or between what Diana Taylor calls the “archive and the repertoire.”¹¹⁸ The works examined here offer a unique opportunity to move beyond these binaries and explore the radically dialectical interactions between objects and practices. To quote Clunas again, one must avoid imposing a false hierarchy between objects and practices: “I am writing from a conviction that the relations between agents, relations in which the work is embedded, illuminate the object, but that equally the object enacts those social relations. In this dialectical engagement neither enjoys unquestioned primacy.”¹¹⁹

Divided into three major sections, this chapter will unpack the processes of *nianhua* ritualization taking place across these interconnected realms: the seasonal marketplace, the home, and the lineage-holding workshop. In each section, I will include firsthand observations of the works *in situ* and interviews with *nianhua* users and makers to draw forth the performative aspects of emerging ritual strategies. On a macroscopic level, these three realms join together to form the core of the seasonal *nianhua* industry, yet the examples show that they are not coherently unified by a shared set of ideals or beliefs. Instead, the ritual practices emerging in each realm reveal diverse conceptions of

¹¹⁸ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 16.

¹¹⁹ Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 13.

agency that are creatively geared towards meeting the shifting challenges of daily life.

Thus I am deploying the notion of the “performative” to indicate how these practices are intended to achieve specific results and aims.¹²⁰ In taking up the cyclic movements of *nianhua* across these three realms, I will therefore stress how *nianhua*’s attributed power to “pursue the auspicious, repel the portentous” serves as an open-ended site of contestation tied to people’s immediate needs and aims.

Harnessing the Seasonal *Nianhua* Market

During the years immediately following the Cultural Revolution, Mianzhu experienced a strong resurgence of open-air street markets. These temporary markets are locally known as *jishi* 集市, which is often translated as a “periodic market” or “market fair.” The increase in scope and frequency of such markets was in line with a national trend, where liberal economic reforms implemented under Deng Xiaoping led to a widespread growth in rural periodic markets.¹²¹ In Mianzhu, as in many other rural townships, these markets vary widely in scale and the types of goods that are sold. Smaller scale markets rotate through the surrounding rural areas providing agricultural goods and simple everyday items. Larger markets bring more specialized items to the community and are usually held in conjunction with seasonal festivals of the lunar calendar or on religious holidays, such as the birthdates of popular deities. In this section,

¹²⁰ I am referencing here the classical notion of the “performative” as first set forth by J. L. Austin who theorized “performative utterances” as a form of speech that can understood as “*doing* something rather than merely *saying* something.” J. L. Austin, “Performative Utterances,” in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 233-52.

¹²¹ William Skinner, a scholarly authority on China’s rural marketing systems, has documented how the “remarkable increase” of the periodic market was fueled by a relaxation of controls over agricultural production, marketing, and the use of private plots, leading to their increase of over thirty percent in the five years between 1978 and 1983. William Skinner, “Rural Marketing in China: Repression and Revival,” *The China Quarterly* 103 (1985): 406-408.

I will examine the large winter street markets that circulate a changing variety of printed and painted ephemera as ritually efficacious *nianhua*. As competing vendors jostle for position and status in these markets, these ritualized gatherings continually adapt to new technologies, shifting public demand, and changing regulations imposed by the state.

This is evident in a comparison of two photographs that document the recent developments of the *nianhua* street markets of Mianzhu. A black and white photograph taken in the early 1980s shows a simple makeshift stand that is put together with a few pieces of wood to create a long table, which is completely covered from end to end with a variety of printed works (**fig. 21**). A curious crowd is gathered around the stand to examine the works, which appear to be commercially printed works, judging by the thick and glossy appearance of the papers. In a different context, these prints may not be necessarily viewed as ritual goods. However, the strategic timing of these markets during the Lunar New Year season actively reintroduces these prints to the marketplace as ritually efficacious products for seasonal use. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, local residents reengaged with large quantities of ritual ephemera in these marketplaces long before the state-led *nianhua* revival got fully underway in Mianzhu.¹²² Signaling the political shifts in the marketplace, the colorful print stand stands out in sharp contrast to the clothing stand behind it, which is selling the blue and gray “Mao suits” that were widely worn at the time. The prints signal a more relaxed social environment for the consumption of traditional items, as well as the return of seasonal goods tied to the Lunar New Year.

¹²² During the 1980s Mianzhu’s Cultural Affairs Bureau devoted the bulk of their resources towards launching travel exhibitions of *nianhua* rather than building up the local *nianhua* industry.

In contrast, a 2004 color photograph of an urban street in Mianzhu illustrates how *nianhua* markets have expanded in scale and scope, with a greater variety of goods and a more regimented use of street space (**fig. 22**). Compared to the early 1980s, these markets are more closely regulated by Mianzhu's officials, who have tightened their protocols of collecting taxes and fees from itinerant peddlers. The photograph shows a temporary street market spread out on the main thoroughfare of a business district, flanked on both sides by the year-round storefronts that are also selling *nianhua*. The market is held near an auspicious landmark, a traditional gateway that can be seen in the background at the entrance to the boulevard. The area has been closed to motorized traffic and auspicious red lanterns line the streets on wooden poles, announcing the arrival of the Lunar New Year festival season.

The street peddlers are selling a combination of digital prints, handmade works, paper cutouts for display on windows or walls, incense, bells, greeting cards, lanterns, and children's toys. In the foreground, sets of gold gilded lintel hangings are laid out for sale. In the local Mianzhu dialect, these are also known as "hanging money" (*guaqian* 挂钱) or "joy cash" (*xiqian* 喜钱), these works are designed to hang off the edge of the door's lintel in a row of five pieces to signal the arrival of prosperity and wealth. On display just behind the lintel hangings, the spring couplets are made with long strips of red paper bearing hand painted calligraphy of poetic verses for ringing in an auspicious new year.

In considering the evolution of these periodic markets from the early 1980s to the present, the works are continually changing, but the markets' timed appearance during

the twelfth lunar month remains consistent. A vibrant “multichronous marketplace”¹²³ is seen in both photographs, with permanent storefronts that follow rhythms of the modern Gregorian calendar alongside a temporary marketplace that marks the rhythms of the lunar one. These two temporal regimes are harnessed to support livelihood in very different ways, often marking out an urban-rural divide between the higher-end urban shops and the street markets filled with rural itinerant traders selling inexpensive ritual ephemera. The year-round and temporary markets also mark out a spatial hierarchy between those with permanent access to privatized storefronts and those with only temporary access to the public space of the street.

The changing configurations of these periodic street markets speak to their flexible and adaptable nature, as participating vendors use whatever means possible to sustain their winter sources of livelihood. The rapid growth of these markets in the 1980s took some scholars by surprise, as many saw urbanization and industrialization as potential threats to the periodic marketing system. For instance, in his famous 1964 essay on rural marketing in China, William G. Skinner predicted that the modernization of the transport system would lead to the disappearance of “traditional standard markets” while “traditional higher level market towns will have been transformed into modern trading centres.”¹²⁴ However, recent studies show that “the continuous rise in attendance and the appearance of new markets demonstrate that the pivotal effect of modern transport has not materialized.” According to a study by Rozelle, Benzinger, and Huang, periodic

¹²³ Eugene Cooper critiques the multichronous character of the agricultural activity in Dongyang County, Zhejiang Province. Responding to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Alfred Gell on the role of calendars in agricultural communities, he argues that calendrical knowledge serves as both a source of symbolic capital as well as an instrument of political control and domination. Eugene Cooper, “The Annual Round of Agricultural Tasks in Dongyang County: Synoptic Illusion or Symbolic Capital?” *Asian Folklore Studies* 59 (2000): 240.

¹²⁴ William Skinner, “Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 2 (Feb. 1965): 195-228.

markets continued to grow because local officials had difficulty taxing them and many families could not afford to open permanent shops.¹²⁵ These developments have thus chastened scholars against blindly equating modernization with the destruction of the rural marketing system and other traditional forms of exchange.

The changing characteristics of Mianzhu's winter *nianhua* markets thus represent the "agency of the indigenous sector" to reconstitute various forms of trade and livelihood by adapting to urbanizing trends and by tapping into the popular demand for ritual goods and services.¹²⁶ As anthropologist Mayfair Yang points out in her study of rural Wenzhou, many ritual industries continued to evolve and grow during the post-Mao era, actually spurred by "new models of capitalism" rather than being displaced or replaced by them.¹²⁷ Similarly, in Mianzhu, these winter street markets profited from both the influx of cheap mass-produced print ephemera and the annual demand for ritual goods during the Lunar New Year season.

It is important to keep in mind that the seasonal *nianhua* markets carry a politicized dimension since *nianhua* were heavily criticized and banned during the Cultural Revolution. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, those who came to the winter markets to sell *nianhua* faced a social taboo against works that were seen as "feudal superstition." While the state's official sanction of the *nianhua* revival helped alleviate this obstacle at the end of the Cultural Revolution, many vendors had to deal with hostile remarks from the public. According to local printmaker Li Fangfu 李方福, when he heard

¹²⁵ Scott Rozelle, Vince Benzinger, and Jikun Huang, "Continuity and Change in China's Rural Periodic Markets" (working paper, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of California Davis, Davis, CA, 2002).

¹²⁶ Mayfair Yang, "Putting Global Capitalism in its Place: Economic Hybridity, Bataille, and Ritual Expenditure," *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (2000): 227.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

the state's endorsement of *nianhua* made on public radio in 1979, he immediately began making woodblock prints to take to the winter print markets. However when he first set up his stand in the streets, he encountered sharp criticism from local villagers:

I had returned to agricultural work during the Cultural Revolution. When I heard the announcement on the radio that they were going to renew the *nianhua* industry, I hurriedly made some prints in time to set up a stand in the streets for the winter markets that year. I walked to a nearby village market to sell them, and a man in the street angrily told me not to sell those old-fashioned works in his village. I had to inform him that a province-wide *nianhua* revival was underway all over Sichuan and that his village was indeed part of Sichuan, so I had every right to sell my prints in his village. I stood firm in my stand and refused to leave. Nowadays, everyone admires *nianhua* and my business is doing well, but that wasn't always the case.¹²⁸

At a time when the status of *nianhua* was in the midst of transitioning from a banned object to a desirable market commodity, local printmakers such as Li had to navigate an uncertain marketplace in order to sell their works. They also faced stiff competition from the growing number of vendors redistributing digitally printed *nianhua*, which are sold in great quantities for much lower prices. Li and many other printmakers were briefly hired by the Cultural Affairs Bureau in the early 1980s to reproduce works in the state *nianhua* collection, but the pay was far too low, so many opted to strike out on their own in the street markets instead.¹²⁹ This is a significant indicator that the winter street markets initially played a more important role in supporting the livelihood of local printmakers than the state-led *nianhua* revival. Later in this chapter, I will address in greater detail how various *nianhua* workshops repositioned themselves in the marketplace.

¹²⁸ Li Fangfu, in discussion with the author in Mianzhu, Sichuan, June 2006.

¹²⁹ Li Fangfu and Chen Xingcai, in discussion with the author in Mianzhu, Sichuan, June 2006.

In taking the bold initiative to produce new works and offer them for sale in an outdoor stall, Li actively stakes his claim in the emerging industry by participating in the winter markets, where he physically and verbally defends his right to sell *nianhua*. His action can thus be understood as a powerful ritual strategy of reclaiming a lost source of livelihood while responding to the immediate challenges of the marketplace. It is significant that the annual cycle of winter markets never ceased during the Cultural Revolution although the goods that circulated in them changed from year to year. When the Cultural Revolution drew to a close, these markets were immediately accessible to those who needed a venue to sell their products. They thus served as a critical catalyst for the recovering of the winter *nianhua* industry at the local level.

It is possible to think of these markets as dynamic sites of ritual activity, where the annual demand for seasonal goods tied to Lunar New Year gives rise to a range of creative strategies tied to winter livelihood. This relates to Catherine Bell's point that:

[T]he study of ritual practice has meant a basic shift from looking at activity as the expression of cultural patterns to looking at it as that which makes and harbors such patterns. In this view, ritual is more complex than mere communication of values and views; it is a set of activities that construct particular types of meaning and values in specific ways...[Rather] than ritual as the vehicle for the expression of authority, practice theorists tend to explore how ritual is a vehicle for the construction of relationships of authority and submission.¹³⁰

The winter street markets can thus be considered sites of ritual potential, where competing parties negotiate their respective positions while creatively harnessing the temporal and spatial power of the market.

¹³⁰ Bell, *Ritual*, 82.

A brief anecdote here will further capture the highly innovative and performative nature of the activities shaping the winter street market. In one of the interviews I conducted with Mianzhu residents, a woman in her mid-fifties named Gong Jinlan 巩金兰 recounted her childhood experiences of growing up in a rural area and attending the winter street markets. At the young age of eight or nine, during the years of the Cultural Revolution, she decided to set up a small stand of her own in the winter street market:

Anybody could go to the winter markets to sell things, so I looked around the house to see what I could make for the market. I decided to set up a stall selling cups of sugared water with red food dye added to it to catch people's attention. These were easy to make and I could make a few pennies at the market selling drinks while my grandpa sold peanuts...¹³¹

The simple yet rather ingenious act of selling red sugar drinks illustrates how market practices are spontaneously performed in the interest of making a quick profit with whatever materials one has at one's disposal. While cups of red sugar water might not be palatable at other times of year, they take on special significance in the context of the Lunar New Year market, when anything with an auspicious association (such as the color red) could be marketed for ritual use to bring happiness, prosperity, and success in the coming year. Gong Jinlan's story shows how all members of the community can participate in the winter markets, even a young girl with access to a few basic kitchen supplies. In bringing these drinks to the market, she presents them as ritual goods while also shaping a marketplace ritual that may be repeated in subsequent years if proven successful. Her experience captures the competitive spirit of these winter markets, where vendors attempt to carve out niche markets by creatively exploiting the demand for

¹³¹ Gong Jinlan, in discussion with the author in Mianzhu, Sichuan, June 2006.

ritually efficacious goods. It also demonstrates how one can adapt the ritual practices of the winter markets to fit one's own immediate needs and abilities.

Records from Mianzhu's historic door deity trade also document a changing industry, shaped by performative approaches to ritual print production and marketing. For instance, one of the most publicized works of Mianzhu *nianhua* is a pair of simple and roughly executed door deity prints dated to the late nineteenth century, done in a format known as *tianshuijiao* 添水脚, a dialect term that may be loosely translated as “superfluous painting” or literally, “adding watery feet” (**fig. 23**).¹³² As a way to make some extra income from the winter print markets, the workers in Mianzhu's print factories would stay after hours to make these door deities out of leftover papers and paints. These works would then be cheaply sold to customers during the late-night markets, when many vendors had already packed up and gone home. Over time, this became a ritualized activity and the works were known as *tianshuijiao*. A similar term, *ganshuihuo* 赶水货, was used to refer to the batch of hastily made works of the winter rush as opposed to the works produced in the slower summer months.¹³³ With a few quick brushstrokes, the *tianshuijiao* producers would create the most inexpensive door deities in the marketplace. Printed and painted on small size papers, the works were designed for temporary display on modest sized doorways. These works are thus the innovative results of niche marketing to the poorest segment of the population, who could only afford the most basic door deity prints made with leftover materials. In the extant

¹³² The term itself may carry negative connotations, as in the saying “画蛇添足,” which literally means “drawing legs on a snake.” Figuratively, the saying means to ruin the effect of something by adding something superfluous, or to overdo something.

¹³³ Wei Chuanyi 魏传义, “Mianzhu nianhua diaocha cailiao” 绵竹年画调查材料 [Mianzhu nianhua interview records] in *Zhongguo Mianzhu nianhua* 中国绵竹年画 [China's Mianzhu nianhua], ed. Yu Jundao 于俊道 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 136-140.

example seen here, only minimal efforts were made to fill in the outline of the print and essential features are left unpainted, such as the sword and eyes of the warrior on the left. The *tianshuijiao* door deities thus reflect how innovative works and marketing strategies were ritualized as responses to challenges of the workplace and marketplace.

Accounts of the early twentieth-century print trade also show how Mianzhu's printshops and print guilds competed vigorously for access to auspicious locations and the most auspicious dates for setting up temporary markets. Interview records with 80-year-old printmaker He Qufa 何去发 document a hierarchical arrangement of "large" and "small" print markets in Mianzhu:

The rhyme goes, "On the first day of the eleventh lunar month, the shop sign goes up. On the first day of the twelfth lunar month, the market stand goes up [冬月初一出望子, 腊月初一出摊子]." The winter print market was made up of a big market and a small market. The small market was at the Eastern Gate Dam [东门河坝], in Qingtong village [清通乡]. Starting from Qingtong village, the print stands would extend fifteen *li* along the main road, all the way to Nanxuan Shrine [南轩祠] just outside of town. The big market was inside the urban area at Nanhua Palace, open every day until two in the morning. This market would continue to the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month. Another rhyme goes, "Go see flowers at the East Gate Dam, go see pictures at Nanhua Palace [东门河坝去观花, 南华宫里去画]." ¹³⁴

These rhymes, which are excerpts of orally transmitted knowledge in the trade, underscore the role of auspicious shrines and temples as sought after trading sites. Up until the end of the Qing period, the timing and siting of these print markets was regulated by a powerful door deity guild known as the Fuxi Association, named after the

¹³⁴ Ibid., 136-137.

guild's patron deity Fuxi, a legendary emperor credited for creating fishing, trapping, and writing. The guild set up a meeting hall with a shrine to Fuxi at the Nanhua Palace in Mianzhu's urban center, consolidating their presence and power in a central location. On selected auspicious dates, the guild would reserve the Nanhua Palace for large banquets, where several hundred people would gather to conduct business negotiations in the print trade while feasting, watching theater performances, and making offerings to the guild's patron deity. To protect the industry from regional competitors, the guild also regulated issues around pricing, workers' pay, trading rules, and production secrets.¹³⁵ These records show that a deft understanding of how to harmonize one's business with the use of auspicious times and sites was a matter of survival in the trade.

Indeed, the marketplace itself was seen as an auspicious and ritually efficacious event that boosted the prosperity and status of the community. This is captured in a short "bamboo stick verse," or popular chant by the late Qing dynasty author Li Ximing 李锡命, who captures the bustling marketplaces of Mianzhu, affectionately known at the time as "Little Chengdu:"

A Chant for Mianzhu

*Waterways and mountain roads rumble with the ruckus of shipping.
Year-round shops and traveling merchants wheel and deal all night and day.
Throngs of people flow together, as bountiful as the silky bamboo groves.
The good name of "Little Chengdu" is a worthy one.¹³⁶*

¹³⁵ Feng, "Historical accounts of Mianzhu's trade associations," 14.

¹³⁶ Zhang Zhaoyuan 章肇源. *Mianzhu shi song* 绵竹诗颂 [A selection of Mianzhu poetry] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1998), 197.

咏绵竹

水程山陆货争呼
坐贾行商日夜图
济济真如绵竹茂
芳名不愧小成都

The sounds, textures, and agitated energy of the crowded streets are brought to life and celebrated as an auspicious image of prosperity and abundance. The festive scene is full of movement and exchange, where the sense of prosperity is captured by the flows of people and goods over mountains and rivers. In the last two lines, the poem plays on Mianzhu's name, with its literal meaning of "silky bamboo" and its nickname of "Little Chengdu." In comparing the throngs of people to silky bamboo groves, the verse references Mianzhu's name but also an important local resource that is used to manufacture large quantities of fine papers. The last line concludes that Mianzhu does indeed live up to its reputation as a "Little Chengdu," a name that suggests that Mianzhu's markets are only second to the provincial capital itself.

In thinking through the power of these markets to transform a range of goods into ritual commodities, I would add here that it is the timed *interaction* between marketplace practices and ephemeral goods that produces the efficacious results of the marketplace to support prosperity and livelihood. In thinking through this dialectical relationship as the site of agency, I am persuaded by the notion of an "agentic assemblage," as proposed by political theorist Jane Bennett. Referencing the theoretical work of Bruno Latour and Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett describes an agentic assemblage as a spatial-temporal configuration comprised of diverse human and non-human agents that each carry a

“certain vital force” yet as whole give rise to effects that are greater than the sum of the parts:

Assemblages are adhoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across the surface. Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group.¹³⁷

Instead of focusing on objects or practices in isolation, the notion of an agentic assemblage shifts the focus onto a certain spatial-temporal configuration of both objects and practices. Using an electrical grid as an example, Bennett argues that the competing efforts of various human players (legislators, technicians, company heads) within a complex cluster of charged electrical entities (electrons, power lines, or electromagnetic fields) produces distinctive effects despite “alongside energies and factions that fly out from it and disturb it from within.”¹³⁸ The notion of an agentic assemblage thus acknowledges the co-existence of disparate entities that may “confound from within” while maintaining a certain common trajectory.¹³⁹ This view of “distributed agency” acknowledges how competing entities and discourses may simultaneously shape the *nianhua* marketplace, which as a whole produces real effects in supporting livelihood in the community. In considering the *nianhua* street market as an agentic assemblage, it is

¹³⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 23.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

possible to acknowledge a more nuanced view of how agency is continually negotiated between human and non-human entities, without taking for granted a hierarchical relationship between the two.

In contrast to anthropologist Alfred Gell's theory of "object agency,"¹⁴⁰ which privileges human agency over object agency by situating objects as "mediators" or "indexes" of human agents, the notion of an agentic assemblage does not privilege human agents over non-human ones. In setting forth the notion of an agentic assemblage, Bennett challenges the life/matter binary in modern scholarship in order "to theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality" and "to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance."¹⁴¹ Instead of reducing materiality to raw or crude matter to be creatively manipulated or infused with meaning by humans or divine entities, Bennett argues for a view of materiality that is "as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension."¹⁴² Bennett further argues that agency should not be exclusively limited to human will or intentionality, as the "locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group."¹⁴³

Bennett's works represents a growing body of work that challenges the positivist rhetoric of materiality that has pervaded Western scholarship since the Enlightenment era.¹⁴⁴ For a study of *nianhua*, the notion of an agentic assemblage is useful for several reasons. Firstly, it acknowledges the presence of an ontologically heterogeneous field, where competing bodies, discourses, and practices may be grouped together for analysis.

¹⁴⁰ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6-8.

¹⁴¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹⁴⁴ Among the most influential works to critique the life/matter binary in Western discourses are Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

It is thus a concept that does not necessitate an objective or fixed interpretation of agency, but rather stresses how diverse conceptions of agency may come into play. Secondly, in challenging the life/matter binary, the notion of an assemblage moves past the reductive labels of “image-worship” or “superstition” that have plagued the study of popular Chinese images since the late nineteenth century.¹⁴⁵

Interestingly, Bennett also draws extensively on the work of Francois Julien, who theorized the notion of *shi* 勢 within Chinese cultural discourses. As a word derived from military strategy, the notion of *shi* refers to the disposition, propensity, power, or trajectory inherent to a specific arrangement of things, the “dynamic force emanating from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than from any particular element within it.”¹⁴⁶ The notion of *shi* thus pushes for a view of agency that is not fixed in any one “thing” such as an object or human, but rather tied to the spatio-temporal configurations in which such vital entities play a part. It also suggests that the agency of a particular event or arrangement may be unpredictable and emergent rather than guided by a central authority. Like the concept of the assemblage, the notion of *shi* resonates with how *nianhua* vendors’ actively harness auspicious times and spaces to boost the propensity of the market to draw customers, although it should be kept in mind that the specific practices they use to do this may vary widely and represent competing strategies. As I move towards a discussion of ritual practices in *nianhua* consumption and production, I will further stress how the notion of ritual agency is negotiated and performed in ways that mark out auspicious time and space.

¹⁴⁵ I am referring here to the studies of Chinese popular images in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Sinologists such as Henri Dore, Edouard Chavannes, and Justus Doolittle.

¹⁴⁶ François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1999), 35.

“Out With the Old, In With the New”: the Transformative Spaces of *Nianhua* Use

Although I found little evidence of *nianhua* used for ritual purposes inside the home, ephemeral prints and paintings appear on the exteriors of a countless number of household doorways in Mianzhu. In conversations with local residents, I asked people from different backgrounds why they continued the annual practice of renewing the various displays on their doors. For some, especially those of an elder generation, the renewal of door deities and spring couplets is a solemn ritual to ensure the divine protection and blessing of the home for the year to come. In these cases, this act is usually associated with a proper sending off and welcoming back of the deities so they can perform their protective duties for the coming year. Yet for most people I encountered, they explained it as simply a customary practice to ensure a festive atmosphere for their Lunar New Year reunions. Interestingly, “pursuing the auspicious, repelling the portentous” is often used as a catchall term for these different attitudes and practices. Instead of projecting a set of shared beliefs or ideas onto the actual print practices, I will stress the diverse range of approaches tied to ritual *nianhua* display.¹⁴⁷

I will begin with an example that shows how household displays directly reflect the diversity of works circulating in the markets. In a humble urban home located in an older residential area of Mianzhu, it is possible to see how old and new print practices

¹⁴⁷ Anthropologists working in the area of Chinese popular religion have cautioned against using the term *xin* 信 or “beliefs” in interviewing people and in referring to popular practices. This is because the term is often associated with the negative connotations of *mixin* 迷信 “superstition” or may carry too strong of a meaning in terms of conviction or worldview. For a discussion of this issue, see Ole Bruun, *Fengshui in China: Geomantic Divination between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003). Stephan Feuchtwang has also pointed to the problem of using a European language of religion to describe Chinese religious practices, where a sharp distinction between belief and performance should not be taken for granted. See Stephen Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), 8-13.

merge together in one display. This particular residence is tucked away in a tightly packed row of single story households with doors that open to a narrow cobble-stoned lane. A pair of digitally printed door deities face inward on either side of the double leaf doors, a typical feature of older *sanheyuan* 三合院 homes that have a small center courtyard, surrounded on three sides by living spaces (**fig. 24**).¹⁴⁸ These door deities bear little resemblance to Mianzhu's historical woodblock printed door deities; they are generic representations of warriors who are only identifiable by the names printed in the upper corners, which mark this set as the historical Tang warriors Yu Chigong 尉迟恭 and Qin Shubao 秦叔宝. A pair of digitally printed spring couplets are symmetrically displayed on either side of the door, two strips of red paper with calligraphic verses that call for wealth, prosperity, and peace to enter the home: "May the wellsprings of wealth pour into an abundant home, may peace and fortune enter a prosperous abode!" 财源广进 昌盛家,泰运鸿开兴隆宅. These spring couplets are accompanied by a third strip of paper centered over the lintel that has fallen apart due to exposure to the elements.

While the protective door deities guard the center of the door to repel the portentous, the calligraphic strips frame the outer perimeter to welcome in the auspicious. The notion of balance is an underlying principle here as seen in the symmetrical alignment of the works, the equal length verses of the couplets, and the tension between attracting prosperity and repelling danger. At the center of the door is yet another calligraphic strip of paper, with handwritten characters that read, "Auspiciousness when the doors open!" 开门吉庆. The work is placed right over the opening of the door and cut

¹⁴⁸ There are also four-sided "quadrangle" 四合院 homes in the area, where an inner courtyard is surrounded on all four sides by living quarters. For a discussion of domestic architecture in Sichuan and other areas of Southern China see Ronald Knapp, *China's Old Dwellings* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

down the middle so each time the door opens the characters come apart and back together again. The strategic placement of this calligraphic strip brings an element of interactivity, as the work is physically activated each time the door is used. It was likely made by a friend or family member to supplement the commercially printed works. Such resourceful approaches to ritual print display are commonly seen in Mianzhu, where commercially printed and handmade works are regularly seen side by side on household doors. The timed renewal of these works and their seemingly adhoc combination of different kinds of images reveals a creative approach to transforming the household doorway into an auspicious space for ritual interaction.

As people pass through these doors on a daily basis, they literally walk through the threshold of the words and their physical, visual, and conceptual influences. Auspicious characters play a potent role in the construction of lived spaces, as Ronald Knapp has pointed out through extensive examples from Sichuan and other provinces.¹⁴⁹ Strips of calligraphy bearing auspicious characters are also posted on ridge beams or doorframes during the construction of a home. The characters for prosperity/good fortune 福, emolument 禄, and longevity 寿 are particularly prominent and auspicious; they often appear on ritual print ephemera, greeting cards, clothing, household objects, and architectural details. The vocalization of such auspicious characters and rebus imagery speaks to the powerful role of the written word to bring about real consequences and serves as an integral aspect of engaging with ritual print ephemera.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Ronald G. Knapp, *China's Living Houses: Folk Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation*, (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 1999), 81-132.

¹⁵⁰ According to Di Wang, there were temples around Chengdu during the late 19th and early 20th century that offered the proper disposal of all written and printed words in a ritual manner that is reminiscent of funerary practices, where written words are treated as living entities. As a meritorious act, some people dedicated themselves to collecting written or printed pieces of paper that had been discarded in the streets in order to bring them to the temples for disposal. See Di Wang, *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space*,

When I queried local residents as to how they selected door deity images, many commented on their preference for visually pleasing works with auspicious features, especially bright red paper, gold calligraphy, shiny details, and bold colors. It is possible to consider these preferred formal characteristics as reflecting aesthetic concerns, although they do not conform to the preferred tastes of urban elites and folk art scholars such as Lu Shengzong. Many people specifically commented on the need to display the newest door deity imagery in order to fulfill the New Year aspiration of “disposing the old, welcoming the new” 辞旧迎新. By far, the majority of the people I spoke with preferred digital prints, which were seen as both “new” and “fashionable.” One middle aged woman told me that her uncle used to write the spring couplets for their family and neighbors until digital prints became readily available in the marketplace: “He used to use simple black ink on very thin red paper, but now the markets sell inexpensive couplets that are printed with shiny gold characters that are far more sturdy and auspicious.”¹⁵¹ Such remarks speak to a conscious preference for digitally printed *nianhua*, not only due to price and availability, but also due to their auspicious and ritually efficacious characteristics.

However, in looking at the broader range of door deities across China, it is evident these formal preferences are often a reflection of privilege rather than of ritual necessity. In the rural regions of Shaanxi, even the most ephemeral and mundane materials can serve as door deities, such as lumps of ice (*bing* 冰), a homonym for

Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870-1930 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). This practice was not limited to Sichuan however, but prevalent in many regions of China. For a broader discussion, see Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese: With Some Account of Their Religious, Governmental, Educational, and Business Customs and Opinions*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865; Taipei: Ch’eng-wen Publishing, 1966), 167-169; and Ye Xiaoqing, *The Dianshizhai Pictorial: Shanghai Urban Life, 1884-1898*, Michigan Monographs in Chinese Studies 98 (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2003), 213-217.

¹⁵¹ Local resident in conversation with the author, Mianzhu, December 2006.

“soldier,” that are to be placed around doors, animal pens, and gates. Chunks of coal or charcoal may also be tied up with a rope from the door lintel, as protective “black tigers” (*heihu* 黑虎).¹⁵² In these instances, the concept of “door deity” is signaled through ritual gestures that strategically establish auspicious associations with everyday objects never intended for ritual use. These examples challenge the notion that auspiciousness must be visually represented to be ritually effective, yet they are excluded from the existing *nianhua* research because they do not involve printed or painted images. This shows the limitation of folk art studies that focus narrowly on art media rather than interconnected forms of cultural practice.

The open-ended nature of what constitutes a door deity is evident in Mianzhu, where ephemeral print ads, company calendars, and even movie posters have ended up as door deities on local households in poorer neighborhoods.¹⁵³ In this lower-income urban neighborhood, a single-leaf door shows the use of a calendar advertisement as a single door deity (**fig. 25**). Single-leaf doors have become the architectural norm in more humble living spaces and apartment suites, thus singular door deity prints are commonly seen in Mianzhu. With the advent of consumer mass culture in the 1980s and 1990s, commercial ads are often passed out for free to promote businesses and/or state-sponsored propaganda campaigns. In this case, the calendar print is produced by the City of Mianzhu Television Broadcasting Office and bears a New Year’s greeting to all its viewers: “May you have a joyous spring and an auspicious new year!” It includes a computer-generated image of young girl playing with a puppy in a garden of flowers and

¹⁵² David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 147.

¹⁵³ The appropriation of a printed ad for display within the home as an auspicious image is not a new development. The practice has been documented by Ellen J. Laing in her study of Shanghai’s printing industry in the early twentieth century: Ellen J. Laing, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

butterflies, a scene that is set above a calendar. This printed ad was not designed for ritual use, yet its inclusion of auspicious imagery made it a viable candidate for ritual transformation into a door deity. The inclusion of other works around the print ad also helps to reframe it as a protective door deity. Handwritten on thin red paper, a simple set of spring couplets with missing characters hangs precariously to the walls. The couplet references a popular verse: “With the arrival of spring, a propitious air fills the hall; with the approaching sunlight, an auspicious brilliance glows in the courtyard” 春到堂前增瑞气，日临庭上起祥光. A third strip hung across the lintel reads, “Attaining good fortune, welcoming auspiciousness” 纳福迎祥. In the past, calendar prints were usually displayed inside the home as auspicious images, not on the front door. In this case, it is possible to observe how a particular mode of ritual display transforms a print ad to suit the interests of the user.

If humble urban homes use whatever means available to put together a set of door deities and spring couplets, then wealthy rural families will often take extra steps to enhance their doors with auspicious and extravagant markers of status. In a newly built home in the rural outskirts of town, the double leaf doorway has been painted with a bright auspicious red color, protected with metal bars, and adorned with gold plated designs and an eight-spoked Buddhist wheel of life (**fig. 26**). The doors bear high-end commercially produced door deities, spring couplets, and hanging lanterns. Reflecting the rise of a mass commercial culture, the lanterns are prominently marked with gold corporate logos from a local liquor company. Again, it is possible to see an ongoing dialectic between advertising campaigns that appropriate auspicious design elements for

marketing products and domestic ritual practices that reappropriate such goods to enhance the auspicious space of the home.

The creative approaches used here illustrate ritual practice as an active, flexible, and adaptive activity that makes use of available resources to engage a lived environment. Far from prescriptive, ritual print use is linked to the flow of goods in the marketplace and the changing architecture and social configurations of the city. Depending on the time of year, or even the time of day, the outdoor display of such works continually changes as if caught in an ever-turning kaleidoscope of shifting shapes, textures, and colors. Merging seamlessly with the environment and the passage of time, the annual lifecycles of *nianhua* can only be understood as processes of convergence and dispersal. The object cannot be taken for granted as a tangible entity with stable visual and material characteristics. Instead, it is often *nianhua*'s indeterminate and ephemeral qualities that lend the works ritual efficacy. It is the transformation of the object in time and space that requires analysis rather than the object itself as a fixed site of meaning and efficacy.

In *fengshui* practice, which has regained popularity in Sichuan since the early 1980s, special attention is always given to the entrance of a home, starting from the earliest stages of home construction and continuing on for as long as the home is inhabited.¹⁵⁴ The main gate is the vulnerable interface between the home and the outside world; exterior displays of ritual ephemera play a critical role in situating the home within the larger environment of the street and neighborhood. This process is necessarily ongoing because features in the lived environment may change unexpectedly. For

¹⁵⁴ Ole Bruun has documented the post-Mao *fengshui* revival in the Chengdu region. See Ole Bruun, *Fengshui in China: Geomantic Divination Between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), chapter 4.

instance, the construction activities in a neighborhood may alter its existing layout and require a household to respond to negative topographical features using *fengshui* practices. In some cases, rural neighborhoods will collectively fund the construction of protective walls or other structures to deflect a perceived danger in the changing *fengshui* of the area. A *fengshui* specialist may be hired to come “see fengshui” 看风水, a process that usually requires a geomantic compass and a traditional almanac.¹⁵⁵ What is “seen” here is not only in reference to what is optically perceived through the eyes, but to the entire range of techniques used by an experienced *fengshui* practitioner.

The display of ritual ephemera on household doorways throughout Mianzhu is thus closely tied to concerns around *fengshui*. For instance, to counter the effect of negative *fengshui* elements around the home, additional objects are added over the door lintel to supplement the protective power of door deities, such as mirrors, scissors, sharp objects, or *bagua* symbols. In this particular doorway, a mirror is added to deflect the potential dangers of the alley that faces the door (**fig. 27**). In older neighborhoods such as this one, the complex spatial and temporal histories of *fengshui* activities and ritual print display are made visible in the build up of paper residue around doors and gates. These activities can be collectively understood as an active and multi-sensorial engagement with the town’s changing environment.

In the same way that the winter street markets harness auspicious time and space for trade, door displays also harness auspicious time and space to suit the interests of the household. Mirroring the agency of the marketplace, these door displays can also be understood as agentic assemblages, spatio-temporal configurations of both objects and practices that transform the experience of a lived space. It is worth noting that in all the

¹⁵⁵ Bruun, *Fengshui in China*, 148-50.

displays I studied, there was not a single household that sought to repair or renew the displays when they started to decay and fall apart. When I asked about this, one woman replied, “We only renew these during the Lunar New Year. It would be strange to replace them at any time of year, so we just let them fall off by themselves. Its best not to disturb them as it wouldn’t bode well for the home.”¹⁵⁶ Another man replied that to renew the images at any other time of year “would be of no use whatsoever.” Regardless of the interpretation, the displays are simply left to decay without intervention, a practice that speaks to the integrity of the temporal cycle as critical component of ritual efficacy.

I will briefly mention here two of the orally transmitted narratives that were repeated to me during my research visits to further illustrate how the adaptive and performative nature of posting door deities is distilled in the oral tradition. During one of my walks through an urban residential neighborhood in Mianzhu, an older woman standing in the street approached me and asked me why I was observing all the household doorways in the street. Once I explained my scholarly interest in the subject, she eagerly shared with me the following tale:

Do you know why people started putting up door deities? It all started with one of the Tang emperors who couldn’t sleep at night because he thought demons were going to catch him! He could only sleep when his two best warriors stood right outside his bedroom door, but this was so much trouble so he then came up with the idea of painting their likenesses outside his door. This worked so well, that everyone began putting up pictures of door deities. [Laughs while gesturing at the doors in the street.] That’s what I heard people say anyway.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Conversation with a local resident in Mianzhu, Sichuan, July 2006.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

I heard this narrative in Mianzhu countless times during the course of my research, although the versions have many different twists and variations that I won't repeat here.¹⁵⁸ It is essentially a story about the origins of ritually displaying door deities where two human warriors are suddenly transformed into ritually efficacious images known as “door deities.” In every version of the story, the Tang emperor tries to resolve his insomnia by strategically placing their painted likenesses on a doorway. With proven success, their specific function as protective door deities is established, giving rise to the subsequent ritualization of hanging up door deities. While the actual historical origins of this practice is another issue of debate, this popular narrative captures a subtle point concerning the role of the painted likeness, which is not simply a representation of a pre-existing deity but in itself a transformative process whereby the creation of the painted image in a particular site is equated with the birth of a pair of deities for each side of the door. The story conveys the idea that the painted likenesses of the warriors may be equally or even more powerful than the living warriors themselves.

Another popular tale that was often repeated to me concerns a monstrous beast known as the *nian* 年 beast, which is also the character for “year.” The central message of these stories is that the *nian* beast must be frightened away from the home with bright colors and loud sounds or else it might eat people. It is for this reason that people wear bright colors and set off firecrackers in front of their homes during the Lunar New Year.

It is possible that people repeatedly shared these popular tales with me because they saw

¹⁵⁸ According to historical accounts and legends, these warriors guarded the residence of the Tang dynasty emperor, Tang Taizong (599-649), who eventually had their images painted on the palace gates. In the different versions of the story, these noble warriors protected the kingdom, frightened off demons, and helped cure the emperor from his affliction of nightmares and insomnia. Door deity stories, legends, and myths are documented in Michael Kardos, “God of the Gate, Protector of the Door: Door Gods (Menshen) in Chinese Popular Religion” (masters thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, 1998) and in Wang Shucun 王树村, *Zhongguo menshen hua* 中国门神画 [Chinese Door-God Art] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2004).

me in the role of a researcher, and thus attempted to impart what they saw as historical or cultural knowledge on the topic of *nianhua*. Both of these stories are widely repeated in the folk art literature and other popular accounts of *nianhua* culture in the mass media. Yet regardless of the motives, the stories clearly speak to a strong preoccupation with protecting the home and the vulnerable household doorway by all creative means possible.

In recognizing the active role of *nianhua* users, it becomes impossible to ignore the wide range of everyday goods and images that end up in the role of door deities. While folk art discourses have limited *nianhua* to popular prints and paintings, the actual diversity of ritual practices encompasses many other types of goods that can be appropriated to perform the *role* of *nianhua*. Cultural theorist Michel de Certeau has argued that consumption should be theorized as “another production,” albeit a “hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of ‘production’ (television, urban development, commerce, etc.), and because the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves consumers any *place* in which they can indicate what they *make* or *do* with the products of these systems.” For de Certeau, the everyday practice of consumption is inherently creative and productive of meaning, yet less visible because it “does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order.”¹⁵⁹ In the case of these changing *nianhua* displays, the doorway serves as a distinct ritual space for such creative forms of consumption that mark out auspicious time and space.

¹⁵⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiii.

Reunion and Regeneration: *Nianhua* and the Lunar New Year

Having examined the changing modes of *nianhua* activity in the home and market, I will now situate *nianhua* within a broader repertoire of ritual practices tied to the Lunar New Year. The timed renewal of *nianhua* on household doorways can only be appreciated when it is connected to the many rites of renewal carried out during the “turning the year” or what anthropologist Stephan Feuchtwang calls “the annual apocalypse.” In his study of Chinese popular religion, Feuchtwang has argued that despite the presence of orthodox discourses expounding a well-ordered cosmic hierarchy, the Lunar New Year festival often betrays “another demonic cosmos of great destructive powers and the capacity to withhold or command them.”¹⁶⁰ Thus what is celebrated is not a “benign imperial cosmos” but the family and community’s survival during the apocalyptic death of the old year and the precarious birth of the new year.¹⁶¹ According to Feuchtwang, the completion of this passage is thus a powerful manifestation of renewal and reunion that most Chinese families cherish: “The eve is a return home and a completion of the family household. At the very least a member of a Chinese family would feel absence from it. Many would regret their absence poignantly.”¹⁶²

Building on this, anthropologist Charles Stafford’s study of contemporary Chinese Lunar New Year activities divides the festival’s ritual activities into that which happens in the days leading up to the Lunar New Year and that which occurs immediately afterwards. Prior to the turning of the year, a range of rituals are held for dealing with the movements of spirits, including “1) the ‘sending off’ of gods 2) the

¹⁶⁰ Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion*, 55.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 25.

‘greeting’ of ancestors 3) the ‘sending off’ of ancestors 4) the ‘greeting’ of gods.”¹⁶³ At the moment of the Lunar New Year’s arrival, in conjunction with the ancestral greeting, “then for many days following, a series of reunions are held between various categories of living persons, including family members, friends, and colleagues.”¹⁶⁴ Stafford argues that these activities underscore the preoccupation with renewal and reunion during a “crucial calendrical juncture,” when “one encounters a fleeting solution to the separation constraint: a suspended moment during which work is halted, divisions and death overcome, the pace of visits intensified, and meals and games prolonged as if people could produce, through sheer collective will, a state of permanent, celebratory reunion.”¹⁶⁵

In Mianzhu, I observed a less structured approach to celebrating the Lunar New Year, where these elements were still present in varying degrees or not at all, depending on the family or individual. For instance, the string of reunion meals with friends and family would begin well before the Lunar New Year and continue for weeks afterwards. To give a sense of the changing practices tied to the turning of the year and the role of *nianhua* within them, I include here additional excerpts from the interview session with Gong Jinlan 巩金兰, a woman in her mid-fifties who grew up in rural Mianzhu as a child before moving to the town center as a young adult. I met Gong through my parents who have many friends and relatives in Sichuan, so there was an immediate sense of familiarity and intimacy when we met for tea in her urban apartment. When I asked about her earliest memories of the Lunar New Year, she recounts how the usual Lunar

¹⁶³ Charles Stafford, *Separation and Reunion in Modern China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 31.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

New Year activities continued to take place during the Cultural Revolution, when she was a young girl:

Life here did not seem to be affected much by the Cultural Revolution. I don't remember ever seeing any Red Guards or anybody getting in trouble for celebrating the Lunar New Year. During the Cultural Revolution, you could still buy simple mimeographed prints [油印] in the rural open-air markets. These were made on red paper with auspicious words and door deity images [Gestures the shapes of the small squares with her fingers.] We continued all our Lunar New Year activities, but they just weren't as showy and loud as before...¹⁶⁶

This account is significant because the prevailing view of the *nianhua* industry is that it ceased to exist during the Cultural Revolution, when works were officially confiscated, destroyed, and banned. However, Gong's account serves as a reminder that these policies were not uniformly enforced in all areas, especially in rural areas less affected by national political movements. Furthermore, researchers have also documented instances where images of Chairman Mao and communist soldiers were circulated and consumed during the years of the Cultural Revolution in the place of door deities or other household deities.¹⁶⁷ I go on to ask Gong how the Lunar New Year activities have evolved since those days, to which she gives a detailed account of both past and present practices:

Celebrating the Lunar New Year was much more fun in the past than it is today. As soon as the eleventh lunar month arrived, we'd start curing meat, fish, and pig heads and tails. We'd cure the fish so that there would be "plenitude year after year" [年年有余] and we'd prepare pig heads and tails so that "what begins also ends" [有头有尾]. During the twelfth lunar month, we'd start all the preparations

¹⁶⁶ Gong Jinlan, in discussion with the author in Mianzhu, Sichuan, June 2006.

¹⁶⁷ See Stefan R. Landsberger, "The Deification of Mao: Religious Imagery and Practices during the Cultural Revolution and Beyond," in *China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives*, ed. Woei Lien Chong (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 139-184.

in the home, including a full cleaning and the preparing of special foods. On the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month, for the *laba* festival [腊八节], we had *laba* congee to celebrate. Before, we used to make this by putting all sorts of ingredients in a pot, but now the restaurants make them with eight standard ingredients and people no longer go to the trouble of cooking it at home. But you know such dishes always taste better when they are made in the home! Ah, I really do miss those homemade dishes! [Sighs and rubs her stomach.]¹⁶⁸

In mentioning specific recipes, it is possible to see direct parallels between the renewal of *nianhua* and the preparation of auspicious dishes. For instance, the preparation of certain foods is tied to the sounds of their names, which bear homophonic connections to auspicious phrases, such as the cooking of fish (*yu* 鱼) to signal plentitude (*yu* 余) or the phrase “plentitude year after year” (*niannian youyu* 年年有余). At a time when the home becomes a ritually charged space for the renewal of family ties, these activities work together to activate auspicious speech. Gong goes on to elaborate on the many traditional recipes that would be painstakingly prepared at this time of year, including meat stuffed tofu cakes, steamed red buns, sweet yams, fish, chestnuts, popcorn, and other flavored sweets. She then goes on to discuss the particular timed renewal of images in the home, including the stove deity image that would be replaced on the twenty-third day:

After the *laba* banquets, it was time for people to start heading home and we would plan for visits to the ancestral burial sites. Before the twenty-third of the twelveth lunar month, we would have to go to the ancestral graves to burn money, candles, incense, and paper goods. By this time, all the hired help in the house had to leave so that there would be no outsiders in the home. We’d also make offerings to the stove deity on the twenty-third and put up his new picture next to our wood stove. Then all the children would get so excited because we would get

¹⁶⁸ Gong Jinlan, in discussion with the author in Mianzhu, Sichuan, June 2006.

to eat stove deity candy made of ginger, dough, and all sorts of flavors. On the last day of the year, we would have our big New Year's Eve dinner and early the next day there was a race to the temple to see who could light the first incense of the year, which was considered most auspicious. Today people don't go there themselves to light the incense, but they'll hire somebody to do it for them! Can you imagine this? [Throws her hands in the air as if in exasperation.]¹⁶⁹

In yet another parallel between food and *nianhua* display, the renewal of the stove deity image coincides with the preparation of stove deity candy, which is sometimes smeared onto the stove deity's mouth so that the deity provides a positive report on the family's affairs when he makes his annual journey to the divine realms. When I ask her to discuss the ritual display of any other images in the home, she replies:

We used to always hang up door deities and spring couplets. When I was a child, these were simple mimeographs, the kind made on red paper. There were no shiny prints back then, those only came later. We also had double-leaf doors back then, instead of the single-leaf ones in our apartment today. We'd place the door deities facing each other and my grandfather wrote the spring couplets. By the first day of the New Year, the entire house had to be ready with new images. Inside the house, we had handprinted works of people, flowers, and other auspicious images. We had an altar [神台] set up in the living room [堂屋] so that you would be facing the ancestors as soon as you opened the doors to the room. We put the names of the ancestors there with couplets on either side, and an incense burner in the middle surrounded by offerings such as food, liquor, flowers, and the back end of a roasted pig.¹⁷⁰

Gong Jinlan's description here captures the full transformation of the home into a ritual space for ancestral worship before the Lunar New Year. The renewal of the exterior

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

doorway with door deities and spring couplets coincides with the renewal of the indoor altar, which also bears couplets on either side. When I ask her whether her family has continued to display such images over the years, she explained the major shifts in how the Lunar New Year is celebrated:

Today we are in apartments with single-leaf doors and we just put up a single *fudao* [福倒] image or nothing at all.¹⁷¹ We buy them in the bookstores where they sell really nice ones. These cost more and you can't find them in the street markets, which only sell the crude ones. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, Mianzhu has been growing really fast, with paved roads in places where there were only dirt roads. Now people go to eat in restaurants and play *mahjong* all day. There are TVs and computers everywhere you go and little communication between the generations in one family. Before, the kids would perform songs and dances for the elders to get some more New Year's cash out of them. The elders would also tell stories around the pictures in the home. My grandma couldn't read, but she had lots of stories to tell and she liked to perform a fan dance for the kids. There's no longer that kind of interaction between the generations. Even *nianhua* is commercialized and made for art collectors.¹⁷²

Gong's detailed account sheds light on the significant role these year-end ritual practices play in shaping family relationships and in maintaining the ties between the younger and older generations. It also situates the annual renewal of *nianhua* within a broader repertoire of ritual activities tied to renewal, including cooking, feasting, cleaning, reuniting with ancestors, playing games, and sharing stories. In performing these various activities, participating family members and friends strengthen their existing social bonds and create new ones. They also renew the bonds between the living

¹⁷¹ The *fudao* image is the written character for "prosperity" (*fu* 福) displayed upside down on a doorway, window, or wall. Since the character for "upside down" (*dao* 倒) is a homophone for "arrive" (*dao* 到), this method of display serves as a rebus image for the phrase "prosperity arrives" (*fudao* 福到).

¹⁷² Ibid.

and the deceased and between the worldly and the divine. It should also be added here that these activities take place in the realm of the marketplace as well, where company bosses are often expected to host banquets for their employees while all debts are collected and squared. It is thus possible to see how “pursuing the auspicious, repelling the portentous” is a concept that comes into play across a wide range of ritual practices tied to renewal, regeneration, and reunion in all facets of life. As an open-ended concept, it encompasses a vast range of associations both secular and divine. When asked, “What does ‘auspicious’ [吉祥] mean?” Gong Jinlan enthusiastically replied, “All things good!”¹⁷³

In selecting these particular excerpts from the interview, I am also highlighting the changing nature of these activities, which inevitably respond to shifting trends in fashion, technology, and the architectural configurations of the family’s lived space, such as the simplified modes of *nianhua* display on single-leaf apartment doors. Gong gives many examples of how the festival practices are changing, including the increasing number of people who eat in restaurants or who hire people to burn incense for them at the temple. She also points to how TVs and computers are replacing direct forms of human communication, producing a divide between the younger and older generations. Later in the discussion, Gong mentions a recent survey that reported seventy percent of Chinese families watch the Spring Festival Gala broadcast on the official CCTV networks across the nation. The gala is a variety performance not unlike the Lunar New Year street parades that are held on the first day of the New Year, although the gala shifts the spectacle experienced indoors and to the eve of the Lunar New Year, from about 8:00

¹⁷³ Ibid.

pm to 1:00 am. For Gong, these changes have taken away from the intimacy and joy of the festival, which was “much more fun in the past.”¹⁷⁴

Interestingly, this nostalgic sentiment repeatedly shows up in the scholarly literature on *nianhua*, including a recent essay by art historian Bo Songnian, who laments the commercialization of the *nianhua* industry and the decline in traditional rituals tied to the Lunar New Year.¹⁷⁵ However it should be kept in mind that these are often urban perspectives that are not necessarily shared by those living in rural areas. During my research trips, rural residents or those who still return from the cities to their rural homes for the Lunar New Year often spoke with great enthusiasm over the elaborate festivities and homemade meals that were still carried out at home. For instance, one male rural resident argued that the traditional Lunar New Year rituals were not dying out at all but actually growing and expanding due to the greater wealth in his village:

We display many new images around the home nowadays, as there is so much variety to choose from and the images are not expensive. They also get more beautiful every year. Many people are better off now, and they have the better means to celebrate the Lunar New Year, but certainly some are more fortunate than others.¹⁷⁶

Overall, the emerging *nianhua* displays in Mianzhu and the firsthand accounts of Lunar New Year activities reveal diverse approaches to *nianhua* consumption that are not connected by a unified set of ideals or beliefs but rather a range of conflicting perceptions and attitudes. I have therefore emphasized a performative approach to the ritual practices that shape *nianhua*'s significance in the home, where a creative array of strategies are

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Bo Songnian 薄松年, “Xingshuai cunwang zhongde nianhua yishu” 兴衰存亡中的年画艺术 [The Rise, Fall, Preservation, and Loss of Nianhua Art] *Art Observation* 美术观察 2 (2005): 8-10.

¹⁷⁶ Conversation with a local resident in Mianzhu, Sichuan, June 2006.

employed. These strategies reflect the changing conditions of everyday life, including the continuous influx of new goods, ideas, and technologies. The rural or urban home is thus a permeable space, intimately connected to larger trends in the marketplace. At the same time, the home serves as a site where emerging goods and technologies may be appropriated for new uses and ritual ends.

Just as the periodic market harnesses auspicious time and space to maximize its potential for profit, so do the household displays of *nianhua*. The rhythms of the home and market are thus synchronized with the circulation of *nianhua*, supporting a wide range of activities tied to everyday life and livelihood. I will stress here the importance of the dynamic and dialectical relationship between ephemeral *nianhua* and the processes of ritualization that define and shape their meaning. Caught in a continuous cycle of renewal and decay, the works themselves are always changing and in flux. At the same time, the ritual practices tied to *nianhua* are also evolving in tandem with the changing conditions and spaces of everyday life. Perhaps the only stabilizing element here is the timing, the climatic turning of the lunar year.

Lineage-making Strategies for Reclaiming Authority in the *Nianhua* Marketplace

I will now turn to the ritualization processes employed by local printmakers to rebuild their workshops in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. In particular, I will examine how local lineage-holding printmakers strategically reassert their identities and the ritual efficacy of their works in order to compete in the emerging marketplace. The notion of a *nianhua* “lineage” usually refers to a familial line of *nianhua* producers who construct and assert their lineage-holding status through a variety of means, including

their family genealogy, signature production skills, and territorial claims to a particular production site that may or may not belong to the family. Since the late 1970s, Mianzhu's *nianhua* lineages have had to actively reconstruct their lineage-holding status with the help of few supporting documents or none at all because these were lost or confiscated during the Cultural Revolution.

It must be noted here that the term “lineage” is a problematic construct, which has been unpacked in recent scholarship as an anthropological fiction with no direct correspondence to Chinese concepts of *zong* 宗, *jia* 家, *xing* 姓, *shi* 氏, *fang* 房, *pai* 派, or *zu* 族, to name a few of the related terms. The recent sinological literature has thus pushed for a shift away from an apriori rationalization of the functional characteristics of lineage and towards an analysis of specific practices to address how the social rules, regulations, and operational principles of lineage must be performed and lived out in practice to be realized. Allen Chun has stressed this point and warned against the imposition of European concepts of “descent,” especially in the concept of *zong*, which “may be viewed as a line of descent, but its essential meaning really has to do with the transmission of ancestral rites and obligations.”¹⁷⁷ It is a concept that stresses a “hierarchical continuity between ascendant and descendant” yet does not call up lineage segmentation or clan familism as do the terms *fang* or *jia*.¹⁷⁸ Extending Chun's argument, Mayfair Yang cites Bourdieu's emphasis on situational practice and agency to advocate for an approach to lineage that moves away from focusing on the normative or “official” rules of lineage and towards an examination of the “the daily conversions of these rules

¹⁷⁷ Allen Chun in Allen Chun, John Clammer, Patricia Ebrey, David Faure, Stephan Feuchtwang, Ying-Kuei Huang, P. Steven Sangren, Mayfair Yang, “The Lineage-Village Complex in Southeastern China: A Long Footnote in the Anthropology of Kinship [and Comments and Reply],” *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 3 (1996), 439.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

into strategies of power and counterpower by active agents exercising ‘practical kinship.’”¹⁷⁹ Working along similar lines, the work of Sangren and Scheffler examines how a diverse range of lineage organizations, involving both kin and non-kin, are able to change structurally to adapt to diverse environments.¹⁸⁰ In the case of Mianhu’s *nianhua* lineages, this adaptive power is enacted when the rules and principles around lineage transmission are manipulated, recast, and redeployed to access its symbolic capital in the marketplace.

To unpack these issues, the following discussion draws on my interview sessions with the elder heads of the Wang, Chen, and Li family workshops. It is evident in each case that the elders have well-rehearsed presentations of their workshop histories, as they are accustomed to speaking with visiting scholars and officials. I was first introduced to the workshops by my mentor Liu Zhumei 刘竹梅, an artist and *nianhua* researcher at the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum who has formed long-standing relationships with the workshops. During our initial meetings, Liu referred to my personal background as an American born Chinese whose father came from a small village in Sichuan. She explained that I was interested in exploring my cultural and ancestral roots by studying *nianhua*, a topic that I would share with Western audiences. Liu’s skillful introduction served as a powerful icebreaker in conversation as it provided a personal dimension to the project.

In the following discussion, I will first address the ritualized forms of copying and innovation within the Wang family lineage of print designers (*huashi* 画师) who have extant lineage documents, including genealogy charts, sketches, and inherited paintings

¹⁷⁹ Mayfair Yang, “The Lineage-Village Complex (Comment to),” 446.

¹⁸⁰ Key studies include P. Steven Sangren, “Traditional Chinese Corporations: Beyond Kinship,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 43 (1984): 391-415; Scheffler, Harold W. “Filiation and affiliation” *Man* 20 (1985): 1-21.

that carry the valuable traces of older generations. In these instances, the auspicious act of copying and redesigning these works is central to the continuous flow of skilled knowledge required for the prosperity of the family lineage and livelihood. This continuity allows lineage holders to experiment and innovate authoritatively within an established tradition. I will then address how the Li and Chen workshops (respectively known as the Northern and Southern schools of Mianzhu *nianhua*) link their production practices with territorial claims, as a way of (re)constructing their lineages without lineage documents. The different lineage-making approaches reveal competing strategies in the production of efficacious images intended to “pursue the auspicious, repel the portentous.” In particular, the workshops’ strategic performance of lineage discourses and practices plays a critical role in legitimizing their authoritative presence in the marketplace, especially in framing their prints and paintings as ritually efficacious items for a broad audience.

Wang Family Lineage

Wang Xingru 王星儒 (b. 1922) is a seventh generation lineage holder in a long line of professional designers or *huashi*, as they are locally known.¹⁸¹ As a family trained in print design, the Wang painters specialized in figure paintings of popular deities executed with fine brushwork and detail, a type of painting referred to as *gongbi hua* 工笔画. They were seen as ritual experts familiar with local religious practices and existing traditions of visual iconography. They make sculptures, architectural designs, coffins, prints, paintings, and murals. With the support of their long-standing lineage, the Wang

¹⁸¹ The term *huashi* is broadly used for those who design the original paintings for reproduction as prints. These designers are usually literate or semi-literate and live in urban areas.

designers contributed creatively to these traditions by bringing to each project their distinct repertoire of designs.¹⁸²

The following discussions are based on a group conversation with Wang during the summer of 2006. I was accompanied by Liu Zhumei, my mentor, and Ning Zhiqi 宁志奇, a historian and director at Mianzhu's Cultural Relics Bureau. Both Liu and Ning were well acquainted with Wang, who had collaborated with them on past research projects concerning *nianhua* history. The discussions were conducted in the local dialect, with Liu and Ning translating obscure terms into Mandarin when necessary.

It is significant that Wang chose to share his lineage documents before taking out his many sketches and scroll paintings. In doing so, he first establishes the authority of his lineage-holding status, providing an appropriate social context for the viewing of his own painted works. From the onset of the conversation, Wang took a lead in presenting the information and guiding the discussion. It was immediately evident that he was experienced in sharing his workshop's history with visiting scholars and officials. Wang brought out a wooden box that was fully packed with various lineage documents, however he chose only a few items for us to document and photograph (**fig.28**).

According to Wang, these rare documents were kept safe during the Cultural Revolution because his father Wang Tianbao 王天保 (1885-1971) took great risks to protect them and managed to bury them in a secret location. Wang Xingru was able to retrieve his father's precious documents only after the *nianhua* revival got underway in the late 1970s. Many

¹⁸² Local archives list many names for the family lineages of professional *huashi* designers, including the Ma, Zhang, He, and Wang families. For a partial list of these lineages including the names of individual designers, see Liu Zhumei 刘竹梅 and Ning Zhiqi 宁志奇, "Mianzhu nianhua huashi ji yishu chengjiu" 绵竹年画画师及艺术成就 [The huashi designers of Mianzhu nianhua and their artistic achievement] in *Zhongguo Mianzhu nianhua* 中国绵竹年画 [China's Mianzhu nianhua], ed. Yu Jundao 于俊道 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 103-113.

of the older works were in a state of serious decay, as worms had started eating through the documents while they were underground.

The first work he showed us is his copy of the family's genealogy chart, a traced copy that is composed like an unbound book, with a front and back cover and seven loose pages in the middle bearing diagrams of the family lines. The writings on the front cover are particularly significant here because they demonstrate the intimate link between a patrilineal bloodline and a profession (**fig. 29**). The center of the front cover foregrounds the family name and bears the four large characters: "Wang family genealogy chart" 王氏宗谱. The back cover reads, "May the Wang family school flourish forever" 王氏班派, 千古流芳. Here, the first four characters name the lineage as the "Wang family school," where the kinship term for "clan name" (*shi* 氏) is combined with the term for "professional school" (*bangpai* 帮派).

In the center of the front cover, on either side of the family name, a pair of antithetical couplets references the central importance of the family profession: "Because it is so difficult to establish a profession, keep in mind the work of your ancestors. To sustain one's achievements is not easy, thus future generations should be warned." 守诚不易戒儿孙, 创业维艰思祖远. This couplet is flanked on either side by another set of couplets that call for ritual offerings to be made to the ancestors, in honor of their achievements: "May the virtuous achievements and honorable names of our ancestors flow forth for hundreds of generations. Through spring frost and autumn dew, may they receive sincere offerings for thousands of years." 祖德宗功芳流百代, 春霜秋露祀笃千年. The top of the genealogy chart cover has a set of horizontally inscribed verses that read:

“With sacrificial offerings of fragrant foods, may the ancestors be honored with care and devotion” 禴祀蒸嘗, 慎忠追远.

These couplets directly link the preservation of ancestral memory to sustaining a form of livelihood. The center couplets repel the portentous by warning future generations against the difficulties of sustaining the family profession. The flanking couplets attract the auspicious by announcing the virtue and longevity of the lineage. Ancestral virtue is characterized as “flowing” 流 through the generations, like a river or stream.¹⁸³ The arrangement of the couplets on the genealogy cover mirrors the spring couplets placed around his studio entrance, reinforcing the efficacious power of the genealogy chart (**fig 30**). Like spring couplets protecting the entrance to a family’s abode, these inscribed couplets appear to protect the names listed in the genealogy chart. The written names of ancestors carry a powerful living presence in the context of lineage documents. This is most evident in the ancestral tablet placed on the Wang family altar, which bears the names of his forefathers (**fig. 31**). This tablet, which is placed next to a photo of Wang’s father, occupies the center of the altar where the Wang family members place regular offerings of food, drink, and incense. The altar itself is located in a prominent place in the center back wall of Wang’s painting studio, on a tall cabinet. This spatial arrangement joins the ancestral shrine with the work area in such a way that the ancestors appear to be keeping watch over the room, and over the survival of the family profession.

¹⁸³ Keeping with the imagery of flowing water, a double meaning for “school” 派 is a river’s “tributary.” Like tributaries carving new paths to expand the reaches of the river, so do the lines on the genealogy chart expand and fan out in complex and unpredictable patterns. This metaphor supports an understanding of lineage as connected to a common source yet also diverse and evolving in its continuity.

Keeping with their family traditions, Wang received a version of the chart from his father and made a copy of it by placing tracing paper over the original and reinscribing the characters by hand with a brush. Each inside page represents a single generation 世, which are numbered at the top of each page, followed by the names of the parents of that generation of offspring (**fig. 32**).¹⁸⁴ While the names of female family members are included, the lines of descent are only continued through the male offspring. When multiple sons appear in the same generation, each son would receive a set of lineage documents at the father's discretion. Upon copying the chart, Wang added the name of his youngest brother's only son, the only male in his generation and the last name to appear on the chart. Ritually traced by each lineage holder, the transmission of the chart is considered an auspicious activity that must be continually performed in order to maintain the family profession and to "sustain one's achievements" for all future generations.

The close relationship between the copied mark and genealogical transmission has been long recognized by scholars of Chinese painting history. Chinese art historian Wen Fong, in his discussion of Chinese literati painting and calligraphy, has noted: "The artistic process of replication parallels the anthropological concept of genealogy. Just as one's mortal body both replaces and transforms that of one's ancestors, the life and authority of artistic tradition, through endless replication, can remain forever ancient and forever new."¹⁸⁵ In this genealogical framework, the "styles of the canonical masters, as transmitted through tracing copies and replicas, may thus be considered a kind of DNA

¹⁸⁴ The names of all the siblings in the same generation share a common character after their last name. The names of the wives for each son in the family are included but not the names of the daughter's husbands, reflecting the understanding that daughters were married out of the family while the sons bring their wives into the family.

¹⁸⁵ Wen C. Fong, "Why Chinese Painting Is History," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 2 (June, 2003): 262.

imprint from which all subsequent idioms emerge.”¹⁸⁶ Although Wen Fong is referencing elite literati traditions, the genealogical dimension of the copied mark also carries a powerful currency in Mianzhu *nianhua*. In Mianzhu, the painting term *linmo* 临摹 is loosely used today to reference tracing or “side by side” freehand copying. As I will show below, this term is flexible in meaning and does not refer strictly to an exact copy; instead it often carries with it connotations of genealogical transmission and revelation.

This is evident in a set of paintings completed by Wang Xingru’s grandfather Wang Zhengfa 王正发 (1865-1929), who traced by hand a complete set of a Qing dynasty version of *Gengzhitu* 耕织图 or “Plowing and Weaving Pictures.” In copying this prestigious set of prints that was nationally circulated by Emperor Kangxi in 1696, Wang Zhengfa accomplishes two key tasks. First, he appropriates the visual language of royalty, authority, and moral virtue, resituating these values within the context of the Wang family lineage. Secondly, he uses this as a vehicle to display his own embodied mastery of the brush, a vital skill that is transmitted from generation to generation within the family line.

Inspired by an earlier set of “Plowing and Weaving Pictures” from the Song period, Kangxi began distributing his own commissioned version of the prints as a form of state propaganda. The pictures were designed to boost the emperor’s public image as a benevolent Confucian ruler despite his Manchu heritage.¹⁸⁷ Kangxi’s prints bear idealized scenes of rural families working diligently to support the nation with agriculture and silk weaving as encouraged by the court. Each scene is accompanied by Kangxi’s own poems

¹⁸⁶ Fong, 262. The major terms for copying in Chinese painting reveal a broad spectrum of approaches: *lin* 临, *mo* 摹, *fang* 仿, *ni* 拟, *fenben* 粉本, and *beilin* 背临.

¹⁸⁷ For a complete reproduction and description of the forty-six “Plowing and Weaving Pictures” circulated by Kangxi, see Wang Chaosheng 王潮生, *Zhongguo gudai gengzhitu* 中国古代耕织图 [Plowing and weaving pictures of ancient China] (Beijing: Zhongguo nongye chubanshe, 1995).

that exhort Confucian virtues among the common populace, such as filial piety, frugality, and hard work. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, different popularized versions of “Plowing and Weaving Pictures” were circulated in regional print centers as ritually efficacious images to attract bountiful harvest, prosperity, and social harmony.¹⁸⁸

In Mianzhu, Wang Zhengfa’s decision to copy the Kangxi version may reflect its local status as the most “traditional” or “classic” model of plowing and weaving pictures. By resituating these auspicious prints in the context of his family lineage, Wang Zhengfa expands the workshop’s repertoire of images while appropriating the prints’ status and prestige. As an interesting parallel to this, a pair of antithetical phrases on the back cover of the Wang genealogy chart calls for the blessings of the state to support the family profession: “A riteous nation is harmoniously ordered like the stars in the sky, may upright officials bring us peace. True wealth and honor are as precious as jade; may every generation prosper” 国正天星顺, 官清明自安, 玉石真富贵, 世代永昌隆 (**fig. 33**).

In contrast to the carvers, printers, and those trained in the final stages of coloring and painting, *nianhua* designers are primarily recognized for their ability to design and paint many different kinds of ritually efficacious images. In this context, Wang Zhengfa’s “Plowing and Weaving Pictures” can be understood as a display of his mastery of the brush in both painting and calligraphy. In particular, it showcases his ability to paint a wide range of figures, including men, women, and children engaged in many different activities of daily life and labor. As Wang Xingru explains, their family lineage specializes in figural painting: “We specialized in painting figures, which in the past were called *gongbi* pictures. We painted deities for home altars, such as the deity of the home,

¹⁸⁸ For this study, I consulted a complete painted version of the Kangxi “Plowing and Weaving Pictures” held in the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, Canada, with forty-six leaves of paintings in two albums. These works are dated to the late eighteenth century or later.

Guanyin, Zhongkui, the Wealth Deity, the Eight Immortals, the Sixteen Arhats, Eighteen Lohans, and the Twenty Four Filial Acts.”¹⁸⁹

Wang’s grandfather painstakingly rendered the complete set of 46 prints of Kangxi’s “Plowing and Weaving Pictures” into a set of paintings by laying thin paper over the prints then copying the lines with brush and ink. In contrast to the original prints, Wang’s painted copy bears the delicate nuances of Wang’s energetic brushwork. If one compares a scene from Kangxi’s prints to Wang’s version, it is possible to see how the brushwork comes to the fore in Wang’s copy. In Kangxi’s version, the last scene in a series of plowing images depicts a family making sacrificial offerings to the deity of agriculture (**fig. 34**). It is a hand colored woodblock print reproduced after a painting by Jiao Bingzhen 焦秉贞, who was commissioned by Kangxi to design the entire set. Not shown in this image are Kangxi’s calligraphic verses added to the top of the page. In Wang Zhengfa’s traced version of this same scene, the calligraphy along the top is also absent although the calligraphy inside the frame of the picture is faithfully reproduced (**fig. 35**). It is not clear whether the version he was tracing included the calligraphy.

In contrast to the Kangxi version, Wang’s copy only includes the outlines of the image, leaving out the shading and the coloring. Wang’s hand painted lines stand out against the background, with each brushstroke visible on the surface of the delicate paper. In comparing the minute details of the altar, straw roofing, and fencing, Wang’s version bears fewer lines to mark out a textured surface in an abbreviated manner. The short grass and vines growing at the edges of the walls are only indicated by a few dots, delineating the compositional space these details would occupy if one were to paint them in with color. It is possible that these works were painted as designs to be carved into

¹⁸⁹ Wang Xingru in discussion with the author, Mianzhu, Sichuan, June 2006.

woodblocks, although the lengthy collection of 46 images would have made this a very expensive and laborious task. It is more likely that Wang's painted version served as a painting model, to be reproduced as paintings within the family workshop. Passed down through the family and copied by each lineage holder, the work becomes a vehicle for transmitting and performing the embodied mastery of the brush.

Copying lineage paintings is thus a means of attaining certain skills and displaying one's accomplishment. According to Wang, his father decided to train him in the family profession instead of sending him to school:

I learned the art at the age of eleven. It wasn't possible for my family to continue my education, and my father had a lot of work to do. There were often people coming over to rush him in his work, there was so much work and not enough people to do it. So he asked me to start working. That's how I learned to paint.¹⁹⁰

Thus instead of attending school, Wang learned how to read from his grandfather, who was going blind at the time: "When I was learning to paint, his eyes could no longer see. If I didn't recognize a character, I'd write it on the palm of his hand with my finger. Then he'd tell me how to read the character."¹⁹¹ Sparked by our viewing of his grandfather's painting, Wang's recollected memories reveal how he learned to read and write by copying characters onto his grandfather's palm. This intimate act speaks to the significance of copying in ways that are not recorded on paper but only in memory. These forms of copying are as important as the ones that leave physical traces and speak to a kind of on-going transmission of knowledge through touch and observation.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

Scholars of Chinese art and drama have emphasized certain difference between the Chinese concept of *mo* 摹 (usually translated as “imitate” or “copy”) and the Western notion of mimesis, which is usually associated with a likeness or semblance in outward form. In his study of *mo* in Chinese drama, Chen has noted, “To understand the Chinese concept of *mo*, one must also understand the Chinese concept of aesthetic truth, especially theatrical truth. Revealed in all major traditional Chinese arts, such as painting and drama, is the idea that aesthetic truth is not empirical. Rather, truth lies beyond mere superficial likeness.”¹⁹² Citing drama critics from the Yuan dynasty to present day, Chen argues that *mo* is “closer in meaning to the words ‘revelation’ or ‘display’ than to ‘imitation’ or ‘duplication.’”¹⁹³ Chen’s retranslation here sheds light on the Wang family’s “Plowing and Weaving Pictures,” which are not simply replicas of Kangxi’s prints but transformed copies that also reveal and display the genealogical marks of the family lineage.

In examining the Wang family genealogy chart and lineage paintings, it is possible to see a complex form of shared authorship that is continually shaped by each lineage holder. Wang Xingru situates his own works within a collection of works produced by his forefathers, thus lending authority to his own paintings as transmissions of a living lineage. Wang Xingru’s brushwork simultaneously bears the mark of his ancestors as well as his own. It is possible to understand the Wang family paintings as produced by the individual *as well as* the lineage since these two categories are mutually inclusive rather than exclusive. This point challenges the idea that a collectively produced work takes creative agency out of the hands of the individual artisan by pointing to a

¹⁹² Jingsong Chen, “To Make People Happy, Drama Imitates Joy: The Chinese Theatrical Concept of Mo,” *Asian Theater Journal* 4, no. 1 (1997), 43.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

conceptual framework that simultaneously embraces individual and multiple authors. It should be kept in mind that the “individuation” of knowledge as described by Foucault in his famous essay “What is an Author?” did not develop in China to the same degree as it did throughout the history of modern Europe.¹⁹⁴ In the context of a painting lineage, the creative process is not necessarily bounded by an individual “creator” but may be considered part of genealogical continuum. In the case of *nianhua*, it is the authority and supporting context of the shared lineage that supports an individual’s creative contributions to the profession. As Wang’s paintings show, the copied mark straddles continuity and change as variations are creatively exploited. In the words of Wen Fong, these traces are “forever ancient and forever new.”¹⁹⁵

Wang’s lineage box also contains sketches from his ancestors, however the ones he showed us were his own contributions to the collection. Drawing out a thick stack of small-scale sketches, Wang laid out on the table various religious motifs, intricate patterns, auspicious creatures, cloud designs, rebuses, and written characters. Many of these sketches had written notes on them, such as notations on color, size proportions, and explanatory comments on the ritual significance of specific details (**fig. 36**). These sketches serve as a visual compendium of design concepts for producing ritually efficacious objects, including prints, paintings, sculptures, architectural components, temple murals, and coffins. Accrued over many generations, the sketches betray the profound wealth of ritual knowledge maintained in the family profession. They also illustrate how certain designs could be used in different configurations and in different media, generating a virtually limitless range of possibilities for the designer to explore.

¹⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author,” in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

¹⁹⁵ Fong, “Why Chinese Painting is History,” 262.

For instance, in a scroll painting known as *Double Longevity* 双寿, auspicious patterns from Wang's sketches are incorporated into many aspects of the image (**fig. 37**). The painting, which depicts a pair of male and female longevity deities, is designed to be a birthday gift to be given to an elder. According to Wang, this painting is an appropriate gift to present to one's parents in their older age. Both deities are depicted only if both the mother and father are alive, otherwise only the female deity is presented to the mother or the male deity to the father. The female goddess of longevity and the protector of elderly women is the immortal Magu 麻姑, who is often distinguished by her youthful appearance, long nails, and her basket of gourds, fruits, and flowers swung over her shoulder on a pole. Her child attendant carries two peaches of immortality in a basket on his back. Standing beside them is the god of longevity, Shouxing 寿星 or Nanji Shouxing 南极寿星, who carries a knotted staff with a gourd that contains life-sustaining water and in the other hand, a blessed citron fruit known as a Buddha's hand 佛手. All three figures are bearing gifts of health and long life, reinforcing the painting's intended function as a birthday gift.

Wang incorporates a range of ritually efficacious patterns into the figures' clothing to bolster the power of the painting to ensure longevity. Wang added these patterns to Magu's robe, which is covered with images of fecundity in the form of flowers, vines, and leaves. Her basket is also transformed into an auspicious object with the addition of a longevity sign that appears woven into its structure. Similarly, her young attendant's robes are covered in flowers. The Shouxing figure is appropriately adorned with longevity signs on his robe, patterns that are more flatly imposed onto the figure. These patterns enhance the ritual efficacy of the painting while dressing these well-

known figures in the unique marks of the Wang family workshop. The patterns also bear strong resemblance to the stamped designs found in many of Mianzhu's historic door deity prints, suggesting a process of cross-referencing between printing and painting techniques.

In examining Wang's sketches and lineage documents alongside his finished works, it is possible to see how copying from an existing repertoire of patterns, designs, and auspicious imagery allows for many variations to emerge in different media. Wang's thick stack of sketches is a visual library of efficacious signs that is an efficient way to create a range of ritual goods imprinted with the distinct marks of one's workshop. As the Wang family works permeate public spaces in the form of murals, sculptures, and architectural designs, their designs become readily recognizable in the community. It is no wonder that the copying is considered an auspicious act in itself, as it serves a very practical function of distributing a distinct lineage identity while attracting recognition and prosperity to the family workshop.¹⁹⁶

Historically, Mianzhu's *nianhua* workshops have much at stake in developing unique lineage identities and recognizable repertoires of printed works. According to the archived records of the early twentieth-century print trade, door deity guilds fiercely guarded their trade secrets and production methods.¹⁹⁷ They were aware of regional competitors and sought to brand their products with certain visible characteristics in order

¹⁹⁶ The use of preparatory sketches, drawings, and copying methods in painting workshops has a long history in China. For a more detailed study on this topic, see Sarah Fraser's study of the ninth and tenth century preparatory sketches found in the Dunhuang caves: Sarah Fraser, *Performing the Visual: The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia, 618-960* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). Also see Qing Pan, "Creativity Within Copying: A Comparative Study of Copying as a Way of Learning in Euro-American Painting and Chinese Painting Traditions" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, New York, 2007).

¹⁹⁷ For a discussion of Mianzhu's trade guild practices see Feng, "Historical accounts of Mianzhu's trade associations," 112-119.

to trade them at a higher value in the regional print markets.¹⁹⁸ On a smaller scale, different workshops within Mianzhu also strived for prestige by mastering certain skills within the constraints of the guild rules, knowledge that was carefully guarded and transmitted through family lineages. Individual workshops and even individual artisans would thus occupy the vanguard of particular aspects of print production, competing for status in the industry in ingenious ways. Although many print formats or designs remained stable over time, the methods of production reflect great diversity and experimentation. Today, these ritual strategies are still vital components of how lineage-holding workshops engage the marketplace.

While Wang Xingru claims his place in a multigenerational lineage of *nianhua* designers living in Mianzhu's urban center, the Chen and Li workshops are newly formed lineages that emerged after the Cultural Revolution in Mianzhu's rural outskirts. In contrast to Wang, the Chen and Li workshops do not have lineage documents to draw on. Their situation reflects unique strategies of adaptation, where they reconstruct their workshop lineage identities by copying historic *nianhua* works. Chen and Li refer to their lineages as *pai* 派, a term used for painting schools comprised of both kin and nonkin members. While Chen Xingcai claims to be the head of the "Southern School" (*nanpai* 南派), Li Fangfu claims lineage in the "Northern School" (*beipai* 北派). I will now draw on interviews conducted with members of both schools to show how the process of copying plays into the territorial politics of lineage discourse to further boost the status of the workshops.

¹⁹⁸ These characteristics include the production of thick, high quality paper known as *fenjianzhi* 粉笺纸 and the use of gold or silver leaf applied by either brush or small stamps. According to Li Fangfu, an elder *nianhua* maker, the door deity guild enforced certain practices to maintain the quality of works produced in their workshops. Inspectors would visit the workshops in search of works that did not meet the proper standards. Works that failed the inspection would be burnt.

The Northern School of Mianzhu *Nianhua*

The Northern and Southern schools of Mianzhu *nianhua* are relatively recent designations, labels that only came into use after the Cultural Revolution in Mianzhu. As the state-led *nianhua* revival got underway, the terms came into widespread use as an abbreviated way to reference the two main geographic vicinities where *nianhua* was in production (**fig. 38**).¹⁹⁹ Interestingly, the Chen and Li workshops have since adopted these terms to construct the lineage-holding status of their workshops. In contrast to Wang, both Chen and Li come from rural families, where farming is the primary form of livelihood. They were trained as carvers and painters and worked in the seasonal print industry as apprentices and hired hands. While year-round designers such as the Wang focused on painting original designs, Chen and Li specialized in the final phase of adding color and details to printed outlines. In developing their own workshops, both Chen and Li have capitalized on these skills to construct unique workshop repertoires. The following interviews with Chen and Li were also conducted in the summer of 2006. I met Chen and Li through Liu Zhumei but she did not accompany me on these visits. Instead, I was joined by Han Gang 韩刚, a graduate art history student who assisted me with translations of the Mianzhu dialect. Not unlike the conversation with Wang, both Chen and Li had well-rehearsed presentations of their workshop histories. They informed me right away that they often get visiting journalists, scholars, and officials who request interviews.

¹⁹⁹ For a discussion on the Northern and Southern schools of Mianzhu see Shen Hong 沈泓, *Mianzhu nianhua zhi lü* 绵竹年画之旅 [Touring Mianzhu nianhua] (Beijing: Zhongguo huabao chubanshe, 2006), 107-128, 163-176.

Li Fangfu 李方福, the self-proclaimed lineage holder of the Northern School, agreed to meet with us for a recorded interview in his small street-level studio in Mianzhu's urban center. He seemed eager to share the details of his training and his workshop's history and immediately brought out a stack of prints (**fig. 39**). According to Li, he lost both his parents to illness by the age of six and was adopted into a print workshop at the young age of twelve. Li gained his skills in the Huang Anfu Workshop 黄安富画店, which was located to the west of Mianzhu in an area known today as West Road 西路. During the land reforms of the 1950s, Li and his family were relocated to the north of Mianzhu, where they settled in the rural farming community of Gongxing. As the nianhua revival gathered momentum in the 1980s, the Li family set up a year-round *nianhua* shop in a small alley known not far from the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum.²⁰⁰ Li's workshop doubles as his street-side storefront. He and his wife live in a home in Mianzhu's rural outskirts and they commute to the city each day to open the shop. The walls of his shop are covered on all sides in hanging scrolls, with a long table in the center and a glass case filled with smaller size prints (**fig. 40**). Unlike Wang, there is no family altar on display in the workspace.

When asked about the characteristics of the Northern and Southern schools, Li explains the primary differences in terms of methods of production:

The two schools are different due to their methods of production. The Southern School uses bold colors and they are vibrant and all made by hand on a flat *pingan* [平案] table. What is *pingan*? It means you work on a table's surface, just like making big flat cakes. You work on a *pingan* table. The Northern School works on a wall, just like in this room where you see all these hanging works on

²⁰⁰ This alley is now locally known as "Imitating the Ancients Road" 仿古街, as several new *nianhua* shops and temporary stalls have sprung up alongside Li's workshop in recent years. I will discuss these new shops in more detail in Chapter Four.

the walls. Why is this? All of these works are hung up on the wall then painted. First of all, this trains the hand in brushwork; secondly, it trains the body to be lively and energetic. Using these methods of production, one can produce more works in one day. Why is this? Once you finish a picture, you have to move it aside. If you are working on a wall, and you finish painting one picture, you simply step aside to work on the next one. This method is more efficient. It is also more conducive to training one's hand.²⁰¹

The key differences between working on a table versus working on a wall are explained here, as Li points out the merits of working vertically. For Li, it is not only preferable for gradually training one's hand in brushwork; it is also a more efficient set up for mass production. This is set apart from the Southern School, which he associates with bold colors and working on a horizontal surface. This focus on brushwork and training aligns well with Li's understanding of the efficacious power of the prints as being directly linked to the mastery of the brush. As mentioned earlier, Li commented on how painters possess an ability to infuse an image with a righteous spirit through their brushwork, a powerful means to repel the portentous.

Having established the basic differences of the two schools based on production methods, Li goes on to describe one of the signature methods of brushwork used in the Northern School:

The Northern School is best known for a method called *mingzhang minggua* 明展明挂. What is this? It is like these pictures here; the flowers have inside them yet another circular stroke of color. The bright red has inside it a circular outline of dark red and the dark red has inside it a circular outline of white. There are also lines that divide the colors. This is called *mingzhang minggua*, where every color is outlined by another. If [the colors] are stamped on, it is flat and there are no

²⁰¹ Li Fangfu, in interview with the author, Mianzhu, Sichuan, January 2007.

raised surfaces. [In these works,] you can feel the raised lines; they all stick up. This is the difference between the two schools.²⁰²

An approximate translation for *mingzhang minggua* may be “bright outlines” or literally “brightly displayed, brightly hanging.” A pair of Li’s warrior door deity prints shows the deity’s costume outlined in this method (**fig. 41**). Thick white lines are applied and visibly raised off the surface of the paper. They are described as “bright” because they usually produce a high contrast with the darker colors underneath. This method is actually widely seen in the older door deity works held in the permanent collection of the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum. However, Li claims this method for the Northern School and keeps it alive as part of his evolving repertoire of techniques to produce ritually efficacious images.

Li’s discussion of the Northern School therefore constructs a continuous transmission of brushwork and signature production methods rather than a continuity of kinship relations. The term for “lineage” used by Li is always *pai*, in contrast to the various kinship terms of *zu* and *zong* used by Wang Xingru in reference to his position in the Wang family workshop. When asked if he will pass on his skills to his children, Li replies:

My sons and daughter have learned these skills, but my grandson is in school and will need money, that is our first priority. To make these pictures, one must have a calm heart, otherwise the pictures won’t be done right. In this line of work, we must keep the perspective of a whole lifetime; we must cultivate our hearts, take care of our bodies, and try to make the best pictures. How can we make works that communicate something significant? We want to leave these for our future generations. That is our purpose. People survive [生存] in society, but what does it

²⁰² Ibid.

mean to live [生] and to survive [存]? To live is to preserve our fragile bodies. To survive is more difficult. Why? Because we must attain worthwhile skills and achievements that can be passed on to our future generations.²⁰³

Li's comments here echo the auspicious phrases written on Wang's genealogy chart, which also warned of the difficult problem of "sustaining one's achievements" from one generation to the next. The family lineage and profession merge together as one entity. As Li states here, to "survive" is to attain worthwhile skills that can be passed to future generations. Although Li has trained his children to paint, he hints here that they are occupied with school and other forms of employment due to the need for money. If his children decide to carry on his work professionally however, they will be able to claim position in a familial line under their father and the so-called Northern School. They will also be the first to inherit their father's paintings as lineage documents, the valuable traces of his brushwork and his lifelong dedication to the profession.

The Southern School of Mianzhu *Nianhua*

In contrast to Li's small-scale workshop, the Chen family workshop has grown into a rather large operation involving dozens of artisans and apprentices. With the financial support of the local and provincial government, the Chen workshop has expanded its repertoire of works and moved into a much larger workshop complex known as the Nianhua Village 年画村. The Nianhua Village is located just south of Mianzhu near Qingdao township 清道镇, where Chen Xingcai 陈兴才 was born and raised (**fig. 38**). The Chen family has been established in this area for several generations.

²⁰³ Ibid.

According to Chen Xingcai, the elder patriarch of the Southern School, “Here in Qingdao, there were dozens of [printmaking] families and the West Road had over a hundred families making pictures. Now nobody is painting anymore.”²⁰⁴ As the last family workshop making woodblock prints in Qingdao, Chen’s workshop has made its territorial claim over the entire neighborhood by taking on the title of the “Southern School.” When asked about the primary characteristics of the two schools, Chen replies:

The Northern School is actually from the West Road. So you know, it was only after the land reforms that they moved to Gong County 珙县. Gong county was under the jurisdiction of the North Road 北路, so you know, when people talk about it, they don’t realize that their actual origins don’t match the name.²⁰⁵

Chen’s response clearly undermines the status of the Northern School by drawing attention to how the Li family moved from one region to another. In his later comments, he refers to the North Road as West Road, a choice of terms that further underscores this discrepancy in origins. This is contrasted by his family’s long-standing connection to Qingdao village where they have thrived for at least four generations. According to Chen, “Qingdao is the Southern School.”²⁰⁶

When asked to elaborate on the unique characteristics of the Southern School, Chen comments on the school’s production of ink:

It is the ink... I made this ink here. Other than my workshop, no one else makes this ink. There’s lots of ink to buy in Beijing, but my ink here is unique. The Southern School makes works on a flat surface. Those from the West Road stick their works up on a wall and paint upright. They only take them down when the works are just about finished. That’s the main difference.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Chen Xingcai, in interview with the author, Mianzhu, Sichuan, January 2007.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

In a published interview with *nianhua* researcher Shen Hong 沈泓, Chen also describes the Southern School in terms of its methods of production:

Mianzhu's Southern School has two main characteristics. Firstly, the painting is done on a table. The works are half printed and half painted. A woodblock is carved with the outline and printed, and then the color is applied. Secondly, the approach here is rigorous and strict. The colors must be clear and elegant 清丽 and harmoniously matched.²⁰⁸

While Li focused on brushwork in discussing the strengths of the Northern School, Chen focuses on the Southern School's use of ink and colors to create auspicious works.

According to Chen, "Doing the coloring is the time when an artist is able to make full use of his imagination and experience. As a result, the same printing block will produce prints with diverse colors. That is what distinguishes Mianzhu *nianhua* from other *nianhua* schools."²⁰⁹

Whereas Li's studio was covered in hanging works, Chen's works are produced and displayed on flat surfaces. With more space to work at the Nianhua Village, the Chen workshop uses different rooms for the different stages of printmaking and painting, including a carving room, a printing and drying room, and several painting rooms (**fig. 42**). These rooms surround a center square courtyard on all sides, in a traditional *siheyuan* 四合院 formation. As I was led through each space by Chen's grandson Chen Gang 陈刚, I observed how each step in the printmaking process contributes creatively to the final product. In particular, I noted how the team of carvers had much liberty in creating a

²⁰⁸ Shen, *Touring Mianzhu Nianhua*, 165.

²⁰⁹ Chen Xingcai, in interview with the author, Mianzhu, Sichuan, January 2007.

wide variety of small-scale stamps that were then passed to the painters who applied them as finishing touches to the painted works.

In contrast to the patrilineal structure of the Wang family workshop, Chen has been training both the men and women in the family, including distant relatives and friends. However it is Chen's sons and grandson who have taken on the leadership roles thus far. Chen's two grandsons have been particularly innovative in approaching the family profession. For instance, his eldest grandson Chen Gang recently contributed new designs to the family repertoire such as a set of seven prints depicting young boys playing outdoor games (**fig. 43**). While most of the games are traditional ones, such as "dragon dancing" or "frolicking in the garden," there are also completely new themes such as "boys making a snowman." These works use the signature methods of the Southern School, including the flat application of bold colors and stamping. Yet Chen Gang takes the auspicious imagery of young boys and experiments with them in different settings and engaged in contemporary activities. These new designs thus embody fresh approaches to constructing ritually efficacious prints to pursue male progeny and fertility. These examples exemplify the drive to innovate within an established tradition, where new designs may be introduced and tested in the marketplace alongside well-established ones.

By exploiting different production methods, the Northern and Southern schools claim authority over certain techniques and thus construct their lineage identities along those lines. In doing so, they also provide different emphasis on how to best produce a ritually efficacious image. Their strategies allow for each school to boost their status by reproducing prestigious works while carving out a unique niche in the marketplace. It is

also a strategy that sheds light on how diverse works may emerge from the same print center, offering a microcosmic view of how regional differences evolve in tandem with a changing marketplace.

Local records from the early twentieth century reveal how professional lineages in Mianzhu similarly developed unique lineage-making practices to protect the skilled knowledge within a family. These include skills in highly developed technologies such as papermaking, metalwork, printing, carpentry, liquor production, and the procurement and production of herbal medicines. The close relationship between lineage and livelihood is perhaps most pronounced when families manipulate or transgress the accepted norms of lineage formation in the print trade in order to advance their workshop's interests. For example, in the early twentieth century, the rural Yao family workshop collectively decided to allow one of their daughters to carry out lineage practices normally reserved for male offspring. Having recognized her natural talents at an early age, the family allowed their daughter Yao Chunrong 姚春荣 (1899-1995) to be trained in print design and brushwork, essential skills for her to take a leading role in the workshop. According to Yao, when she saw two other women selling prints in the streets, she grew determined to set up her own stall in the winter print market, an environment that was primarily reserved for male traders. Overcoming many obstacles, she assumed the leadership role in a small-scale operation where she hired male artisans to reproduce and distribute her designs in larger quantities. These works sold quickly and as the operation grew, she led her family workshop to prosperity and widespread acclaim.²¹⁰ Yao Chunrong went on to

²¹⁰ Liu Zhumei, 刘竹梅, "Mianzhu nianhua laoyiren Yao Chunrong" 绵竹年画老艺人姚春荣 [Mianzhu nianhua elder Yao Chunrong] in *Mianzhu nianhua ziliao xuanbian* 绵竹年画资料选编四 [Mianzhu Nianhua Selected Research Documents Vol. 4] (Mianzhu: Mianzhu Nianhua Society 绵竹年画社, 1982), 7-11.

an illustrious career in printmaking, as she participated in the *nianhua* reform campaigns of the 1950s as well as the resurgent *nianhua* industry of the 1980s and 1990s before her death in 1995 at the age of ninety-six (**fig. 44**).

Yao's story speaks to the power of lineage discourse to straddle both continuity and change in the development of a workshop over time. Under the training and support of her family workshop, she was able to legitimize her activities as part of an established lineage. At the same time, she was able to leverage this support to strike out a new path in the marketplace, ultimately subverting the patrilineal forms of lineage transmission that dominated the industry. In the end, the Yao family workshop worked together to recalibrate and manipulate existing lineage practices to advance their livelihood in the marketplace. Their risks paid off in terms of profit as well as reputation, further illustrating how the pressures of the marketplace may outweigh or influence the ritual protocols of lineage transmission. In this sense, ritualized lineage practices can be understood as performative rather than prescriptive; they evolve in tandem with the immediate needs and demands of livelihood.

Conclusion

To return to the central problem raised at the beginning of the chapter, instead of approaching *nianhua* as a system of *representation*, what does it mean to approach *nianhua* as competing modes of *presentation*? By recasting *nianhua* in terms of its performed roles, I have moved away from treating *nianhua* as a fixed “thing” or object of analysis. Instead I have turned the analytical focus onto *nianhua*'s shifting *lifecycles* and *movements* through markets, homes, and workshops. In each realm, I have argued that the very notion of *nianhua* is reshaped and renegotiated, revealing the very notion of *nianhua*

to be a contested site of meaning that is deeply performative in the sense that diverse *nianhua* are continuously made to serve the immediate needs of everyday life and livelihood. Instead of treating the notion of *nianhua* as an objective or apriori category, I have instead focused on examples that show how various works are made to *perform* the role *nianhua*, thus establishing the status and significance of *nianhua* in situated practices. This includes the more obvious examples of appropriation, such as the print ads that appear as door deities, but it also encompasses the timed marketplace activities that frame a range of goods as ritual commodities for the Lunar New Year or the workshop activities that present the ritual efficacy of *nianhua* in terms of lineage discourses.

In examining the many different ways *nianhua* are performed and presented, I have also stressed the absence of any overarching system of shared beliefs or ideals. This is a critical move that resists providing a functionalist interpretation of *nianhua*'s ritual significance that is limited to certain prescriptive roles. The examples discussed above show how *nianhua* are activated and implicated in an endless array of daily activities in the home, market, and workshop. This is precisely the import of Catherine Bell's emphasis on the agentive and performative dimensions of ritual practice, which is not simply the expression or communication of cultural patterns, but that which "makes and harbors" such patterns.²¹¹ In terms of the *nianhua* industry, I have thus pointed to how processes of *nianhua* ritualization evolve and change in ways that reflect new social hierarchies and relationships. This is seen in the changing household displays of *nianhua*, which play a role in shaping the social relations within a family but also the social fabric of the streets and neighborhoods. The transformation of social relations is also evident in

²¹¹ Bell, *Ritual*, 82.

how Mianzhu's lineage-holding workshops deploy ritual practices to assert the value of their works and to jostle for status and position in the emerging *nianhua* marketplace.

While Bell's ritual theory advances the methodological aims of this chapter, it is limited in its ability to address the complex dialectical relationships between ritual objects and ritual practices. While her focus is primarily on the role of human agents in ritual practice, her theory leaves little room for acknowledging the critical role of non-human agents. A key contribution of this chapter is thus its engagement with a locus of agency that is tied to spatio-temporal configurations of both human and nonhuman entities, or "agentic assemblages." I have argued that the distributed agency of an assemblage moves away from fixing agency on stable objects/bodies and towards acknowledging how agency may be unevenly distributed and negotiated within a spatio-temporal configuration of both objects and practices, such as the *nianhua* street market.

The ephemeral nature of the works examined here actively challenge the life/matter binary and push for alternate models agency that do not take for granted *nianhua*'s status as fixed or stable objects. In tracing the movement of *nianhua* through markets, homes, and workshops, it is evident that *nianhua*'s attributed ritual function of "pursuing the auspicious, repelling the portentous" cannot be simply interpreted in terms of the auspicious signs, symbols, or themes that appear in representation. Rather, it becomes critically necessary to acknowledge the role of *nianhua* in marking out auspicious rhythms and spaces through a diverse range of ritual strategies. As the following chapters will show, this methodological shift from the represented to the presented is an issue of immediate urgency, as the question of what constitutes an

auspicious work of *nianhua* carries high stakes for those aiming to make a living in the emerging *nianhua* market.

Chapter Three: “The Picture Must Have Theater”: Performing Narrativity in Mianzhu *Nianhua*

The picture must have theater, or the myriad viewers will be bored. It must produce auspicious words if it is to please the people. The figures must be elegant and handsome, to attract people’s admiration.

画中要有戏，百看才不腻，出口要吉利，才能合人意，人品要俊秀，能得人欢喜。

Popular rhyme among Mianzhu’s *nianhua* makers

While a study of the ritual print practices tied to the seasonal markets opens up the *nianhua* archive to a broader range of printed and painted ephemera in daily life, this chapter will unpack the archive by rethinking the issue of narrativity in *nianhua*. This is a critical issue in the study of *nianhua* because many existing studies categorize *nianhua* according to its narrative content, as images based on narratives drawn from theater, historical episodes, or legends and myths. *Nianhua* authority Wang Shucun, for instance, has recently published a volume on what he calls “theater-based *nianhua*” 戏出年画.²¹² In this work, Wang draws together a large body of prints across time and space (mostly from northern print centers) that directly reference historical stage dramas. According to Wang, theater-based *nianhua* emerged in greater quantities as regional theater expanded in the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the works played a key role in disseminating elite social values and in providing entertainment and storytelling opportunities to the lower classes. To demonstrate the close ties between the theater and printing industries, Wang matches each print with the characters, scenarios, and narrative plots found in the corresponding theater production.

²¹² Wang Shucun 王树村, *Zhongguo xichu nianhua* 中国戏出年画 [Chinese theatre-based *nianhua*] (Beijing: Beijing gongyi meishu chubanshe, 2006), 3.

Wang's study situates *nianhua* as illustrations or counterparts of a prior text, including both written and oral texts such as theater scripts, excerpts of vernacular fiction, or other historical texts. In doing so, the image becomes representative of a larger narrative or set of narratives, serving a communicative role to translate them into visual media. This is central to Wang's argument that theater-based *nianhua* allowed theatrical performances to be relived inside the home, as an inexpensive form of mass entertainment that would prompt storytelling, singing, and the sharing of instructive lessons for the younger generation. Since Wang's research into this topic focuses primarily on the *nianhua* of north China, he has not addressed the incredibly rich theater traditions of Sichuan and their profound influence on Sichuan's printmaking industries.

Wang's approach here is mirrored in the Western scholarship on *nianhua*, including art historian Catherine Pagani's study of Chinese popular prints based on the classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三国演义. Like Wang, Pagani argues that the prints "reinforced ideas presented in theater" by "presenting the same tales and promoting the same cultural ideals."²¹³ For Pagani, theater also "provided the context for an image that would allow for a full understanding and enjoyment of a Three Kingdoms print."²¹⁴ Similarly, sinologist Li-ling Hsiao has argued that the many printed illustrations of theater performances found in the published plays of the Ming period are also designed to evoke the experience of theater for readers. Hsiao uses the term "performance

²¹³ Catherine Pagani, "The Theme of Three Kingdoms in Chinese Popular Woodblock Prints," in *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture*, eds. Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 103.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 94.

illustration” instead of “narrative illustration” to stress the emphasis on theatricality found in these images.²¹⁵

In this chapter, I will argue that depictions of theater in Mianzhu *nianhua* play into a whole range of issues beyond simply conveying a narrative or evoking a theatrical performance, although these elements are certainly present. Instead of approaching *nianhua* as symbolic or communicative devices that represent an existing narrative or performance, I will stress their role as catalysts for creative storytelling sessions where references to theater can take on new meaning and ritual significance. Drawing on a growing body of scholarship that examines the limitations of interpreting visual media as fixed linear narratives, I will underscore this issue of performativity and push for a rethinking of established categories such as theatre-based *nianhua* or narrative-based *nianhua*.

In her study of Chinese “narrative illustration,” art historian Julia Murray has pointed to the fact that there is no traditional term or category for “narrative” in the Chinese literary tradition, a problem long recognized by literary specialists.²¹⁶ Murray thus warns against imposing a “core narrative” upon images that might actually call up multiple narratives and interpretations for different viewers.²¹⁷ Keeping this issue in mind, Murray argues that it is still worthwhile to analyze different forms of narrative illustration in relation to the written narratives found in Chinese cultural discourses. For

²¹⁵ Li-ling Hsiao, *The Eternal Present of the Past: Illustration, Theater, and Reading in the Wanli Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2007): introduction.

²¹⁶ This particular issue is dealt with in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, *From Historicity to Fictionality: The Chinese Poetics of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 37-52.

²¹⁷ On this issue, Murray cites Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who challenges the structuralist notion that primal core stories underlie all manifestations of a particular narrative. For Smith, there are only versions or retellings of stories that are constructed in relation to each other, for specific purposes and within particular contexts. Julia K. Murray, *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustration and Confucian Ideology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2007), 10.

Murray, the essential characteristic of narrative “is that *something happens*. There is a story, which means that one or more events occur in a sequence of time... in terms of visual art, narrative illustration might then be defined as a picture that relates a story” (author’s italics).²¹⁸

In contrast to Murray, art historian Efrat Biberman has argued for an alternate conception of narrative illustration that does not take for granted the existence of coherent temporal orders within images. Biberman argues that paintings do not unfold temporally in the same way as written or verbal texts. Although the notion of narrative structure has been recast as a “meta-concept valid for various human activities” since the writings of Roland Barthes, there is still the tendency to bring various literary assumptions to bear on images. This includes the assumption that a “painting is a coherent, decipherable object” that can be “solved” with a narrative interpretation and that a painting may bear a “coherent structure within a given temporal order” and that this order is “fully available to the viewing subject.”²¹⁹

Challenging these assumptions, Biberman points to the “persistent gap between the picture and the narrative discourse it entails,” which always produces “a visual surplus that cannot be verbalized.”²²⁰ Instead of imposing a temporal narrative structure upon a picture, Biberman argues that “viewing a picture is fragmentary by nature; its temporality is not necessarily successive and does not correlate with the strict criteria that narrative structure demands.”²²¹ For Biberman, a theory of “narrativity in the visual field” must therefore acknowledge how “every viewer, in a sense, reinvents the narrativity she

²¹⁸ Murray, *Mirror of Morality*, 12.

²¹⁹ Efrat Biberman, “On Narrativity in the Visual Field: A Psychoanalytic View of Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*,” *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 241.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

finds in a picture.” Depending on the situation, this may or may not involve the narrative components such as “series of events, time duration, causal connections and plot.”²²²

In this chapter, I will contribute to this by adding that it is not only the “visual surplus” or lack of temporal order that sets pictures apart from other written or verbal narratives. The very notion of the “visual field” must also be qualified to address the multi-sensorial, embodied, and culturally specific modes of engagement with images. To do this, I will draw on the critical work of visual studies scholars and anthropologists who have complicated the very category of the “visual.” As visual studies scholar Mieke Bal has convincingly argued, the “act of looking is profoundly ‘impure’” in that it is “inherently synaesthetic” and an act that is “framed, framing, interpreting, affect-laden, cognitive and intellectual.”²²³ There is certainly greater need to trouble the disciplinary divides separating the visual and non-visual realms of activity, as productive topics of critique rather than policed boundaries.

Along the same lines, anthropologist Christopher Pinney has set forth the notion of “corpoethetics” to move beyond debates concerned with the aesthetic value of art. In his study of popular religious prints in contemporary India, Pinney defines the notion of “corpoethetics” as “the sensory embrace of images, the bodily engagement that most people (except Kantians and Modernists) have with artworks.”²²⁴ In shifting the analysis from aesthetics to corpoethetics, Pinney attempts to “transpose the discussion of aesthetics onto political grounds” by acknowledging how the agency and social significance of popular prints are produced within “fields of conflict” that inform everyday life in the

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Mieke Bal, “Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 5 (2003): 9.

²²⁴ Christopher Pinney, “Piercing the Skin of the Idol,” in *Beyond Aesthetics: Art and the Technologies of Enchantment*, ed. Chris Pinney and Nicholas Thomas (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 158.

“messy reality of India.” Instead of framing the issues around the stylistic or formal features of the prints, Pinney’s emphasis is on “bodily praxis” or the “poetics of materiality and corporeality around the images.”²²⁵

In the discussions below, I will use these theoretical advances to rethink the role of narrativity in *nianhua* and to ask the question: What is at stake, politically and historically, in these embodied practices of narrativity that lie beyond the archive? To tackle this question from a few different angles, I will first draw on interview sessions with local printmakers who strategically deploy a range of performative gestures and storytelling techniques to boost the social capital of their workshops and their *nianhua* products. These knowledgeable producers creatively perform their mastery of *nianhua* in ways that directly meet the needs of the situation at hand, often using voice, gesture, eye contact, rhythm, and other storytelling conventions to shape the social relations between speaker and audience. I will then build on this discussion by connecting these “corpothetic” practices to the many gestures, costumes, sounds, props, and famous characters of theatre that appear in a wide range of *nianhua*, where they are transformed and put to new uses in the home or marketplace by *nianhua* consumers. In doing so, I will attempt to uncover some of the parallels between Sichuan’s ritual theater traditions and the *nianhua* industry that have been concealed by folk art typologies that organize works according to function or format.

Instead of treating only certain works as narrative illustrations, I will argue that the embodied practices of narrativity are not reserved for a special class of *nianhua*. Instead, many works serve as sites of “narrative density,” a term I will use to describe how *nianhua* are densely packed with narrative cues (such as mnemonic and aural cues)

²²⁵ Ibid., 169.

that give rise to a range of narrative possibilities to be activated by knowledgeable viewers. This notion of narrative density is illuminated in the interview sessions discussed, but it also pushes for an alternate interpretation of a high profile *nianhua* “treasure,” a set of late Qing dynasty scroll paintings titled *Greeting Spring* 迎春图 (fig. 56). While existing interpretations treat the work as a narrative illustration that unfolds temporally due to the presence of repeating figures in a street parade, I will argue that the painting can be understood as a site of narrative density, where a range of narratives may be activated to suit the immediate needs of its elite patrons and users. In particular, I will argue that the prevalent use of rebus imagery suggests that the painting was both designed and used as a ritually efficacious image to activate auspicious speech. The key goal here is to recover the role of narrativity within the ritual context of this important work, and thus establish a way forward for recuperating the ritual significance of many other historic *nianhua*.

The Medicine King: Performative Gestures and the Art of Storytelling

I will begin with a critique of a storytelling session that vividly captures how an experienced speaker weaves together a narrative through embodied interactions with the many visual cues in a *nianhua* painting as well as the live audience. In particular, I will draw attention to the use of performative gestures as a key element of the corporetics or “bodily praxis” of *nianhua* storytelling, where the speaker’s embodied movements activate and animate an image while shaping the social relations in the room. Comparative literature scholar Carrie Noland has theorized performative gestures as a “technique of the body,” whether conscious or not, that involves “any use of the body

that can become a source of kinesthetic feedback, and thus agency.” Noland argues that all gestures are performative in the sense that they shape and transform everyday experiences, be it “communicative, instrumental, or aesthetic.” Relying on both learned routines and direct engagement with what Martin Heidegger calls “everyday being in the world,” performative gestures may indicate and instantiate requests, refusals, pleas, invitations, and other powerful social actions.²²⁶

The interview session detailed below was recorded during a visit to Wang Xingru’s home studio in 2007, after we had developed a degree of familiarity from previous visits, as documented in the last chapter. There was an established understanding that I was only loosely connected to the official revival movement and that I would be recording our conversation for a graduate research project in Canada.²²⁷ On this day, graduate art history student Han Gang accompanied me and translated some of the local dialect terms into Mandarin when they came up in conversation. He had also met Wang on previous visits. Ning and Liu, the two scholars who introduced me to Wang also joined us on this visit, as they were interested in Wang’s stories for their own *nianhua* research. At first, I was not sure how their official status would affect the interview process. However, I soon observed that they had formed a long-standing friendship with Wang, who spoke openly and intimately on many potentially taboo subjects in their presence, including the Cultural Revolution, popular religion, and ritual *nianhua* practices. I also learned that Wang only agreed to share his stories with me because Ning and Liu ardently supported my research and prepared him for my visit.

²²⁶ Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 15-16.

²²⁷ While Chen and Li were accustomed to visits from the media and the presence of a video camera, Wang claims to have had few encounters with cameras, researchers, and journalists. However, he seemed to ignore the camera completely and looked directly at his audience when speaking.

During our informal group interview, which was conducted in the local dialect, Wang recounted much of his life story to us and then invited us into his studio to view his works (**figs. 45, 46**). The only work that he chose to narrate at length is a mounted vertical scroll painting of the “Medicine King” (*yaowang* 药王 or *yiwang* 医王) (**fig. 47**). The Medicine King figure, also translated as the “Medicine Deity” or the “God of Medicine and Healing,” has a long and complex legacy in the history of the healing and medicinal trades, popular religion, and in painting, printmaking, sculpture, and temple building.²²⁸ Scholars have traced the origins of the Medicine King figure to the Buddhist canon, where the term first appears in translations of Buddhist writings concerning the Medicine Buddha.²²⁹ While the nature and identity of the Medicine King has evolved over time, during the Ming and Qing periods he was most widely identified with the Tang dynasty physician and Daoist adept Sun Simiao 孙思邈 (581-682), who is still honored today in most Medicine King temples across China.²³⁰ In Sichuan, many Medicine King temples were recuperated after the Cultural Revolution, a development that was closely tied to the resurgence of Sichuan’s lucrative medicinal herb industry and the rise of temple tourism in the region.²³¹

When I asked Wang Xingru to tell us about his painting of the Medicine King, Wang explained that traditional Chinese doctors often carried pictures of the Medicine

²²⁸ Susan Naquin provides an analysis of Beijing’s many Medicine King temples during the Ming and Qing dynasties, providing accounts of their diverse origins and how these temples have evolved. See Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). For a discussion of Medicine King lore and reproductions of Medicine King prints, paintings, and sculptures, see Paul Unschuld, *Medicine in China: Historical Artifacts and Images* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2000).

²²⁹ The Medicine King has been identified with many physicians and Daoist adepts over the dynasties, including Bianque 扁鹊 (ca. 500 BCE), Wei Shanjun 韦善俊 (595-694), and Sun Simiao 孙思邈 (581-682).

²³⁰ Yuan-ling Chao, *Medicine and Society in Late Imperial China: A Study of Physicians in Suzhou, 1600-1850* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 71.

²³¹ Cha Qing 查庆 and Lei Xiaopeng 雷晓鹏, “The modern development of Sun Simiao worship and Medicine King Festival practices in Western Sichuan” 川西孙思邈崇拜, 药王会习俗及其现代开发, *Sichuan jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* 四川教育学院学报 [Journal of Sichuan’s College of Education] 12 (2007): 23.

King, especially the traveling doctors in the countryside. He then signaled to us that he would share an orally transmitted narrative by standing straight, taking a step forward, and reciting a line of verse. He also held his pointing stick out to his right side as if marking out a performance space. In taking this stance, he appeared to assume the position of authority in the room, to physically assert his role as the narrator of the story that is to come (**fig. 48**). In the following excerpt of Wang's entire story, I have included descriptions of shifts in gesture and intonations that indicate a co-creative interaction between his performed narrative and the painting:

There is a pair of antithetical phrases for the Medicine King that goes: "Due to lack of pain, the dragon embarks on the open ocean. Due to a toothache, the tiger emerges from the apricot forest." [Here, "lack of pain" also means good health and "apricot forest" refers to the profession of traditional Chinese medicine.] The tiger was eating people and he happened to eat a woman who had a silver hairpin in her hair. It got stuck in the crevice between his teeth. [Bares his teeth and points to them.] The tiger was in terrible pain but couldn't do anything about it. Knowing that the Medicine King travels every day on the path by the foot of the mountain, the tiger went to sit at the crossroads to wait for him. As soon as he saw him coming, he started nodding, wagging his tail, and bowing with folded paws. [Imitates the tiger's actions and bows several times.] The Medicine King was a traveling doctor and thus he walked long distances in all four directions and through the hills. [Makes a large circular gesture with his stick.] His attendants accompanied him and carried a chest of medicines. [Points to attendants in the painting with his stick.] They would be summoned to wherever there was illness and they could cure any ailment.

In setting up his narrative here, Wang begins by quoting a set of poetic phrases. This is a conventional practice in casual storytelling and serves as a mnemonic for the story to follow. The melody and rhythm of the rhyme offer mnemonic support, while

relating directly to the visual cues of the narrative, such as the tiger and dragon depicted in the painting.²³² The opening verse is thus double coded for efficiency of recall, drawing on the auditory as well as the visual. It also establishes the authoritative knowledge of the speaker, who is immediately positioned as an experienced narrator of orally transmitted verse. This convention is well documented in the scholarship on Chinese storytelling as well as the published vernacular stories of the late Ming and Qing periods. These stories were often prefaced by a poem to evoke the rhetoric and authority of an oral storytelling session by a professional storyteller in a teahouse.²³³

Wang's swift and gestural use of the stick is significant here because the stick is normally used to hang up and take down paintings, as it has a metal hook at the end for this very purpose. However in just one powerful gesture, this functional tool is suddenly transformed into a theatrical prop and pointer, bringing to life the entire scene as a performative and theatrical space rich with semiotic possibilities. Just as the narrative density of painting begins to unfold, one can also see how in one gesture, the narrative density of the stick is also activated. He continues on with a renewed relationship to the prop in hand:

When he arrived at the crossroads, he saw this yellow spotted tiger nodding and wagging his tail. He thought it was quite strange that this fierce tiger should appear so friendly so he approached the tiger and asked, "What are you doing here?" [Points his stick forward to enact the role of the deity.] This is all

²³² In Jan Vansina's study of oral history, she emphasizes the role of mnemonic cues and the active nature of recalling memories: "Studies of memory emphasize that remembering is action, indeed, creation. Its mechanisms are cueing and scanning." I borrow from her study the idea that mnemonic cues play a key role in storytelling, although here the cues are both visual and verbal. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 42.

²³³ Key studies include W.L. Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); Vibeke Bordahl, *The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China* (London: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1999); and Victor Mair and Mark Bender ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Chinese Folk and Popular Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

according to what people have said. The tiger vigorously nodded his head, pawed at his mouth, and wagged his tail while gently approaching the Medicine King. The Medicine King replied, “Tell me, what is the matter with you? You don’t want to eat me?” The tiger nodded again and used his paw to point inside his mouth. [Nods and points to enact the role of the tiger.] The Medicine King finally understood and asked the tiger to open wide his mouth. The tiger also understood and opened his mouth large and wide. The Medicine King took one look and saw the silver hairpin stuck between his bleeding teeth, so he told the tiger, “You must open your mouth wide so that I can reach inside and pull that out. Then I will take some medicine from my chest and apply it to your mouth. But it is not possible to do this today because if I stick my arm in your mouth, you will feel a lot of pain and bite my arm in half!” What can be done about this?

Using gestures and shifts in his vocal intonations, Wang moves swiftly between enacting the different roles of the Medicine King and the tiger. At this point in the narrative, Wang takes a quick pause and speaks slightly slower to indicate another rhythm:

This is why all traveling doctors walk through the streets and alleys with a metal ring, which can be either copper or silver. This ring is hollow and filled with beads, so it makes a rattling sound as the doctors walk. This is how people knew that a doctor or herb trader was approaching.

Having inserted this side commentary in a different voice, it is clear that Wang is weaving multiple narratives together. By embedding a mini-story within a larger story, he offers some historical background on traveling doctors and their metal rings. As he returns to the narrative about the Medicine King and the Tiger, it becomes apparent that the metal ring plays a key role in the story:

So, the Medicine King told the tiger, “After three days, I will return to cure you. I need to make a metal ring, so that when you open your mouth, I can stick the ring in your mouth. When I reach in to pull out the pin, you will feel a lot of pain and feel a strong urge to clamp down and bite my arm. The ring will protect my arm from your bite. Once it is in place, I can pull out the pin and apply medicine to your mouth. For three days, you must wait for me here.” [Mimes the actions of prying open a mouth and pulling out the pin.] After three days, the Medicine King finished making a ring and returned to the crossroads to cure the tiger. The tiger was very grateful and let the Medicine King ride on his back. This is why in theater performances, one sees the Medicine King sitting on a tiger’s back. [Gestures to the painting.]

Wang’s narrative here clearly demonstrates a continual interaction with the painting, through gesturing, pointing, and the inclusion of specific narrative references to details in the painting. It is evident that Wang draws on a variety of visual cues and mnemonic elements in the painting while narrating these details in a coherent and structured story. In a dialectical manner, the painting also guides and confirms Wang’s evolving narrative as he repeatedly points to the visual evidence. However Wang’s referencing of the painting does not seem to follow a linear order of fixed temporal scheme. Instead, Wang’s gesturing to the painting seems spontaneous as he moves fluidly through his performance. Similarly, the narrative itself seems flexible enough to accommodate tangential narratives, such as his side commentary on the significance of the metal ring to traveling doctors. While Wang recounted a story that focuses on the relationship between the deity and the tiger, the painting depicts the deity holding up a sharp pin in one hand while tugging on a dragon’s beard with the other. The deity is also wearing a robe with a frontal view of a dragon’s head. In other stories associated with the

Medicine King, he is said to have cured the Dragon King 龙王, the deity of the seas, who rewarded him with a recipe book of cures, or in certain versions, a treasure chest of medicines.²³⁴ In the painting, the deity appears to be holding an acupuncture needle up to the dragon above his head, although Wang's story suggests that it may also be the hairpin pulled from the tiger's mouth. These different possibilities reveal the narrative density of the painting, which clearly bears many potential narratives connected with the figures in it.

Wang does not mention the deity's two attendants who are emerging from behind the deity on either side of him. To the left side of the deity, an attendant carries a gourd bottle with a red cap, an object associated with healing, protection, and longevity. Gourd bottles, which were used to mix and hold medicines, also became a shop sign for apothecaries. The calabash gourd (*hulu* 葫芦) depicted here may also serve as a rebus with the homophone for "protection" (*hu* 护).²³⁵ To the right of the deity, another attendant carries a medicinal chest, which may be referenced as the reward provided by the Dragon King. In sum, these details may call up a whole host of other narratives, including the various myths and stories associated with Sun Simiao's disciples.²³⁶

Interestingly, Wang describes important objects that are not depicted in the painting. By inserting a brief account of how traveling doctors used a rattling metal ring to announce their arrival in a populated area, Wang links the painting directly to the

²³⁴ In other versions, the Medicine King cures the Dragon King's son who is disguised as a snake or the dragon of Kunming Lake. For a synopsis of the tale, see Jeremy Roberts, *Chinese Mythology A to Z* (New York: Facts of File, 2004), 140.

²³⁵ For a brief discussion of calabash gourds in Chinese art and folklore, see Patricia Welch, *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and visual imagery* (Rutland: Tuttle, 2008), 50-52.

²³⁶ Sun Simiao's most famous disciple is Meng Shen 孟诜 (621-714), a noted alchemist and physician who authored the *Shiliao bencao* 食疗本草. For a study of Medicine King stories and lore, see Paul Unschuld, *Medicine in China: Historical Artifacts and Images* (Munich: Prestal Verlag, 2000).

professional world of traveling doctors. In the story, the metal ring protects the Medicine King's hand from the tiger's teeth. It also allows the doctor to cure his tiger patient and gain the tiger's loyal service as his protective steed. The story thus communicates the powerful efficacy of the ring, to "attract the auspicious and repel the portentous." For Wang, this explains the significance of the metal rings carried by traveling doctors in the non-story world. He further explains how these hollow metal rings serve a practical function of alerting people of a doctor's arrival. There is thus a direct correlation between the efficacious power of the ring and its role in supporting the doctor's livelihood and the health of the community. The metal ring also mirrors the role of the Medicine King image, which according to Wang, is also carried around by traveling doctors to aid in their work. In an allegorical manner, Wang's narrative discussion of the metal ring reflects back on the significance of the painting as an auspicious object.

At the end of his narrative, Wang links his story to practices in the theater industry, concluding that the story clarifies "why in theater performances, one sees the Medicine King sitting on a tiger's back." This simple conclusion opens up a theatrical view of the painting, where the central figures are likened to theater performers. In the Mianzhu region, and especially in Chengdu, the Medicine Deity figures prominently in ritual theater performances.²³⁷ Today, although traveling doctors are rare, the deity's birthday is still honored in regional temple festivals, where theater troupes would perform for the deity and make pleas for the health of the community. In the story, the four-way crossroads described by Wang is quite reminiscent of a theater stage or outdoor square (*chang* 场). Like an established site for ritual theater that is aligned with the four

²³⁷ In nearby Zitong county of Sichuan, the Medicine King Gorge 药王谷 is now a burgeoning tourist attraction and monument. Local theater troupes regularly perform dramas based on the Medicine King figure, locally known as one of four "theater deities" 戏神.

directions, the crossroads is at the conjunction of four paths. In the story, the Medicine King and the tiger meet at the crossroads at the “foot of the mountains,” a liminal site between the human community and the wild, and between the earthly and the divine realms. In his performance, Wang recreates and inhabits the liminal space of the crossroads through gesture and mime. In adopting theatrical conventions, such as the intonation of different voices, dramatic gestures, miming, and using the stick as a prop, Wang takes on multiple identities in rapid succession.²³⁸

Immediately after concluding this narrative, Wang moves closer to his audience, shifts his tone of voice to a lower pitch, and offers this painting to me for purchase. His movements convey the end of the lively storytelling session and a transition to the more serious business of negotiating a deal. I had not expected the offer to be made so abruptly, although I knew that sharing oral narratives was a well-established “tool of the trade” for making a sale. In the context of promoting his works, Wang’s narrative boosts the prestige of his studio as well as the market value of his works. In this regard, it may be considered a success since I did indeed purchase the painting and promote it by including it in this study. According to literary scholar David Rudrum, a performative view of narrativity requires one to ask whether or not a narrative is “successful”: whether or not it fulfills its aims in a particular social context. Instead of simply asking how narratives take on different forms, Rudrum calls on narratologists to question what narratives “are capable of doing.”²³⁹ In Wang’s case, his performative storytelling may

²³⁸ Vibeke Bordahl, *The Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling* (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1996), 84.

²³⁹ David Rudrum, “Narrativity and Performativity: From Cervantes to Star Trek,” in *Theorizing Narrativity*, ed. John Pier and Jose Angel Garcia Landa (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 255.

be understood as successfully fulfilling his aims when his works are purchased and publicized by his visitors, including researchers such as myself.

As an important parallel to Wang's storytelling, the presentation of performative gestures also plays a central role in the iconography of the Medicine King and in the ritual theatre performances of the deity that serve to strengthen and protect the health of Medicine King followers. In many pictorial depictions, the deity is depicted either seated or standing over a tiger and holding up a needle to a dragon. This gesture displays the Medicine King's mastery over the elemental life forces of yin and yang, where the tiger below is associated with the yin element and the dragon above with the yang element. This particular gesture is clearly related to theater performances of the Medicine King, as documented in a late Qing dynasty print from the northern print center of Yangliuqing (**fig. 49**). In this print, the central figure of the Medicine King has one leg holding down a tiger and another arm outstretched, holding a needle up to a man who is wearing a dragon costume and standing on a chair. In contrast to Wang's painting, the print presents all the details of a theater performance, including the chair that serves as a prop to indicate the dragon's movement in the sky.

In the folk art literature, Wang's painting of the Medicine King would be categorized as an "altar painting" 案子, distinguished from narrative based ones such as the Qing example of "theater-based *nianhua*." However, the typologies constructed by scholars to organize such *nianhua* works by function or format inevitably conceal their rich and multifaceted connections in narrative discourse. Through his theatrical storytelling, Wang actually situates the painting within multiple discourses: the medicine and healing professions, theater, ritual practices, poetry, and local history. In doing so, he

not only positions himself as an authoritative and experienced narrator, he also establishes the cultural and social value of the painting on many fronts.

Wang's storytelling also connects the painting to *zhiguai* 志怪 narratives, often translated as "records of the anomalies" or "stories of the strange" that were shared in casual oral storytelling since the fifth century BCE. These stories enjoyed a resurgence of interest during the Ming and Qing periods and continue to play a role in contemporary Chinese film, short stories, and popular culture in general.²⁴⁰ Wang's story is closely related to the many *zhiguai* narratives that focus on a prominent tiger character who exchanges either knowledge or skills with a human. In his study of "righteous tigers" in *zhiguai* tales, Charles Hammond describes the tiger as a powerful "archetype of ferocity" that also embodies the Confucian virtues of righteousness, loyalty, courage, and generosity.²⁴¹ Much like the personality of door deities or demon quellers depicted in *nianhua*, tigers are both fearsome and revered.

Wang's storytelling is not only a rich store of cultural and historical knowledge; it is also a critical strategy for asserting this knowledge and authority in the marketplace. To return to the question of what is at stake in acknowledging the embodied repertoires of *nianhua* practice, Wang's narrative illuminates the role of *nianhua* in realms outside of the folk art industry, where a painting of a Medicine King might be circulated in homes, temples, and medicine shops as a ritually efficacious image. In Sichuan, images and stories of the Medicine King are circulated in Medicine King temples 药王庙, where a

²⁴⁰ For a comprehensive history of *zhiguai*, see Xiaohuan Zhao, *Classical Chinese Supernatural Fiction: A Morphological History* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005).

²⁴¹ Hammond's study includes many *zhiguai* narratives that bear strong similarities to Wang's tale, including one that recounts a man pulling a bone from a tiger's throat and another of a man pulling a thorn from a tiger's paw. In both cases, the tiger provides a great reward for the human's kindness and courage. Charles Hammond, "The Righteous Tiger and the Grateful Lion," *Monumenta Serica*, 43 (1996): 191-211.

range of ritual activities takes place to prevent and cure disease. The annual Medicine King Festival 药王会 and ritual theater performances are also held at the temples, which serve as important trading and networking venues for those in the traditional healing and medicinal herb industries. These events have been further advertised as tourist attractions, especially for urban visitors seeking a more “cultural experience” of rural Sichuan. The Medicine King Festival of Yunxi 云西 village near the township of Shenfang 什防 is a particularly popular tourist destination. Painted or printed images of the Medicine King may serve as important sources of social and cultural capital for these different communities, where the narrative density of the image may be activated in a variety of embodied activities, both secular and sacred.

There is also much at stake in recognizing the living and evolving dynamism of *nianhua* storytelling. I will briefly give an account here of how a young *nianhua* printmaker has developed his own repertoire of gestures and stories for presenting *nianhua* to potential customers. During one of my visits to the Chen family workshop in 2006 with Han Gang, we met with Chen Xingcai’s eldest grandson Chen Gang, who was working as a print apprentice at the time. In addition to carving, printing, and painting works, Chen Gang was responsible for greeting visitors, taking them on extended tours of the studio, and for selling works (**fig. 50**).

Among the many narratives Chen relayed to us, I will include here his discussion of the *Bicycle-riding Maiden* 骑车仕女, a well-known image in the Chen family repertoire of prints (**fig. 69**). The topic of the *Bicycle-riding Maiden* arose when Chen Gang guided us into the carving area where various tools, half-carved woodblocks, and print samples were spread around the tables. One of the half-carved blocks on the table

depicted the outline of the *Bicycle-riding Maiden*. As Chen was explaining the process of carving, he picked up this block and pointed to the chiseled marks on the block as an example of “yang carving,” 阳刻, where the negative space is carved away to leave the lines protruding out of the block (**fig. 51**). I then asked Chen if he knew the history of the image. Here is my translation of his full response, with a record of his gestures in brackets:

I’ve been making this print for many years now. I believe it is quite old, from several generations ago. Back in those days, the print designers [画师] imagined this kind of bicycle for riding and made a picture of it. The handlebars of the bicycle looks like this. [Points to carved outline on the block.] The artisans from the past imagined it like this since there weren’t even bicycles back then. Take a look at what they came up with! [Holds up the block.] They were rural people and they gave the bicycle a dragon’s head. They completely imagined this. Take a look at these steel wires; they are all twisty and curvy. [Traces the lines with his fingers.] I heard all of this from the others. In any case, a master print designer from the past drew this image according to his imagination, this *Bicycle-riding Maiden* [Adds emphasis on the title of the work.] It is even quite famous now. We all call it the *Bicycle-riding Maiden*. There are some things that represent Mianzhu, such as “double-bang firecrackers” [双鞭]. This print is a representative work, as it is more famous than the others.²⁴²

In this short narrative, Chen Gang explains how rural designers of the past imagined the fanciful details of the bicycle. To confirm his interpretation, he points to the auspicious dragonhead and curved wires, repeatedly asking us “to look” and see for ourselves. These visual markers serve as mnemonic cues for his narrative as well as the concrete evidence confirming his narrative for his audience. Chen’s narrative can be

²⁴² Chen Gang, in interview with the author, Mianzhu, Sichuan, July 2006.

traced to an interpretation of the print that has been published in folk art research and in the media, which often repeat this detail that the print designer's depiction of the bicycle was based on imagination or hearsay rather than direct observation of an actual bicycle. However, it is significant that Chen assigns *oral* origins to the narrative and not written ones: "I heard all of this from the others." This simple statement conveys Chen's self-aware position as both a receiver and giver of orally transmitted knowledge. While he does not explicitly state who "the others" are, he is most likely referring to the other members of the Chen workshop.²⁴³ In recognizing the other voices that have shaped and authorized his telling, Chen performs his own role within an established community of *nianhua* makers and speakers.

Chen's embodied telling takes places in the performative present, recreating the meaning of the work in his own words and gestures. Caressing the block, Chen immediately establishes his own personal relationship to it: "I've been making this print for many years now." This casual opening supports his authority to speak and firmly locates the print within the Chen family print tradition. He then establishes the age of the print as being "quite old" and of rural origins, two highly valued features in the folk art industry as discussed in the introduction of this study. Chen's gestures and expert handling of the block are essential forms of non-verbal communication that perform the value of the block as well as his own embodied skills as a trained apprentice, attesting to what narratologists have termed "narrative competence," the acquisition of skills to both receive and transmit narratives within a social and cultural context.²⁴⁴ Instead of situating Chen's story as derivative of folk art publications, it is important to recognize his

²⁴³ Later in the conversation, we are told that he has never visited the museum.

²⁴⁴ Emma Kafalenos, *Narrative Causalities* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 2.

embodied telling as a strategic creation in its own right, for the purposes of supporting the family business. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian reminds ethnographers that talk about culture “is itself a cultural practice, a rhetorical strategy, and that this is also the case with (talk about) popular culture.”²⁴⁵

As an experienced speaker in this setting, Chen kept his audience in mind as he selected specific details to share about the woodblock. As academic researchers and potential buyers, Han Gang and myself could play a role in boosting the fame and status of the workshop through our writings, photographs, and purchased works. These factors may have influenced his decision to focus on the work’s historical value and rural origins. It is likely that he would take a different approach for another audience. In keeping in mind the co-creative relationships of narrators and audiences, these interviews must be approached as delicate inter-subjective exchanges rather than direct transmissions of cultural knowledge from one individual to another.

There are many historical precedents for such innovative storytelling approaches in the oral culture of *nianhua*. For instance, Wang Shucun has commented on orally transmitted narratives that were innovated to suit the needs of the *nianhua* industry during the late Qing period. In his study of door deity prints from Sichuan, Wang records the following story that was orally disseminated by printshops in Mianzhu:

There was a couple with a wife who had been pregnant for ten months but could not give birth to the baby. Someone said that if they tore off the head of the door god and burnt it, the child would have no problem descending from heaven. The husband believed this so he ripped off the head of the door god, burnt it to ashes and mixed the ashes into a drink for his wife to consume. When she drank it, the baby was born. Stories such as a door god’s head helping with a birth are but

²⁴⁵ Johannes Fabian, *Anthropology with an Attitude* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 95.

mystified tales told by print workshops to market their products to a wider audience. They also reflect the long and complex history behind Mianzhu's door god industry.²⁴⁶

According to Wang, sensational stories such as this one were circulated to attract customers and to propagate new print rituals in order to increase sales and profit. These examples not only challenge the idea that oral transmissions are static and unchanging, they demystify them by revealing their pragmatic nature. Although Chen's story does not prescribe a ritual practice, it links the workshop prints to a highly valued discourse in the contemporary print industry - that of folk art research. His storytelling is not only a way of marketing the workshops' prints and paintings, it is also a way of claiming authority over *nianhua* history and knowledge. In comparing these narratives, it is clear that orally transmitted stories draw on different discourses to raise the profile of a print workshop within its immediate environment. As such, orally transmitted narratives can be understood as bringing auspiciousness in the form of livelihood, prosperity, and social status. These examples show that *nianhua* are not only visual texts, but also performative ones that engage all the senses. *Nianhua* can thus be considered complex sites of social engagement and narrative power, playing important roles in "orality, dialogue, life stories, and community-building or what may be more generally called *living history*."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Wang Shucun 王树村, *Zhongguo menshen hua* 中国门神画 [Chinese door deity pictures] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2004), 42-43.

²⁴⁷ Della Pollock, *Remembering: Oral History Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

Transformations Between Theater and Print

While the example of the Medicine King suggests close ties between theater and *nianhua* traditions, it should be kept in mind that the two industries are no longer closely intertwined as they were in the past. While historic records show that Mianzhu's door deity guilds hired theater troupes for their banquets and sold their prints at temple fairs where auspicious theatrical performances would be held, these intimate connections gradually dissolved as both industries underwent intense periods of reform and revival. Starting in the early 1980s and concurrent with the state-led revival of traditional *nianhua*, the Sichuan CCP Provincial Committee issued a directive "to get Sichuan opera moving" 振兴川剧 with an emphasis on "salvaging, inheriting, reforming, and developing" traditional opera.²⁴⁸ Like the term *nianhua*, the notion of *chuanju* 川剧 or "Sichuan theater" is a blanket term for diverse forms of regional theater in Sichuan. In the same way that the notion of folk art groups together many objects, the misnomer of "Sichuan theater arts" 川剧艺术 groups together an array of performative practices involving music,

²⁴⁸ Colin Mackerras, "Theatre in China's Sichuan Province," *Asian Theatre Journal* 14, no. 2 (1987): 191-192. As early as 1978, Sichuan was the first province to revive and publicly perform traditional music-drama plays as distinct from the "newly written historical" items. By the late 1980s there was an average of one troupe for each of the 177 counties. Like rural printmakers, these troupes were most active during the Lunar New Year, the slack season for agricultural activities. While some farmers turned to printmaking, others performed in theater productions to bring in extra winter income.

singing, dance, and ritual theater.²⁴⁹ In Mianzhu, these practices had many names such as “singing theater” 坐唱, “wooden bench theater” 板凳戏, or “encircling drums” 围鼓.²⁵⁰

The relationship between these different forms of theater and *nianhua* is further complicated by the extensive appropriation of theatrical elements in *nianhua* over time, so that the references take on very different meanings in the ritual consumption of *nianhua*. For instance, a traditional stage production in Chengdu dramatizes the exploits of the famous female warrior Mu Guiying 穆桂英, a character from *Romance of the Yang Family Generals* 楊家將演義, a Ming dynasty novel that gave rise to countless theater productions across China. In the promotional material for the Chengdu Sichuan Opera Theater 成都川剧院, a photograph of Mu Guiying captures the highly stylized gestures and costumes of Sichuan theater (**fig. 52**). The performer wears a costume reserved for high-ranking military generals, with flags on the back, fringed streamers around the waist, two long pheasant feathers on an elaborately decorated helmet, and a long spear in hand.

In the *nianhua* that are most often associated with Mu Guiying, the figure is recast in a new identity to fulfill the specific goals of ritual print use. In these works, the identity of the female warrior is often blurred, as in this widely reproduced pair of female door deities from Mianzhu (**fig. 53**). In the published literature on these prints, the figures are

²⁴⁹ As many scholars have noted, the theater traditions of Sichuan are extremely diverse and have absorbed the influences of musical systems from surrounding regions since the 17th century, including Kunqu opera and the *gaoqiang* musical variant from Jiangxi, clapper opera introduced from Shaanxi, and the *huqingiang* musical variant from Hunan and Hubei. It is often noted that only *dengxi* or “lantern theater” is native to Sichuan, a small-scale folk opera that developed from the ritual theater of agricultural communities. See Ursula Dauth, “Strategies of Reform in Sichuan Opera since 1982: Confronting the Challenge of Rejuvenating a Regional Opera” (PhD dissertation, Griffith University, Brisbane, 1997).

²⁵⁰ For a description of Mianzhu’s local theater traditions see Huang Zonghou 黄宗厚, “Mianzhu nongcun de chuanju huodong” 绵竹农村的川剧活动 [Sichuan theater activities in Mianzhu’s rural villages], in *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 14 [Anthology of Mianzhu’s historical studies vol. 14] ed. Wang Peisheng 王培生 and Zhang Changlu 张昌禄 (Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1995), 102-107.

usually associated with the female warriors Mu Guiying and Qin Liangyu 秦良玉 although there are no distinguishing features here to tell them apart. Both Mu Guiying and Qin Liangyu are well-known figures in the regional drama traditions across China, although female door deities are rarely seen in other parts of China. They are probably prominent in Sichuan because some famous female warriors are native to the region. For instance, Qin Liangyu lived in the Ming era and comes from Zhongzhou, Sichuan. She led an army to protect the region by resisting the invasions of Sichuan led by Zhang Xianzhong.²⁵¹

In contrast to the martial appearance of the theater performer, these printed door deities are dressed in elegant women's costumes with fashionable "lotus shoes," signaling the bound feet of elite women. The sound for "shoes" (*xie* 鞋) is a homophone for "harmony" (*xie* 谐), a feature that enhances the auspicious quality of the image. There are no flags to indicate their military status although they do wear the helmets with pheasant feathers normally associated with the theatrical garb of martial figures. Their hands are poised in a feminine gesture, lightly holding the phoenix feathers and their facial expressions are sweet and subdued. The door deities are thus portrayed in a more gentle and domesticated manner suited to household display.

In comparison to the theatrical portrayal of Mu Guiying, who is in a bright red costume, these female door deities are dressed in costumes of paler colors and simpler floral patterns. According to Alexandra Bonds' detailed study of Chinese opera costumes, the costumes of high-ranking military figures are often bright in color and embroidered with dragons or fierce animals and tight geometric patterns. In contrast, ladies of high

²⁵¹ For a brief discussion of female door deities in Sichuan art, see Wang Shucun, *Chinese Door Deity Pictures*, 37-39.

position usually wear pastel colors with floral patterns.²⁵² It appears as if these prints have mixed up these theatrical references as the female door deities wear the elegant dress of household ladies yet they also have martial helmets on their heads and wield the large weapons of female warriors. In this particular example, they have a sheathed sword hanging from the waist and a large “reclining moon blade” 偃月刀 in hand.²⁵³

In these works, it is possible to see how the theatrical figure of a female warrior is transformed into a door deity. The elements of costume and gesture are made to perform a new role here, which is to attract the auspicious while protecting the household gate. As door deities without clear markers of identity, the narrative density of these works is intensified in the sense that they now call up a broader range of famous female warriors, including the two mentioned already but also Hua Mulan 花木蘭 and Liang Hongyu 梁紅玉. The prints have thus appropriated and transformed aspects of the theatrical repertoire, putting them to different uses and producing new narrative possibilities.

As discussed in the last chapter, the great variety of door deity prints produced and consumed in Mianzhu demonstrates how a door deity is not attached to any fixed identity or persona. Instead, the notion of a door deity is more like a performed role that many different figures can play when properly positioned and renewed. The idea that many actors/identities may perform the role of a particular deity, such as the Medicine King or the door deity, may be related to a similar conception in Sichuan’s ritual theater, where various skilled performers may enact the efficacious powers of a deity as if the deity were living and present in the performance itself.

²⁵² Alexandra Bonds, *Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 2008), 245-248.

²⁵³ While Sichuan theater performances of Mu Guiying usually show her with a long spear or bow and arrow, the weapons vary in *nianhua* depictions and are sometimes omitted altogether.

In the case of Sichuan's famous "face-changing theater" 变脸戏, a performer may even take on multiple roles in a single performance by rapidly removing thin layers of painted silk masks that are tightly bound to the face (**fig. 54**). This produces a thrilling special effect where the performer's face changes from moment to moment in the performance, often in rapid succession or when the audience least expects it. As a performative gesture, "face-changing" is a display of the performer's physical mastery of a protected trade secret that is simultaneously conveyed as the mastery of various identities and life forces, including the countless deities and heroic figures of ritual theater.²⁵⁴ Similarly, it is possible to see how the ritual displays of Mianzhu's door deities harness a range of auspicious figures to serve the single purpose of controlling the many positive and negative influences around a household doorway.

The transformation of theatrical signs into rebus imagery is another prominent example of how theatrical elements are made to play new roles in a wide range of *nianhua*. A rebus is a representation of a word or syllable by a picture of an object with a similar sounding name, such as a rhyming word or homophone. The key element here is the sound of the object's name, which serves as a cue for vocalization that prompts the viewer to enunciate its name and thus call into being various auspicious notions. In a Qing dynasty print, for instance, four young boys greet a mother figure as they arrive at their household steps while a fifth boy observes the scene from behind a table inside the home (**fig. 55**). The boys bring an array of auspicious objects that are commonly seen in theater props or costumes. These objects are the most colorful elements in the image and jump out boldly on the picture plane. Each one is a rebus on its own, yet in combination

²⁵⁴ For a discussion of Sichuan's "face-changing theater," see: Wang Dingou 王定欧, *Sichuan juehuo* 四川绝活 [Sichuan theater arts] (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2007), 22-8.

with the other objects, they may carry double or even triple meanings based solely on a play of aural associations. To illustrate the many narrative possibilities in this seemingly simple print, I will first provide an interpretation of how the rebuses might work individually to call up auspicious speech, then in various combinations.

In the center of the image, a young boy draws a boat on wheels that bears a tall red vase (*ping* 瓶), which may be a homophone for peace (*pingan* 平安). Rising out of the vase are three halberds (*sanji* 三戟), a homophone for “levels” (*sanji* 三级), as in the three successive levels of official promotion. The word halberd (*ji* 戟) is also homophonous for “auspicious” (*ji* 吉). This suggested meaning of promotion is confirmed by the official’s cap just in front of the vase on the boat and the boy behind the table, who carries a reed pipe (*sheng* 笙), which is homophonous for “promotion” or “rise” (*sheng* 升). The boy behind the boat carries a lotus blossom (*lianhua* 莲花 or *lianzi* 莲子), which carries connotations of “many sons” due to the homophonous words for “successive” (*lian* 连) and “sons” (*zi* 子). The bright sashes (*dai* 带) worn by the boys also means “to bring” and is a homophone for “generations” (*dai* 代), a reference to male progeny carrying on the family name. The boy facing the mother figure carries a jade or stone chime (*qing* 磬), a homophone for “celebration” or “congratulation” (庆 *qing*). The blue color (*qing* 青) of the sashes also resonates with this celebratory meaning.

In combination, these rebus signs call up a whole host of auspicious sayings. The placement of the objects on a rolling boat (*chuan* 船) thus calls up the expression, “May official positions roll in every generation; may you have three successive promotions” (*guan dai liu chuan, lian sheng san ji* 官带流转，连升三级). The triple combination of the “halberd, chime, and vase” (*jiqing heping* 戟磬合瓶) appears in many *nianhua* prints and

is homophonous for the phrase, “auspiciousness, felicity, and peace” (*jiqing heping* 吉庆和平). The mother figure holds an auspicious carved scepter (*ruyi* 如意), which literally translates as “as you wish.”²⁵⁵ Combined with the lotus (*lian* 莲), which rhymes with “year” (*nian* 年), the *ruyi* scepter and the lotus call up the saying “may your desires come true year after year” (*niannian ruyi* 年年如意).

The image may also be associated with the theme of *wuzi duokui* 五子夺盔, which translates as “five boys competing for a helmet,” where the term for helmet (*kui* 盔) also refers to finishing “first place” in the civil service exam. The phrase references the famous story of the scholar official Dou Yujun 窦禹钧 (ca. 907-960) who had all of his five sons successfully pass the civil service exam. The number five also calls up the required knowledge of the Five Classics for the civil service exams. During the Ming and Qing periods, images of five boys took on many variations tied to the notions of officialdom, promotion, and fertility seen here.²⁵⁶ These themes are not unique to Mianzhu, but are commonly seen in the woodblock prints from the other major print centers across China, such as Yangliuqing, Suzhou, and Weifang.²⁵⁷

In a theatrical context, halberds, colorful sashes, official caps, and lotus blossoms figure prominently as stage props or elements of costume. They might be used to signal

²⁵⁵ These *ruyi* 如意, or “wish granting scepters” were commonly presented to the emperor and empress on auspicious occasions. In woodblock prints, they often appear in the hands of deities and immortal figures, especially Daoist figures such as the Eight Immortals and other deities, as the *ruyi* bears a resemblance to the fungus of immortality. For a discussion of *ruyi* imagery, see Patricia Welch, *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle, 2008), 258-259.

²⁵⁶ Since the Ming era (1368-1644), images of a hundred boys or five boys were widely popularized in various media, including porcelain, tapestry, painting, prints, and sculptures. For a study of children in Chinese art and the repeated imagery of young boys, see Terese Tse Bartholomew, “One hundred children: from boys at play to icons of good fortune” in *Children in Chinese Art*, ed. Ann Barrott Wicks (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002) 57-83.

²⁵⁷ For a broader discussion of the thematic depictions of young boys in Chinese prints and paintings, see Terese Tse Bartholomew, *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2006).

the particular identity and moral character of a performer, such as an upright official or brave warrior. However, in the context of this *nianhua* print, these markers of identity take on aural associations with auspicious concepts such as male progeny, emolument, and prosperity. Collectively, these theatrical props have been transformed into vocal and narrative cues to serve a new ritual agenda, to attract auspiciousness into the home.

Most significantly, these rebus signs speak to the efficacious power of the human voice to literally call into being and bring to life auspicious notions. During the course of my fieldwork, it became evident that the rebus may serve as a mnemonic device for people to recall the meaning of a work. For instance, when asked about the significance of their prints, Chen Xingcai and his grandson Chen Gang often repeated aloud the auspicious phrases tied to the rebuses in the prints. When asked why they displayed certain *nianhua* in their homes, they would repeat the auspicious phrases associated with each print or painting.

I also noticed that rebuses were used to interpret new works that people were viewing for the first time. When I showed my mentors Liu Zhumei and Ning Zhiqi images of the Mianzhu *nianhua* held in the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, they worked through the meaning of each work by sounding out loud the different auspicious words and phrases of each rebus. When it comes to *nianhua*, rebuses do not follow a predictable set of rules. The images may reference auspicious words through a variety of ways, as a rhyme, direct homophone, or one syllable within a longer phrase or saying. Add to this the subtle tones of the Mianzhu dialect and it is possible to find a great deal of variation in one rebus. The pervasive presence of rebuses in Mianzhu *nianhua* suggests a strong preoccupation with activating the auspicious words, phrases, and stories associated

with them. The sharing of auspicious speech is still an integral aspect of viewing *nianhua* today, especially during the Lunar New Year. As seen in the interview with Gong Jinlan in the previous chapter, it is not only *nianhua* that call up auspicious phrases but also the different dishes that are prepared for the annual reunions.

Similarly, the power of voice has been well documented as an integral part of traditional Chinese theater. Scholars have long recognized the central role of the voice in traditional performances that place greater emphasis on singing, music, and lyrics than on tight plot development.²⁵⁸ Elizabeth Wichmann has emphasized the aural dimensions of Chinese theater, where it is usually stated that one “listens to theater” 听戏 or “sings theater” 唱戏.²⁵⁹ The central role of music and singing has led some to translate Chinese theater as “opera,” although it also encompasses dance, acrobatics, and elaborate stage and costume design. The mastery of the voice in singing Chinese theater requires rigorous training and breath control, and is often likened to a shamanic practice that can either awaken deities or frighten off demons through the sheer power and vibration of song.²⁶⁰ This shared concern explains the keen interest in appropriating theatrical references to produce efficacious speech. Among rural communities, theater is a much older tradition than *nianhua*, which only appeared after the invention of printing technologies. It is thus likely that prints were used to approximate and appropriate the

²⁵⁸ William Dolby, “Chinese Drama,” in *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, 2nd ed., ed. William H. Jr. Nienhauser (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1985), 13-30.

²⁵⁹ Elizabeth Wichmann, *Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), 1. In regards to this issue, Wichmann has argued that *xiqu* 戏曲 should be translated as “music drama” rather than “Chinese opera.” However, in most scholarly studies, the term Chinese opera is still commonly used in place of *xiqu*.

²⁶⁰ A path breaking study of Chinese ritual theater that examines the shamanistic roles of actors is Piet van der Loon, “Les Origines Rituelles Du Theatre Chinois [the Ritual Origins of Chinese Theater],” *Journal Asiatique* CCLXV (1977). Loon’s findings were further confirmed in later studies such as Barbara Ward, “Not Merely Players: Drama, Art, and Ritual in Traditional China,” *Man* 14, no. 1 (1979), and David Johnson, ed. *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual: "Mu-Lien Rescues His Mother" in Chinese Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1989).

perceived power of ritual theater for use in domestic rituals. To return to the popular rhyme I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, “The picture must have theater, or the myriad viewers will be bored. It must produce auspicious words if it is to please the people,” 画中要有戏，百看才不腻，出口要吉利，才能合人意. The key phrase here is: “It must produce auspicious words” which is explicitly expressed in terms of vocalization, as that which literally leaps “out of the mouth” 出口.

Historians of Chinese art tend to draw on literary metaphors to interpret rebus imagery. According to Qianshen Bai, “to decipher a rebus painting is to treat a picture as a form of writing, to read its image as if it were a text.”²⁶¹ However, the idea that rebuses are a form of writing needs to be qualified in the context of *nianhua* prints. The rebus is not only used for communicating ideas, it carries an active performative dimension because it prompts the use of the voice for ritual efficacy. The rebus is thus performative in the sense that it is considered “world-changing” and not merely “world-describing.” In the ritual use of woodblock prints, the act of reading alone is not enough to activate the rebus. It is the embodied act of speaking (or singing) out loud that is critical to activating the full potential of the rebus in a *nianhua* print. As the above example demonstrates, rebus signs are also unlike words because they can carry many different meanings at once, when viewed alone or in combination with other rebus signs.

Instead of isolating certain works as “theater-based,” as illustrating specific stage performances, there is a need to broaden the scope to consider the pervasive influence of regional theater on many different types of *nianhua* works, from ephemeral single-sheet

²⁶¹ Bai also argues that the Chinese language is predispositioned for rebus use, citing Yuan Ren Chao, who says, “In this word-sign system, the Chinese language creates many homophonic words, each represented by a different character. Compared with other languages, Chinese has many homophones, and the homophonic rebus got an early start in Chinese history.” Qianshen Bai, “Image as Word: A Study of Rebus Play in Song Painting (960–1279),” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 34 (1999): 65.

prints to simple scroll paintings. I have underscored how theatrical references are made to perform new meanings and ritual functions when adapted to a variety of *nianhua* works. In particular, theatrical references are often used to prompt auspicious speech in the form of efficacious stories, sayings, and verse. Instead of treating *nianhua* as mere illustrations of theater for the purposes of communicating the values or morals of the elite classes, it is vital to question the *appropriations* and *transformations* of meaning that take place when theatrical elements show up in ritually efficacious prints and paintings.

Recovering Narrative Density in *Greeting Spring*

One of the most celebrated works of Mianzhu *nianhua* is a set of four horizontal scroll paintings titled *Greeting Spring* 迎春图, currently housed in the Mianzhu Cultural Relics Bureau. The scrolls were painted by Huang Ruigu 黄瑞鹄 (1866-1938), a professional painter and native of Mianzhu. Huang was commissioned to paint the scroll set for a Mianzhu-based dye company managed by his family. In contrast to the ephemeral printed *nianhua*, *Greeting Spring* is a finely executed, permanent work painted by and for local elites. Mianzhu's Cultural Relics Bureau has played an instrumental role in publicizing the painting as a work of *nianhua*, even though it reflects the world of urban elites. Officials and scholars who have published writings on the painting justify this move by explaining how the painting falls into the broad category of non-official art works created in Mianzhu, where the painter would have been involved in the *nianhua* industry as a professional urban painter and designer. This ever-broadening use of the term *nianhua*, which has been primarily reserved for popular prints, reflects the changing institutional agendas that seek to promote a wide range of local works under the rubric of

nianhua. In Mianzhu, this particular painting has also been framed as a historically accurate depiction of a Qing dynasty street parade, a problematic analysis that I will take up in this section.

Greeting Spring is comprised of four horizontal scrolls that add up to about six meters in total length (**fig. 56**). It depicts in great detail a late nineteenth-century street festival that marks the first day of spring on the traditional farmer's calendar, known as *lichun* 立春, or the "Establishment of Spring."²⁶² The Cultural Relics Bureau released these four images of the different scrolls, but the original was not available for viewing during my visits so I could not verify firsthand whether the images are complete representations of the work. The published images show four distinct scenes from the festival. The first scene shows the county magistrate leading the procession through the streets and out the city gates (**fig. 56a**).

The second scene depicts a troupe of musicians followed by a team of dragon dancers and theatrical performers dressed as famous immortals (**fig. 56b**). A third scene includes an elaborate procession of ritual street theater with costumed performers carried on raised platforms among a throng of onlookers and peddlers (**fig. 56c**). The fourth scene shows the procession reaching a temporary pavilion outside the city walls and the magistrate leading the rituals there to welcome the Spring Deity. This scene also shows the magistrate seated before the county bureau 府衙, presiding over the final ritual of the day, when a paper effigy of the Spring Ox is beaten open (**fig. 56d**). In the discussion

²⁶² The *lichun* festival has a much longer and complex history than the Qing dynasty's mandated *lichun* rituals. As the first of the 24 solar terms 節氣 that divide the traditional Chinese calendar, *lichun* can be traced to ancient rites marking the arrival of spring. For a historical survey of *lichun* practices and festivals, see Li Lulu 李露露, *Zhongguo jie* 中国节 [Chinese festivals] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2005), 34-39; and Goran Aijmer, *New Year Celebrations in Central China in Late Imperial Times* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003).

that follows, I will examine these scenes in greater detail to argue that the paintings contain multiple viewing and narrating possibilities. In particular, I will point to the many narrative cues and rebus images that activate auspicious words, phrases, and stories.

Ning Zhiqi, who is a widely published historian and director of Mianzhu's Cultural Relics Bureau, has argued that the painting is organized into three narrative frames that sequentially depict the main ritual activities of the historic *lichun* festival. In particular, Ning emphasizes the thrice-repeating figure of the county magistrate and his entourage. In his first appearance, the magistrate is carried on a sedan chair as he leads the procession out of the town walls to the "spring field" 春场 (**fig. 57**). In his second appearance, the magistrate arrives at the spring field, where a temporary outdoor altar is set up under a pavilion to house the Spring Deity 春神 and the Spring Ox 春牛, who are represented by sculpted effigies made of bamboo strips and colored paper. In this scene, the magistrate and his official entourage are preparing to make sacrificial offerings to the deities in a ritual activity known as "Welcoming Spring" 迎春 (**fig. 58**). Once the offerings are completed, the spring deities are carried back to town to spread their auspicious presence throughout the streets for all to see. This ritual street procession is known as "Touring Spring" 游春 and ends in front of the county bureau, where the deities are installed in a tent for the evening. All of these activities take place on the eve of the first day of spring. The magistrate makes his third appearance the next day, on the first morning of spring to oversee the ritual of "Beating Spring" 打春, the climax and conclusion of the *lichun* festivities. He is depicted in front of the county bureau on a raised seat behind a table (**fig. 59**). Below the steps of the bureau, the Spring Deity and Spring Ox are set up facing the magistrate. Qing soldiers beat the ox apart at the very

hour of spring's arrival to release small effigies of Spring Oxen, to attract abundance, fertility, and good farming conditions for the year to come.²⁶³ An official messenger kneels before the magistrate with an unfurled scroll that announces the arrival of spring.

An extraordinary aspect of the painting is the attentive detail given to the acts of theater in the street procession, where precise details of ritual protocol are brought to the fore. While Ning suggests that this information was included to create a true-to-life representation of a historical event, it is likely that this attention to ritual detail enhanced the auspicious efficacy of the image as well as its symbolic capital. For instance, one can observe the ritual minutiae represented in the scene where the magistrate prepares to make sacrificial offerings at the altar set up outside the town walls. In this detail of the altar, it is possible to identify a wealth of calendrical information embedded in the proportions, colors, and costume of the Spring Deity and Spring Ox figures (**fig. 60a**). The selection and placement of colors on the two deities are based on an imperial color-matching scheme that indicates it is the thirtieth year of the Guangxu era (1903). This is evidenced by the white color on the center of the ox's head, which represents the first "celestial stem" 天干 of *jia* 甲, and the yellow color of its body which represents the fifth "earthly branch" 地支 of *chen* 辰.²⁶⁴ Every year, the precise size, proportions, and colors

²⁶³ It is possible that the "beating spring" ritual is the early origins of the Latin American piñata games. The origins of the piñata are often associated with Marco Polo's visit to China in the thirteenth century, when he observed the beating spring ritual and collected an animal effigy made of paper and ribbon to carry back to Italy. See <http://www.mexonline.com/history-pinatas.htm>

²⁶⁴ The traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar is part of a sexagesimal calendrical system, where each year is identified by one of the ten celestial stems and one of the twelve earthly branches. There are a total of 60 stem and branch combinations, making for a repeating 60 year cycle. In addition to this, each year is associated with one of the five elements (water, fire, metal, wood, earth) and one of the twelve astrological animals.

of the Spring Ox and Spring Deity sculptures are designated by Qing court astrologers to disseminate key details of the imperial calendar.²⁶⁵

This connection to ritual efficacy becomes even more apparent when the painting is situated alongside the many “Spring Ox pictures” (*chunniu tu* 春牛图) that were circulated as inexpensive single sheet woodblock prints. During the late Qing, large quantities of *chunniu tu* were distributed across China to communicate key details of the imperial calendar for each year. These prints were color coded to reflect calendrical information and often included a record of the long and short months of the lunar calendar as well as the dates for the 24 annual festivals. Due to the ephemeral nature of these prints, I was not able to locate an extant example from Sichuan. In this late Qing example from Shanxi, however, it is possible to see the correspondences between the image and the calendrical information for that year (**fig. 60b**). The positioning of the Spring Deity behind the ox indicates the late arrival of spring; meanwhile the one bare foot on the deity indicates good weather for spring farming. Along with other prints of domestic deities, these *chunniu tu* were annually renewed in the home to “attract the auspicious, repel the portentous” for agricultural activities.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ According to Ning’s study, the ox must be four feet tall and eight feet wide to represent the four seasons and the eight major solar terms. The Spring Deity must be 3 ft and 6.5 in. tall to indicate the 365 days of the year, and he holds a whip that is 2 ft. 4 in. long to represent the twenty-four solar terms. These measurements do not change from year to year. The colors of the ox and deity do change, however, to indicate the unique “stem and branch” 干支 of each year as well as the exact time of day for the beginning of spring. These details were unified by the Qing imperial court and widely distributed through the mandated *lichun* rituals as well as the *chunniu tu*. See Ning Zhiqi 宁志奇, “Sichuan qingdai chuantong minsu de zhengui huajuan Mianzhu Yinchuntu” 四川清代传统民俗的珍贵画卷, 《绵竹迎春图》 [Mianzhu’s *Greeting Spring Picture: A Qing dynasty scroll painting and treasure of traditional folk culture in Sichuan*], in *Mianzhu Wenshi Ziliao Xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 9 [Anthology of Mianzhu’s historical studies vol. 9], ed. Liji Zeng 曾立基, (Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1990), 38-45.

²⁶⁶ For a discussion of “Spring-ox pictures” with illustrated examples, see: Li, *Chinese Festivals*, 34-39.

The abundant use of aural or rebus imagery also supports the *Greeting Spring*'s status as a ritually efficacious image, especially one that is meant to catalyze auspicious speech. In the same scene with the spring altar, two robed officials flank the pair of spring deities on either side (**fig. 58**). They are each holding up signs that are composed of the characters “auspiciousness” 吉 and “joy” 喜. Hanging above the altar table, a set of spring couplets presents the wish for successful attainment of high official rank and multiple promotions. Behind the magistrate, who appears under a red parasol, an attendant holds up a large “spring” 春 character made of flowers and cypress branches. The magistrate is also greeted by a kneeling figure who unfurls a scroll that reads “Joyful Announcement of a Bright Spring” 喜报阳春. The widespread inclusion of auspicious words and sayings appear to serve as aural cues that call for the vocalization and narration of auspicious speech.

A close look at the onlookers in this scene shows various individuals engaged in this exact activity of watching, pointing, and speaking around the altar. The crowd here is engaged in the ritualized activities of sharing auspicious speech known as “Speaking Spring” 说春 and “Watching Spring” 看春.²⁶⁷ Although the magistrate's attendants are holding up signs that call for quiet and calm, the crowd appears defiantly boisterous with individuals engaged in conversation, moving about, and even playing instruments. Several people are depicted with open mouths, wide eyes, and excited gestures. The contrast between the signs that call for quiet and the busy crowd infuse the scene with a strong aural dimension. In depicting these ritual activities, the painting appears to prompt its viewers to do the same.

²⁶⁷ For a more detailed description of these ritual theater activities in Mianzhu see Huang, “Sichuan theater activities in Mianzhu's rural villages,” 102-107.

The provenance of the painting suggests that the work was intended as an auspicious gift to be given from one elite family to another. Originally commissioned by a dye company, the painting found its way into a family that ran a medicine shop in Mianzhu.²⁶⁸ A prominent clue that the painting was intended as a gift for the medicine shop owners lies in the painting itself, which includes a large shop sign in the foreground that reads, “Our shop sells genuine chewable medicines of Sichuan and Guangdong. 本号发卖川广道地药材咀片” (**fig. 61**). In addition, the close ties between the medicinal herbs industry and the *nianhua* industry have been well documented in local archives.²⁶⁹ Medicinal herb traders often distributed *nianhua* works and supplies, including paper, prints, paints and dyes. It is quite likely that this painting was gifted as a form of symbolic capital to strengthen relations between elite business partners.²⁷⁰ The imagery in the painting strongly supports such a possibility, where the medicine shop is richly enveloped in auspicious and prosperous activities of every kind, including harmonious interactions between the world of merchants, officials, farmers, ritual performers, and deities.

²⁶⁸ The painter Huang Ruigu was commissioned to paint this, as his family helped run the medicine company. One of the descendants of the family that ran the medicine company gifted the painting to the Cultural Affairs Bureau in the 1960s. The provenance of this work is briefly discussed in Ning, “Mianzhu’s *Greeting Spring Picture*,” 38.

²⁶⁹ For a record of the historical links between the medicine and print industries in Mianzhu, see Zhang Minglun 张明伦, “Luetan jiushi Mianzhu jige shichang de ‘jingjiren’ huodong” 略谈旧时绵竹几个市场的经纪人活动 [A discussion of a few early industries in Mianzhu and the activities of entrepreneurs], in *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 8 [Anthology of Mianzhu's Historical Studies vol. 8] (Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1989), 152-57; and Mianzhu Historical Documents Work Committee 绵竹政协文史资料工作组, “Mianzhu muban nianhua” 绵竹木板年画 [Mianzhu's woodblock printed nianhua], in *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 1 [Anthology of Mianzhu's Historical Studies vol. 1] (Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1982), 31-40.

²⁷⁰ This continues to be a common practice in Mianzhu today, where paintings or calligraphic works are gifted as part of an important business transaction. Auspicious paintings are also commonly gifted for birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries.

If the painting is understood as an auspicious gift for a business contact, what is the role of the scenes of ritual theater? As mentioned earlier, theater troupes played an integral role in the world of trade relations and politics. Trade guilds such as the door deity guild regularly hired troupes to perform for banquets and important events such as the opening of the guild hall, the setting up of the guild's altar, or honoring the birthday of the guild's patron deity. Huang Zonghou has documented the complex social relations between Mianzhu's theater troupes, trade guilds, temple authorities, and even underground brotherhoods such as the Paogehui 袍哥会.²⁷¹ Up until 1949, every village in Mianzhu's rural vicinity had its own theater troupe that competed for prominence in the region. Although there are fewer troupes today, theater troupes still conduct annual ritual performances in front of storefronts to ensure a year of prosperity for the business during the Lunar New Year. For instance, lion and dragon dancing troupes, such as the ones depicted in *Greeting Spring*, are still known to perform for businesses during the Lunar New Year festivities in exchange for money or gifts. Along with an ensemble of musicians and firecrackers, the lions frighten off demons and negative influences to protect the business from harm for the year to come. In this sense, the power of ritual theater to "pursue the auspicious, repel the portentous" is closely tied to concerns around livelihood. Its depiction in a painting suggests a similar message, where the painting itself approximates the role of theater to perform an auspicious wish for a business venture or partnership.

Taking up far more space than the scenes with the magistrate, scenes of ritual street theater in *Greeting Spring* also call up a wide range of narrative possibilities. For instance, in this scene, six "raised pavilions" 抬阁 are carried through the crowd, with

²⁷¹ Huang, "Sichuan theater activities in Mianzhu's rural villages," 104.

costumed figures atop each one performing different theatrical tales (**fig. 62**). Each pavilion carries one or two performers stacked on top of one another. Vertical and horizontal beams are hidden inside the costumes, creating an optical illusion of the stacked performers being held up in the air by a single hand. These performances are ritually performed during the Lunar New Year to attract the blessings of the deities who are brought to life by the performers. At the same time, the deities are expected to ward off demons or malignant spirits. According to Ning Zhiqi, the six scenes are single-act theater performances from the region that include, from left to right: *Beheading of the Ungrateful Husband - Rushing the Palace* 铡美案—闯官, *Qin Xianglian and Chen Shimei* 秦香莲及陈世美, *The Jade Hairpin - Autumn River* 玉簪记—秋江, *Entreating the Moon - Snatching the Umbrella on a Boat* 拜月记—船舟抢伞, *Wang Ruilan and Jiang Shilong* 王瑞兰和蒋世隆, and *Journey to the West - the Pilgrim Sun Wukong* 西游记—孙行者.²⁷²

Each of these acts are packed with narrative potential, including the auspicious costumes and props that reference a variety of popular beliefs, vernacular stories, and sayings. This type of theater is locally known as “Racing Deities” 赛神 or “Wax Offerings” 蜡祭, which refers to theater performed in the street (and not on a stage) at the end of the year, and usually by rural troupes.²⁷³ It was annually performed to honor a

²⁷² Ning, “Mianzhu's *Greeting Spring Picture*,” 42. Where there is a dash in the listed acts, the name of the drama is followed by the name of the specific scene that is being performed. Several of these acts are from the same drama, although it was common for single acts to take on a life of their own, to be performed as one-act dramas or *zhezi* 折子戏.

²⁷³ For a detailed study of *laji* ritual street theater in Sichuan, see Feng Shudan 冯树丹, *Sichuan xiju yishi* 四川戏剧逸史 [A history of Sichuan theater] (Chengdu: Sichuan sheng xijujia xiehui, 1992), 7-24. This format of street theater is also known as “Illuminated Carnival in Elaborate Costume” 高妆社火 and was traditionally performed by rural theater troupes and musicians. Still performed today, popular acts in rural areas include “Lion dancing” 耍狮子 and “Playing Dragon Lanterns” 玩龙灯, which evolved from earlier acts such as “Welcoming the Cat” 迎猫 and “Welcoming the Tiger” 迎虎. According to Feng, *laji* street theater is one of three main historical foundations of Sichuan theater as we know it today and is distinguished by its highly localized characteristics that evolved in rural areas. The other two foundations include “song and dance” 歌舞 and “variety shows” 排优.

whole pantheon of deities who would ensure a year of abundance, good farming conditions, and prosperity for the entire community. Those with a firsthand experience of these street performances, or the longer dramas on which they are based, could draw on their own memories to narrate the painting in a more intimate fashion.²⁷⁴

In sum, the painting's detailed depiction of different ritual practices points to multiple layers of narrativity tied to the development of the *lichun* festival. Efrat Biberman has critiqued the basic assumption that "a painting is a coherent, decipherable object" that can be solved with a single narrative interpretation. For Biberman, narrative interpretations often attempt to "solve the puzzle of an image" by imposing a spatial and temporal order onto an image.²⁷⁵ In doing so, the assumption is that painting bears a coherent structure and temporal order that each viewer is capable of extracting. It is thus critical to draw a distinction between the fixed narrative interpretations provided by art historians and the actual viewing experiences tied to a painting. I have therefore opted for a view of the painting as a work of narrative density, with many different narrative cues that can be accessed to form a variety of temporal sequences. It is thus possible to think of *Greeting Spring* as a densely packed "hypertext" that may accommodate both linear and nonlinear interpretations, depending on the viewer(s). As seen here, narratives may be creatively composed around the repeating figure of the magistrate as well as the many theatrical performances and aural cues.

²⁷⁴ These theater acts are still widely performed in China today, and the characters and stories would be identifiable to a knowledgeable viewer. Perhaps the most popular of these is *Journey to the West*, one of the "four great vernacular novels" 四大名著 of the Ming dynasty that has continued to incarnate in a wide variety of media, including oral narratives, novels, comics, television, film, and animation.

²⁷⁵ Biberman, "On Narrativity in the Visual Field," 241.

Conclusion

In rethinking the role of narrativity in *nianhua*, I have emphasized the multisensory and embodied forms of engagement with *nianhua* of both the past and present. In particular, I have stressed the prominent role of performative gestures, storytelling, and auspicious speech in shaping the social significance of *nianhua* in both the home and marketplace. This chapter thus represents a critical move away from treating *nianhua* as visual illustrations of pre-existing narratives found in written and verbal texts. The interview sessions and visual material discussed in this chapter show that *nianhua* do not always communicate narratives in a linear or structured fashion comparable to written or verbal texts. Instead, the works may serve as dynamic sites of narrative density, embedded with a range of narrative cues that may be activated by knowledgeable viewers in both gesture and speech.

The narrativizing practices surrounding *nianhua* thus require close attention to their lived contexts, where different speakers and audiences may play a co-creative role in shaping the flow of the narrative. In this sense, no two narrative “tellings” are ever the same; they reflect complex processes of reactivation rather than the duplication or repetition of fixed narratives. Narrativizing practices are not rigidly confined to the *nianhua* object, which may only be understood as narrative works when they are narrativized in practice. Although *nianhua* may activate and guide a narrative performance in a variety of ways, the performance itself is also mediated by the speaker(s) knowledge of *nianhua*, personal memories, and immediate social engagement

with a particular audience. In the words of Diana Taylor, “materials from the archive shape embodied practices in innumerable ways, yet never totally dictate embodiment.”²⁷⁶

While opening up the visual to the sensory immediacy of touch, sound, gesture, and movement, the “corpothetic” forms of engagement with *nianhua* also shed light on the problematic categories used to identify certain *nianhua* as narrative illustrations. In this regard, I have focused primarily on the problematic category of “theater-based” *nianhua* by drawing on many examples that fall outside of this category. Wang Xingru’s Medicine King painting is an altar painting, but it is also a work with high narrative density and direct ties to theatrical performance of the Medicine King, as seen in the elaborate storytelling session with Wang, who draws on a range of discourses and narrative cues in the painting to weave together a strategic presentation of the painting’s significance. Wang’s storytelling also incorporates a variety of theatrical elements such as gesture, mime, vocal intonations, and the use of props to establish the authority of the speaker and to dramatize the significance and value of the work at hand. At the same time, theatrical references pervade a wide range of works that are not usually examined as “theater-based” *nianhua*, including door deity prints and popular scroll paintings that have appropriated and transformed theatrical elements for new uses.

In taking up the notion of narrative density, I have also offered an alternate analysis of the famous *Greeting Spring* painting, a historic work that has gained prominence in Mianzhu’s contemporary *nianhua* industry. A close examination of the ritual theater and rebus imagery depicted in the painting reveals the multiple narrative possibilities that are prevalent throughout the work. In particular, I have pointed to

²⁷⁶ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 21.

evidence that the work was both designed and used as a ritually efficacious painting to activate the exchange of auspicious speech and/or auspicious wishes for a business venture or partnership between elites involved in the herbal medicines industry of the late Qing period. Instead of limiting the painting to a narrative interpretation based solely on the repeating figure of the magistrate and a linear unfolding of the street parade, I have attempted to recover alternate possibilities of embodied interaction and ritual use.

To return once again to the initial question of what is at stake, politically and historically, in these embodied practices of narrativity, this chapter has stressed its performative nature, which is a powerful source of social and cultural capital for *nianhua* makers and users alike. These embodied practices push for a more situated and nuanced view of how *nianhua* of both the past and present participate in a range of secular and sacred discourses beyond the realms of art and folk art. Most significantly, they expose the connections that have been concealed by folk art typologies that order and organize *nianhua* archives into neat categories based on ritual function or format.

Chapter Four: To Build a Museum and a Village: the Race for Mianzhu's *Nianhua* Heritage

Thus far, this study has examined the recovery of the winter *nianhua* markets in Mianzhu, along with its evolving repertoire of ritual activities tied to both *nianhua* production and consumption. I have only touched on the role of the state-led *nianhua* revival as a catalyst for these developments and as a source of folk art discourses that tend to privilege historic *nianhua* over its contemporary incarnations. In this final chapter, I examine more closely Mianzhu's state-led *nianhua* revival and its use of heritage discourses to launch a folk art industry based on the reproduction of historic *nianhua*. Having laid out a preliminary framework for discussing the many ritual practices tied to *nianhua*, it is now possible to critique how the state-led *nianhua* revival has approached the issue of ritual practices, including its stated intent to preserve and protect *nianhua*'s "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH) 非物质文化遗产.

While official heritage discourses of the 1980s focused primarily on the *tangible* assets of heritage, including monuments, artifacts, and sites, by the mid-1990s there was growing national interest in expanding these activities to include the *intangible* assets of heritage, especially the ephemeral and embodied repertoires of traditional music, dance, and theater. These developments were directly influenced by ongoing collaborations between Chinese authorities and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a relationship that blossomed during the 1990s and onward.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ In China, UNESCO's interest in ICH was already making a nationwide impact in 1992, when its Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific launched the "Memory of the World and China's Traditional Music Sound Archives." For a historical overview of heritage revival activities in China and UNESCO's involvement see Geremie Barme, ed. "A Tale of Two Lists: An Examination of the New Lists of Intangible Cultural Properties," *China Heritage Newsletter* 7 (2006), accessed November 3, 2011, http://www.chinaheritagenewsletter.org/features.php?searchterm=007_twolists.inc&issue=007.

As a result, significant state funds and resources have been poured into building a centralized heritage bureaucracy in China, staffed with skilled heritage workers that UNESCO helped train. Sinologist Geremie Barme, who has followed these developments closely, has observed the rapid growth and immense scale of heritage protection activities in China, which is organizing “one of the world’s largest forces of conservationists and conservation bureaucrats.”²⁷⁸

In 2001, UNESCO’s director general released its “Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” to raise awareness of its changing strategies towards heritage protection. In response to harsh critiques that ephemeral forms of cultural knowledge were seriously threatened by the objectification, isolation, and exoticization of tangible forms of heritage, UNESCO revised its position to specifically acknowledge embodied forms of cultural activity with the following definition for oral and intangible heritage:

People’s learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create and the resources, spaces, and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability; these processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and creativity of humanity.²⁷⁹

The proclamation solidified UNESCO’s position on a controversial issue and renewed its agenda of evaluating and listing the world’s oral and intangible heritage. Since then, China’s heritage bureaucracy has aggressively pursued recognition on UNESCO’s

²⁷⁸Barme, “Tale of Two,” 2006.

²⁷⁹ “2001 UNESCO Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity: Guide for the Presentation of Candidature Files, Article 3: ‘Definition,’” accessed October 15, 2011, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001246/124628eo.pdf>.

prestigious list of ICH, setting off a nationwide race to identify and publicize regional forms of ICH. As a highly sought after goal, UNESCO recognition brings both political and economic capital on the world stage, glorifying China's geopolitical influence as a cultural nation while attracting foreign investment for heritage management, development, and tourism.

Thus far, the historic *nianhua* centers in China have yet to gain a spot on UNESCO's list, although twelve centers including Mianzhu, Sichuan did make the race to be included in an internal list of ICH issued by China's State Council in 2006.²⁸⁰ The list includes ten categories of ICH, including folk literature, folk music, folk dance, traditional drama, storytelling, acrobatics and sports, folk art, handicraft skills, traditional medicine, and folk customs. The twelve historic print centers are listed under the category of "folk art," under the title of "woodblock printed *nianhua*" 木板年画. This list is significant because it resituates *nianhua* as form of *intangible* rather than tangible heritage, and because it specifies woodblock printing as the particular type of knowledge it seeks to protect.

This shift is mirrored in the state-led revival activities in Mianzhu, which were initially focused on the tangible assets of *nianhua* heritage, such as the collection and exhibition of *nianhua* artifacts as well as the building of a Mianzhu Nianhua Museum in 1994 to house the state's *nianhua* collection. By the early 2000s however, local and provincial authorities had shifted their efforts towards rebuilding Mianzhu into a folk art heritage attraction that would include an entire themed Nianhua Village built with traditional architectural forms and a combination of restaurants, *nianhua* shops, living

²⁸⁰ *China Cultural Relics News*, "Representative Items of National Intangible Cultural Heritage" 国家级非物质文化遗产代表作, news release issued by the State Council, January 6, 2006, accessed October 15, 2011, http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/007/features/501_firstlist.pdf.

spaces, farm plots, gardens, and pavilions. State funds were also dedicated to an annual Nianhua Festival that would include a changing line-up of cultural performances based on themes drawn from historic *nianhua*. In taking up the discourses around ICH, state agencies moved beyond merely collecting and exhibiting historic *nianhua* to the building of historic *nianhua* sites and the staging of historic activities at those sites. Instead of marketing the *nianhua* object, the revival moved towards marketing the intangible *nianhua* experience. In response to these developments, local *nianhua* workshops, artists, entrepreneurs, and visitors have also played an important role in either validating or rejecting the state's carefully orchestrated presentations of *nianhua* heritage. Many workshops and independent artists have asserted their own claims to *nianhua* heritage, playing off and countering the state-led projects in creative and often unexpected ways.

The critical scholarship in heritage studies mirrors this shift in that scholars have moved away from theorizing heritage as a set of tangible assets (such as objects, sites, and monuments) and towards critiquing it as a “cultural process” and socially constructed concept driven by a variety of competing discourses and practices. In the opening line of *Uses of Heritage*, leading heritage studies scholar Laurajane Smith states provocatively, “There is, really no such thing as heritage.” Smith uses this statement to expose and to argue against the naturalizing effects of heritage, which is identified with “ ‘old,’ grand, monumental and aesthetically pleasing sites, buildings, places, and artifacts.” Instead, Smith draws attention to the role of heritage as an abstract form of “hegemonic discourse” that validates certain practices and performances while obscuring and undermining others.²⁸¹ Instead of taking for granted the material reality of heritage, Smith argues that the tangible assets of heritage are only known by the cultural values assigned

²⁸¹ Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006), 11.

to them in the first place. Thus in an effort to critique and deconstruct the focus on materiality in hegemonic heritage discourses, Smith sets forth an alternate conception of heritage that is established through cultural processes such as “memory, performance, identity, intangibility, dissonance, and place.”²⁸²

Smith’s approach reflects a larger debate concerning the “dematerialization of culture,” especially in museums and heritage sites that are moving towards more interactive and performative strategies of portraying the past and its tangible remains.²⁸³ Performance and heritage studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has argued for a view of heritage that is not about the tangible objects or sites of objects: “I wish to underscore that heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. It is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past.”²⁸⁴ Like Smith, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett stresses the ways in which heritage discourses assign new meanings: “The heritage industry is a new mode of cultural production and it produces something new.”²⁸⁵

However, this shift towards interpreting heritage as a cultural process often relegates objects and sites to a passive role, where meaning is simply projected or imposed by human activities, where “tangible heritage, without intangible heritage, is a mere husk or inert matter. As for intangible heritage, it is not only embodied but also inseparable from the material and social worlds of persons.”²⁸⁶ In an effort to move away

²⁸² Ibid., i.

²⁸³ Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd, introduction to *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation*, ed. Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd (Manchester University Press, 2011), 1-7.

²⁸⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 150.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 150.

²⁸⁶ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production,” *Museum International* 56, no. 1-2 (2004), 221-222.

from attributing intrinsic value to the objects of heritage, the move towards dematerialization swings to the other extreme of treating tangible objects as raw and “inert matter” at the mercy of heritage discourses. Reflecting the life/matter binary that informs much of Western scholarship, the debate around tangible versus intangible heritage must be approached with caution, especially with regard to how objects are either materialized or dematerialized in scholarly discourses aimed at redefining heritage. Although the critical scholarship is useful in exposing heritage as cultural processes, I will argue that the contested objects taken up in heritage discourses need to be examined within the specific cultural discourses and situated practices that shape their meaning. Thus in critiquing the state-led *nianhua* revival in Mianzhu, I will argue for the need to keep in mind the evolving relationships between *nianhua* and the embodied practices that continually shape their meaning. The danger in dematerializing the notion of heritage is that it risks losing sight of the dialectical interactions between objects and practices that undergird and legitimize both the state’s institutional claim to heritage as well as the counter claims that arise in response.

In the following sections, I will focus on the central role of historic *nianhua* in supporting a wide range of competing claims to *nianhua* heritage. I am primarily interested in how these claims are invested with power and legitimacy through specific modes of engagement with historic *nianhua*, especially the reproduction and recirculation of these works in the marketplace. I will focus on the critical role of historic *nianhua* in supporting large state funded projects such as the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, the Nianhua Village, and the Nianhua Festival. I will also address the range of critical responses and counter-activities that developed as a result of these heritage-building

projects, including the different claims to heritage advanced by local printshops, entrepreneurs, and independent folk artists who are also keen on appropriating the power of historic *nianhua*.

Mianzhu Nianhua Museum: Putting the Past in its Place

In 1978, just as state policies relaxed around traditional forms of cultural production, the notion of heritage protection was redeployed to legitimize the state's control over cultural resources at the local level. The vigorous energy dedicated towards heritage preservation and management reflects a certain anxiety over the state's changing stance towards traditional arts and culture. In Mianzhu, officials dealt with this uncertainty by reinstating the more familiar and tested methods of the 1950s and 1960s, including the collection of *nianhua* from local households, conducting interviews, and setting up production teams to produce state sanctioned *nianhua*.²⁸⁷ As in the reform era, the bureau once again exerted state jurisdiction over all historic *nianhua* as state artifacts 文物 and renewed the 1960 provincial mandate to “rescue of folk art heritage” 抢救民间艺术遗产. While the earlier print reforms sought to rescue heritage in order to weed out “feudal superstition” 封建迷信 and to produce politically sanctioned *nianhua*, the 1980s revival movement sought to recuperate previously banned works in order to launch a folk art export industry. In this section, I will examine how this process of recuperation culminates in the extensive displays of historic *nianhua* at the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, a state-run institution that opened in 1996 to “preserve, protect, and promote”

²⁸⁷ Shi Weian 史维安, "Sichuan sheng wenhua guanzhang peixunban jianggao" 四川省文化馆长培训班讲稿 [Lecture for the Sichuan Cultural Affairs Bureau directors' training], in *Mianzhu nianhua zhiyin - Shi Weian yu minjian yishu* 绵竹年画知音—史维安与民间艺术 [Mianzhu Nianhua: Shi Wei An's Collected Writings on Folk Art], ed. Hou Rong 侯荣 (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 1984).

Mianzhu's *nianhua* heritage. I will draw attention to the problematic provenance of the museum collection as well as the tensions and incongruities that emerge between the actual works and the museum's strategies of heritage display.

The provenance of the museum's prized collection historic *nianhua* is shrouded in mystery. Works were first collected in 1960 when state *nianhua* researchers Shi Weian and Fu Wenshu were charged with the duty of rescuing Mianzhu's *nianhua* heritage. With the assistance of elder printmakers and local informants, they collected some 200 historic *nianhua* roughly dated to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were taken from local households, abandoned storage rooms of former printshops, and even a salvage yard that was preparing to burn a large pile of prints as garbage. The specific details of these collection activities are lacking, as the mission was only recorded in summary form by the leading researcher Shi Weian. According to Shi, the team collected "about 100 door deity works that included over twenty pairs of hand painted door deity designs dating to the Ming and Qing period, 118 carved wooden blocks and rubbing blocks, and other miscellaneous painted works."²⁸⁸

According to firsthand accounts, the bulk of the works were transferred from Mianzhu's Cultural Affairs Bureau, where they had only survived the Cultural Revolution due to the clandestine efforts of the bureau chiefs. In April of 1966, two of the bureau directors, Huang Zonghou 黄宗厚 and Hou Shiwu 侯世武 made a secret pact to build a fake wall in the main office to hide the most treasured works. Two years later, the works were discovered by a group of maintenance workers, who began burning the old

²⁸⁸ According to Shi, they found the works just in time as they were being carted to a salvage yard to be sold as paper waste for recycling. The works were stored as overstocked items from an old paper shop that was being cleaned out by the descendants of the owner. Shi Weian 史维安, "Mianzhu menshen yishi" 绵竹门神轶事 [Mianzhu door deity anecdotes], *Deyang Daily* 德阳日报, March 2, 1996.

printing blocks as firewood to keep warm. By the time Hou arrived to stop the workers, thirty blocks had been destroyed. The remaining eighty-eight carved blocks, prints, and paintings survived to form the most complete and high quality set of historic *nianhua* from Mianzhu.²⁸⁹

Despite the rather haphazard survival of these works, they were immediately displayed in *nianhua* exhibitions that framed them as a representative collection of traditional Mianzhu *nianhua*. During the 1980s, a series of touring exhibitions were organized, showcasing these works as “traditional *nianhua*” 传统年画. They were displayed alongside “modern *nianhua*” 现代年画, new works by trained art academy artists commissioned by the state that depicted themes related to the “Four Modernizations” campaign, such as images of scientific progress, education, and consumer goods.²⁹⁰ In line with the new national agenda to open up Chinese markets to global trade, the touring exhibitions served multiple purposes tied to cultural exchange, diplomacy, and trade, where the works themselves narrated China’s smooth transition to modernity on the global stage. By 1985, Mianzhu *nianhua* had traveled to Hong Kong, France, United States, Japan, Mali, and Burkina Faso in West Africa. A slew of national exhibitions soon followed, attracting media attention and Mianzhu’s inclusion in a Hong Kong documentary on Sichuan’s cultural attractions.²⁹¹ Fueled by a larger “folk art fever”

²⁸⁹ Hou and Huang’s clandestine activities are recorded in a published interview with Hou in Shen Hong 沈泓, *Mianzhu nianhua zhi lv* 绵竹年画之旅 [Touring Mianzhu Nianhua] (Beijing: Zhongguo huabao chubanshe, 2006), 63-70.

²⁹⁰ John Gittings has commented on how posters reflected the “rapid shift in political culture” at the end of the Cultural Revolution (1976-1979) when images of science, education, and consumerism “could now be presented as primary targets of achievement.” See John Gittings, “Excess and Enthusiasm,” in *Picturing Power in the People’s Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, ed. Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 42.

²⁹¹ For a discussion of the 1980s touring exhibitions of Mianzhu *nianhua* and the filming of the feature documentary, *Curiosities of Sichuan* 四川奇趣录 see Pan Peide 潘培德, “Sichuan Mianzhu nianhua huigu yu

that was sweeping through China, these early revival activities were primarily geared towards a global audience and did little to support the local *nianhua* industry.

By 1993, these exhibitions had garnered enough success to earn Mianzhu official recognition as a Folk Art Hometown and state funds were allocated to build the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum 绵竹年画博物馆, a powerful institution that would secure the mandate to preserve and to protect Mianzhu's *nianhua* heritage for all future generations. Opened to the public in 1996, the modern three-story building houses Mianzhu's official *nianhua* collection, which has now expanded to include about 800 works (**fig. 63**).²⁹² In sharp contrast to the cyclic economy of ephemeral door deities seen throughout Mianzhu's residential neighborhoods, the museum establishes alternate modes of viewing where *nianhua* are presented as rare and permanent artifacts of historical and visual interest.

In framing the historical context of *nianhua*, the museum displays directly reflect the legacy of the 1950s print reforms as well as the 1980s traveling *nianhua* exhibitions, which separated traditional and modern *nianhua* as distinct categories. In the museum, a section of the upper floor is reserved for pre-1949 *nianhua* works, which are labeled as "traditional *nianhua*." A separate section, marked off with partitions, is reserved for the "modern *nianhua*" created in the 1950s or later. Separated both temporally and physically, these categories are also arranged to effectively narrate *nianhua*'s historical transition from traditional forms to modern ones, with the modern works placed near the entrance of the room while the traditional works are hung on wall partitions in the back of

zhanwang" 四川绵竹年画的回顾与展望 [Reflections on Mianzhu nianhua's past and future prospects], *Meishu Tongxun* 美术通讯 2(1990).

²⁹² In 1993, the county of Mianzhu was designated a "Chinese folk art hometown" 中国民间艺术之乡 and received at least five million yuan in government funding to build the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum. In 1996, the county (县) was upgraded to city (市) status.

the room, forming a linear order that guides the viewer's back in time as they move through the space (**fig. 64**).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the folk art revival was referred to as a push to “renew *nianhua*” 年画创新 and to “put the past in service of the present, out with the old and in with the new” 古为今用, 推陈出新.²⁹³ These slogans play on the auspicious meaning of newness yet in practice, the revival policies served to relegate tradition to the past. This is confirmed by the use of the term “folk culture” 民间文化 in contrast to “mass culture” 群众文化. According to Shi Weian, the notion of folk culture should be understood as the non-official realms of culture and belonging primarily to the feudal and pre-revolutionary past.²⁹⁴ Conversely, the notion of mass culture, which was popularized by Mao Zedong's Yanan talk in 1943, is closely tied to revolutionary culture and thus firmly planted in the modern age. This shift in terms marks a temporal divide where *nianhua* is reconceived as a folk art of the remote past rather than a cultural activity of the present.

Likewise, the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum's preservation of heritage is equated with the preservation of works made prior to 1950s. In the museum, this temporal divide is replicated in the arrangement of the works, where the upper floor is reserved for pre-1949 *nianhua* works (often referred to as “old *nianhua*” or “traditional *nianhua*”) and the lower floor is for “new *nianhua*,” works created in the 1950s or later. These approaches are borrowed directly from 1950's print reform discourses, which popularized the term “new *nianhua*” to refer to the ideologically reformed prints of “mass culture.” The

²⁹³ Pan Peide 潘培德, “Gu wei jin yong, tuichen chuxin: chengtan Mianzhu nianhua chuanguang zhong de jige wenti” 古为今用, 推陈出新: 诚谈绵竹年画创新中的几个问题 [For the ancient to serve the present, out with the old, in with the new: an candid discussion of the challenges facing the revival of Mianzhu nianhua], in *Mianzhu nianhua ziliao xuanbian* 绵竹年画资料选编 4 [Anthology of Mianzhu Nianhua Research Materials, vol. 4] (Mianzhu: Mianzhu Nianhua Research Society 绵竹年画社, 1982): 5-9.

²⁹⁴ Shi Weian, “Lecture for the Sichuan Cultural Affairs Bureau,” 146.

reformed prints were considered new and hence, auspicious, while all other prints were labeled “traditional” 传统, “superstitious” 迷信 and “old *nianhua*” 旧年画.²⁹⁵ This manipulation of what constitutes the “new” was an effective strategy to cast traditional prints as inauspicious and outdated obstacles to progress.

This spatial separation of old versus new or traditional versus modern *nianhua* is challenged by the works themselves, especially the prints of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that depict modern imagery. For instance, the “beautiful maiden pictures” 仕女图 vividly illustrate how Mianzhu’s workshops absorbed the modernizing tendencies that circulated in the cultural flows of the late nineteenth century. These works have been taken up in existing studies as a sign of China’s “encounter with modernity” at the turn of the century, as a sign of change and rupture due to the influx of new identities, ideas, and modernization movements.²⁹⁶ However, it is also possible to read these images in the context of *nianhua*’s continuous depictions of the new and auspicious, as part of the Lunar New Year rites of renewal and regeneration. These annually-renewed prints typically depict elegant young women on smaller size papers to be circulated as gifts for women; the size is designed for its intimate display inside bedrooms and forms part of the larger repertoire of auspicious images to fulfill women’s pursuit of health, fertility, beauty, birth of sons, happy marriages, and so on. Starting in the late nineteenth century,

²⁹⁵ For a discussion of the 1950s national print reform movement, see Chang-tai Hung, “Repainting China: New Year Prints (Nianhua) and Peasant Resistance in the Early Years of the People’s Republic,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 4 (2000): 779-810.

²⁹⁶ There has been an explosion of literature on this issue in recent years, with many texts that deal directly with images of “beautiful maidens” in posters and ads as a sign of Chinese modernity in Shanghai: Ellen J. Laing, “Reform, Revolutionary, Political, and Resistance Themes in Chinese Popular Prints, 1900-1940,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 12, no. 123-175 (2000); —, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004); Jason C. Kuo, ed. *Visual Culture in Shanghai, 1850s-1930s* (Washington, DC: Lightning Source Inc., 2007); Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999); Laikwan Pang, *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).

fashionable foreign accessories such as fans, earrings, flowers, and umbrellas were gradually incorporated into this context (**fig. 65**).

In an example of a beautiful maiden print, roughly dated to the late Qing period (**fig. 66**), one finds an incongruous juxtaposition of a maiden who carries a fan and yet even with bound feet effortlessly rides a fanciful bicycle bearing a golden dragon-head as its steering device. Her *guapimao* cap 瓜皮帽, *qipao* dress 旗袍, and tiny feet were commonly seen in the late Qing and signify her status as a well-to-do commoner. The cap, which was not worn by women, was occasionally worn as a playful novelty among young girls and adds a whimsical air to the image. The awkwardly structured bicycle also bears disconnected foot pedals that jut out of two closely positioned wheels. It is unlikely that the print's designer had ever seen an actual bicycle, but rather based this depiction on either a verbal account or a printed image of one. In Sichuan, bicycles did not arrive in large numbers until at least the 1930s, however, its image as a sign of wealth, status, and advanced technology was already absorbed into Mianzhu's local formats of auspicious imagery.²⁹⁷

During the 1920s and 30s, Shanghai's urban printing industry appropriated the "beautiful maiden" format to advertise foreign goods and services such as this cigarette advertisement depicting a sexy young woman on a bicycle (**fig. 67**). Such works have attracted much scholarly attention as part of Shanghai's visual culture, which has been privileged as a locus of Chinese modernity in this period. Yet there has been only marginal discussion of how these works are recirculated and reabsorbed into ritual print

²⁹⁷For a discussion on the history of the bicycle in China, see Amir Moghaddass Esfehni, "The Bicycle's Long Way to China: The Appropriation of Cycling as a Foreign Cultural Technique (1860-1941)," paper presented at the Proceedings of the 13th International Cycling History Conference, San Francisco, 2003; Frank Dikotter, *Things Modern: Material Culture and Everyday Life in China* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007).

activities geared towards “pursuing the auspicious, repelling the portentous.” In taking ritual print use into consideration, it is possible to see how newness, change, and innovation were integral aspects of “tradition” and not exclusive to encounters with the “modern.” Further, this documents how Mianzhu printmakers have a history of strategically situating themselves within a competitive marketplace by using new imagery to expand and empower their repertoires of auspicious imagery.

The Museum’s linear staging of *nianhua* history as a transition from tradition to modernity is also highly problematic from a historical point of view, because production of the so-called “traditional *nianhua*” never completely ceased; such works were widely available in the markets up to the mid-1960s when the Cultural Revolution began. There is also evidence that these works continued to emerge in small quantities during the Cultural Revolution, and of course afterwards. Furthermore, the temporal order of the works on display is not reliable because it is very difficult to date the works themselves. Only a very general estimation can be made based on the use of locally produced papers and mineral pigments, which began falling out of use in the 1910s and 1920s due to the importation of cheaper materials. Aside from this, however, it is impossible to date the works according to subject matter alone as many traditional subjects and print formats continued to circulate alongside the reformed prints of the 1950s and 1960s.

By constructing a clear divide between traditional and modern works, the museum uncritically adopts the stance of the 1950s print reforms, which popularized the terms “new *nianhua*” and “modern *nianhua*” to refer to the reformed prints. The rhetoric that foregrounds the newness of the reformed prints actually appropriates the auspicious associations with all things new and renewed, and in doing so, also denigrates traditional

print formats as “old,” which should be discarded and avoided at all costs during the Lunar New Year.²⁹⁸ Yet despite the criticism of traditional references as feudal and backward, the reformed prints continued to appropriate their most auspicious features, including the door deity format that was simply remade with glorified images of anonymous proletarian workers and peasants. In these works, auspicious motifs are used in abundance to help communicate and inculcate socialist values. In one example, a farm girl and a factory worker are riding mythical creatures (a phoenix and a dragon) that are forms of transport reserved for deities. Instead of carrying the traditional weapons used by warrior door deities, the farm girl holds a sickle with a red flag and bushel of wheat while the factory worker grips a steel rod with a red flag and a brick steel furnace (**fig. 7**). Although this was part of the larger attempt to secularize images of divine beings and relegate tradition to the past, it is possible to see how mundane figures are in fact deified in the use of auspicious imagery normally reserved for door deities.²⁹⁹

What is the larger motivation behind replaying the death of traditional *nianhua* at the hands of the state-led print reforms? At first glance, this appears incongruous with the interest in glorifying and marketing traditional *nianhua* to a global audience. However, upon closer inspection, it is possible to see the high stakes involved in keeping tradition firmly planted in the past rather than a living, thriving presence. The projection of *nianhua* as a lost or disappearing tradition is in the interests of the state as it legitimizes the need for official intervention and management. Etymologically linked to the notion of

²⁹⁸ For a discussion of the 1950s national print reform movement, see Chang-tai Hung, “Repainting China,” 779-810.

²⁹⁹ Furthermore, the print reform efforts had limited control over the consumption and ritual use of such works, a point clearly documented by Chang Hai-tung in his study of the 1950s *nianhua* reforms. The notion that traditional print practices were completely displaced by state circumscription holds little ground when ritual use is taken into account.

inheritance, the notion of “heritage” points to that which resides in the past or comes from the past. Similarly, the Chinese concept of heritage, or *yichan* 遗产, carries connotations of material property passed down from the deceased to the living. In situating *nianhua* as cultural heritage, the implication is that traditional *nianhua* would disappear without official action. This position provides a rationale for a wide range of revival activities, where the state is positioned as the authoritative custodian and spokesperson for traditional *nianhua*. The idea of salvaging the past to serve the present is captured in the many revival slogans that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, including the auspicious sounding slogan of “put the past in service of the present; out with the old and in with the new.”³⁰⁰

In thinking through the notion of heritage as a cultural process, it is evident that the museum’s strategies of display serve to reshape and recast the significance of the *nianhua* in its collection. By directing viewers through the space and drawing attention to certain selected details in the works, the museum plays a key role in publicizing and authorizing the historical narratives around *nianhua*. However, the museum display do not completely dictate the significance of the works, as different viewers will inevitably bring their own perspectives, memories, and interpretations to bear on the exhibition. In many cases, the museum’s careful isolation and objectification of historic *nianhua* is undermined by the vital relationships they share with *nianhua* producing families in Mianzhu. Since many works were taken from local households, they are still connected to various families’ histories, as prints, paintings, or woodblocks produced by deceased family members.

³⁰⁰Pan, “For the Ancient to Serve the Present,” 5.

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, lineage paintings, documents, and old woodblocks still play a critical role in supporting a *nianhua* workshop's livelihood and survival in today's competitive marketplace. The various print reform movements of the 1950s and early 1960s marked a period of intense censorship and confiscation of traditional prints and paintings, many of which were treasured lineage documents for local workshops. During the 1980s, yet another wave of collection was implemented under the rubric of protecting the nation's cultural heritage. These repeated seizures have further disadvantaged *nianhua* families who rely on these documents to keep their lineages and professions alive. The museum's promotional materials often celebrate the role of state researchers in courageously rescuing Mianzhu's *nianhua* heritage from total disappearance, while making no mention of the darker histories attached to its collection.

A greater recognition of contemporary lineage-making practices would require a shift in discourse that situates *nianhua* heritage in the present rather than the past. A close examination of how historic *nianhua* are continually reactivated in ritual practices is also required, tied to livelihood and the embodied transmission of *nianhua* knowledge in various domains, such as production skills, storytelling, marketing strategies, and other forms of ritual knowledge concerning *nianhua* use. As discussed in previous chapters, these activities underscore the dialectical and inseparable nature of *nianhua* and their living repertoires of ritual practice.

Although ICH discourses are often aimed at recovering the significance of embodied forms of knowledge and cultural practice, the notion of ICH inevitably reifies a conceptual framework that separates the tangible from the intangible. Anthropologist Philip Scher has drawn attention to the problem of how the anti-essentialist stance in

anthropology continues to bear traces of the essentializing scholarship of the past, especially in the continued “organization of diversity through mutually recognizable classification, or hegemony as taxonomy.” Scher argues that hegemony lies not in the proliferation of homogeneous goods flowing outward from the west, but in “the *organization* of difference, in the standardization of *criteria* by which difference can be measured.”³⁰¹ The institutionally authorized categories of tangible and intangible heritage are thus examples of how cultural difference may be effectively managed and organized under a universal framework that embraces diversity in content but not in organizational paradigms. Scher also points to how the categorizing of certain objects and practices as “heritage” are often closely tied to nationalist ideologies:

The nationalist protection of heritage must posit an interested historical narrative of both the creation and development of certain expressive cultural forms and that, by doing so, the narrative necessarily excludes both an understanding of the historical participation of certain groups within the nation, and their contemporary participation in the ongoing evolution of such cultural forms.³⁰²

In the case of the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, the presentation of *nianhua* heritage is narrated as part of the nation’s transition from the traditional to the modern, a chronological development marked by the transformation of ephemeral ritual objects into elevated works of art. This narrative erases many of the existing ties between historic *nianhua* and the living communities just beyond the walls of the museum, especially since many of the works come from families that are still flourishing, living in Mianzhu, and involved in the resurgent *nianhua* industry. The silence on this issue reflects a

³⁰¹ Philip Scher, “Copyright Heritage: Preservation, Carnival, and the State in Trinidad,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 3, (Summer 2002): 460.

³⁰² Ibid., 455.

general reluctance to challenge the authority of state institutions such as the Cultural Affairs Bureau and the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, the powerful agencies that collect and protect “cultural artifacts.” Nevertheless, there is some evidence that the silence is gradually being broken, and I will briefly draw attention to two important examples I came across in researching this topic.

The first is an account from Wang Xingru, who openly lamented the loss of his family’s woodblocks and paintings during our interview session. According to Wang, these lineage documents were bought by state researchers from Beijing who visited his father in the 1960s:

It’s a shame that we lost four old blocks. One of them was carved with the picture, “bestowing the money pot.” It was this big, this long and this wide, and there were four of them. It’s a shame. After my father gave me his works, they were collected by Professor Ma at the museum in Beijing. The old paintings passed down from our elders were all sold to him and taken away. Every time he came, he wanted to find my father and he’d even wait until late evening to buy those works.³⁰³

It is significant that he shared this information with me during an interview attended by the state researchers Ning Zhiqi and Liu Zhumei. Although he was speaking of the past, it may be read as a critique of the current collection efforts still being carried out by Mianzhu’s official agencies. Both Ning and Liu were sympathetic to this problem but confessed they could do little to help the situation despite their official positions. They informed me that a set of Wang family lineage paintings is currently held in the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum: a large set of paintings attributed to Wang’s father, known as the *Twenty Four Filial Acts* 二十四孝. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate written records

³⁰³ Wang Xingru, in interview with the author, Mianzhu, Sichuan, June 2006.

of how or when this work was collected from the Wang family. This work would play an important role in supporting the Wang family lineage and livelihood, yet there is no clear legal recourse for them to reclaim the piece.

Aside from Wang's account, there are also references to the loss of lineage documents that can be gleaned from the summarized interviews conducted in the 1950s and again in the 1980s. According to Liu Zhumei's summarized interview with Zhang Xianfu, the Zhang family ran one of the most famous and successful *nianhua* workshops in Mianzhu. A multi-generational line of designers, the family produced paintings, prints, murals, fans, and painted coffins. The Zhang family's prized collection of lineage documents was known to include woodblocks and paintings that were hundreds of years old. These works were confiscated and destroyed during the onset of the Cultural Revolution, amounting to a tragic loss for the family lineage. According to Zhang, his father's pain and anger at the loss of these works led him to "die of anger" shortly after.³⁰⁴

Many of the Zhang family works have resurfaced in the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, although the captions make no mention of their problematic provenance. Unfortunately, the silence of the museum on such issues demonstrates the continued repression of such histories and the violent backdrop of Mianzhu's *nianhua* revival. Only by reading against the grain of official reports and archived documents do we get a glimpse of the devastation imparted by the repeated collection of prints and paintings from local households. Despite the lack of official recognition, however, these stories are

³⁰⁴ Liu Zhumei 刘竹梅, "Re ai nianhua shiye de Zhang Xianfu" 热爱年画事业的张先富 [Zhang Xianfu's passion for the nianhua industry], in *Mianzhu nianhua ziliao xuanbian* 绵竹年画资料选编 4 [Mianzhu nianhua selected research documents, vol. 4] (Mianzhu: Mianzhu Nianhua Society 绵竹年画社, 1982, 1-6.

still being told in the homes and workshops of those who remember their lineage histories.

When I arrived to do field research in 2006, the halls of the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum were almost always empty except for the occasional press conference or official meeting between researchers, collectors, and state officials (**fig. 68**). Aside from those directly involved in the state's *nianhua* revival activities, I did not meet a single resident that had actually visited the museum in person. This includes the many *nianhua* producers and vendors I interacted with on the streets. The museum had no schedule of events or programs that engaged the public, although it did have a small team of folk art researchers who were responsible for the study and documentation of Mianzhu *nianhua*. Museum staff had access to small offices and work studios in the museum, but these were largely unused spaces. On most days, the museum was only staffed by one front desk person who also watched over the giftshop and a cleaning person. The eerie silence of the museum served as a sharp contrast to the bustling activities in the street, where the diverse array of ephemeral *nianhua* merged seamlessly with the sounds, rhythms, and lived spaces of everyday life. The slick glass walls of the modern museum and its fragile works preserved behind glass appear to sanitize and mute the colorful, noisy, and unruly life of *nianhua* in the streets. The blindness and deafness of the museum to the living presence of *nianhua* just beyond its walls is reminiscent of Theodor Adorno's famous comments on the connections between museums and the entombment of the dead:

The German word *museal* has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of

dying. ... Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art.³⁰⁵

In the case of the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, many observers still have a vital relationship to the objects on display, so that the museum's premature entombment of *nianhua* is all the more problematic and incongruous with lived experience.

Contesting Heritage: *Nianhua* Makers Stake Their Claims

In recuperating the surviving *nianhua* and woodblocks in its possession, the Mianzhu Cultural Affairs Bureau reestablished ties with the elderly printmakers that had participated in the 1950s print reform. The printmakers were hired to reproduce works in their collection by carving new woodblocks based on historic designs and by printing the old blocks. With access to these resources, Mianzhu's printmakers used the opportunity to help rebuild their own workshop repertoires. Well-poised to straddle both the folk art export market and the seasonal print markets, they drew on their ritual knowledge and innovative skills to reappropriate and redesign the historic *nianhua* for redistribution as ritual goods in their workshops. Each workshop sought creative ways to enhance and renew the historical prints' ritual efficacy to "attract the auspicious, repel the portentous," especially by marketing their own signature skills in printing and painting. To illustrate my point here, I will examine how the Chen and Li workshops incorporated the historic *nianhua* into their existing repertoires. While Chapter Two examined their use of lineage discourses to boost their position in the marketplace, this section will examine more

³⁰⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 175.

closely their appropriation of the historic *nianhua* held in the state collection. I will argue that in the process, they assert their own claims on heritage, not by presenting the works as folk art as is the case in the Museum, but by reintroducing these works to the marketplace as inexpensive ritual commodities.

In 1980, Mianzhu's senior printmakers were invited to reconvene under the auspices of the "Mianzhu Woodblock *Nianhua* Research Committee" 绵竹县绵竹木板年画研究会, a resurrected version of the *Nianhua* Research Society tied to the 1950s print reforms.³⁰⁶ The committee included officials, researchers, and a handful of elder printmakers who were former members of the society. These printmakers have become known as "master artisans" 老艺人, a loaded term that constructs them as individual folk artists. Yet, the works they make are often collaboratively produced and not the products of single authors. They also come from varied backgrounds in the print industry, which was highly stratified across class status and education. They were trained in different aspects of the print production process, including the four major stages of designing, carving, printing, and painting.

Here, I will again draw on the interviews I conducted with Chen Xingcai and Li Fangfu in their print studios in 2006 and 2007. As discussed in Chapter Two, Chen Xingcai is the leading elder of the Chen family workshop, also known as the "Southern School" of Mianzhu *nianhua*. As a youth, Chen was trained as a painter and stamp carver for the final stage of production. During his extended involvement in the *Nianhua* Research Society of the 1950s-1960s and again in its new incarnation of the 1980s, Chen copied many images from the historic woodblocks and later adapted these works to his

³⁰⁶ During the print reform era, the same committee was named the "Mianzhu Woodblock Print *Nianhua* Society" 绵竹木板年画社. The shift towards "research" in the name of the association signals a new policy of revival and research rather than reform.

own methods of carving, hand painted color application, and gold stamping. After the interruption of the Cultural Revolution, Chen built up his own family workshop and began teaching his skills to his whole family. After years of ideological campaigns against traditional culture, Chen's continued use of older images invokes a connection to history, a certain nostalgia, and local pride.

For instance, in redesigning the *Bicycle-riding Maiden* print from the state collection, Chen highlights his unique skills in painting and stamping (**fig. 69**). For Chen, it is his signature use of these skills that makes the piece a part of his repertoire. While the older work from the late 19th century uses pale shades of pink and yellow in the costume (**fig. 66**), the Chen workshop version uses bright blue and pink, with the added detail of gold flower stamps. The bicycle is also redesigned with bright colors on the wheel spokes and handlebars. These approaches are an integral part of revitalizing the auspicious functioning of the image and thus further legitimizing his adaptation. As Chen says, "the more vibrant, the more auspicious, and the more people are drawn to it." Chen has used these elements in ways that innovate, invigorate, or renew the auspicious quality of older works. This illustrates how the very notion of auspiciousness is neither fixed nor bounded, but rather a site of creative experimentation as well as a way to highlight one's unique skill set.

Since the prints in the Museum's collection were drawn from local households to begin with, it is in a circular, if not ironic, fashion by which Chen's copies serve to reinscribe and reactivate those works within the domestic spaces and seasonal rituals of his workshop and the households that display his works. Chen's combined strategy of mimesis and innovation thus allows his workshop to play on the tension between two

poles: on one hand adapting to the unstable trends of a competitive market by claiming historical authenticity, and on the other, retaining a distinct group identity through visual difference. This approach, which creatively bridges past and present while maintaining the auspicious efficacy of the images, has proven successful in that his family has now gained celebrity status in the national *nianhua* market as well as received government funding for a new workshop.

By tracing the trajectory of the Museum works, one can see how these move from the space of the local household to the government museum, and back to the workshop and household. Chen's emulation or copying of these works reflects an effort to claim or reclaim his workshop's access to Mianzhu's *nianhua* heritage, where heritage is approached as a living body of knowledge that must be put into practice through continued innovation and experimentation. His efforts also reflect a strategic marketing move to appropriate high-status examples of traditional Mianzhu *nianhua* that are widely known to contemporary audiences. This is similar to practices in earlier times, where groups of rural craftsmen purchased the works of famous painters in the urban center of Mianzhu, then mass-produced them in their workshops. Interestingly, the notion of the authentic, historic original, as officialized by museum practices, does not hold much ground in *nianhua* production and use, which is based on collaborative work, mass production, and an annual renewal of auspicious images.

Li Fangfu, like Chen, was also a member of the Nianhua Research Society during the print reform era and again in its current incarnation, but he takes a very different approach to redesigning historical works. Li is also from a rural background and spent many years as a farmer and a painter in local workshops, where he was trained in the

final stage of detail application. In contrast to Chen, Li usually works alone, as his children have moved away from Mianzhu to find work in larger cities. Although he also creates prints, Li's works are mostly larger format hanging scrolls or handscrolls for interior display and long-term use. While Chen foregrounds his use of color and stamping, Li redesigns and enhances the auspicious meaning of historical works through highlighting his signature brushwork skills.

When asked about his approach to painting, Li links his brushwork directly to the auspicious power of his images. According to Li, the embodied skill of the painter becomes the direct vehicle for infusing an image with auspicious powers. Li argues that the reason why people still buy hand painted images instead of photocopied ones is because of they believe in the power of the painter's touch: "A person who makes pictures can ward off portentous forces, furthermore, an image maker possesses a righteous spirit. The image fully reveals the quality of this spirit." Pointing to his painting, he continues, "take a look at this pair of paintings, look at the eyes in the face. To paint this properly, the entire portrait should reveal an energetic spirit, no matter where you stand or at which angle you view this, the image should be looking back at you" (**fig. 70**). According to Li, the very last step in painting figures and creatures is the "opening of the eyes" 开相 in which the painter adds the pupils to the eyes to awaken the deity. In speaking about the door deity, Li's use of language positions the deity as a living, animated being. He further explains how the ritual efficacy of the images is tied to the internal state of the highly trained painter:

An image-maker's internal state should be still in order to transmit a righteous spirit; without this, the image fails. Without this, calligraphers would not have

expressive, upright characters; just by looking at their writing you can see their level of internal development.³⁰⁷

Li goes on to describe how this skill is only attained through gradual, painstaking training under a learned master. His own training was based on long hours of repetitive copying: “I practiced so much, my wrists bled. After this, my hand was strong and controlled. Any smallest movement should reveal your highest standard. To do this practice is to learn by doing, and that learning never ends.” By pointing to a form of embodied knowledge, gradually attained over time and through diligent training, Li foregrounds the transmission of this knowledge through the mark of the painter. In doing so, he positions his works as irreproducible and unique:

There is a myth from back in the day, that explains why door deities should be made by hand. There was also mechanized printing back then, but these did not sell as well as the works made by hand. Firstly, the painter was believed to repel evil and secondly, the painter has an upright righteous spirit. This righteous spirit is painted into the picture.³⁰⁸

Li Fangfu is well known for his reappropriation of the *tianshuijiao*, a work that has been touted by the revival movement as an extraordinary example of Mianzhu *nianhua* brushwork. Taking what was a small-format image made with leftover papers and paints, Li completely transforms the historical format into a carefully painted work on oversized vertical scrolls (**fig. 71**). This large format is usually reserved for high-end paintings that are displayed inside high-ceilinged halls or on either side of a tall indoor entrance, and are thus intended for permanent display rather than temporary use. Li appropriates the prominent status of historic *tianshuijiao*, redesigns the genre using expensive materials,

³⁰⁷ Li Fangfu, in interview with the author, Mianzhu, Sichuan, June 2006.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

and has sold such works to visiting collectors and researchers for high prices. In doing so, Li has positioned himself in direct competition with the museum's giftshop, which also sells high-end *nianhua* products based on reproductions of historical works.

Both Chen and Li have placed emphasis on the auspicious power of their works, which they refer to both as “folk art” and as living deities for ritual use. The two categories are not treated as oppositional or exclusive, but comfortably inclusive or even desirable. In contrast to the Museum, which tends to marginalize *nianhua*'s ritual histories, Chen and Li straddle both worlds to play to the folk art market as well as the ritual print economy. Thus, the Chen and Li workshops have developed strategies to take advantage of folk art discourses while also challenging institutional definitions of heritage that narrowly focus on tangible assets. These examples illustrate the contested nature of *nianhua* heritage, where meaning is asserted through embodied practices involving historic designs as well as a “range of activities that include remembering, commemoration, communicating and passing on knowledge and memories, asserting and expressing identity and social and cultural values and meanings.”³⁰⁹

I will stress here the critical need to keep in view how these embodied practices not only shape the meaning of specific works but also how the works themselves activate and enable certain practices. Both Chen and Li play off of historic designs in ways that boost their position in the marketplace, enabling them to capitalize on the high status of these works while asserting their own unique claims to heritage. For these workshops, the privilege of having access to old woodblocks comes down to a matter of livelihood and survival in a competitive business where they must compete against a range of state-led revival activities. The significance of heritage is not only negotiated through abstract

³⁰⁹ Smith, *The Uses of Heritage*, 83.

discourses that construct the value of certain objects, but also, perhaps even more critically in this case, through direct forms of embodied engagement with those objects deemed valuable.

Mianzhu's Nianhua Village and the Rise of Intangible Heritage Tourism

By 2002, the state-led folk art industry was in the midst of reinventing itself by moving away from the preservation/reproduction of historical works and towards large-scale constructions aimed to appeal to tourists. It was apparent that the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum in the town's urban center had largely failed as a heritage attraction; it neither engaged the local community nor outside visitors. In contrast, a booming tourism industry was emerging in the naturally scenic rural areas surrounding Mianzhu, where many ancient sites of cultural importance were being redeveloped for recreation, including Dujiangyan, Qingchen Mountain, and the Sanxingdui archaeological site.³¹⁰ Eager to revamp *nianhua's* tourism potential, Mianzhu's officials teamed up with land developers to build "sites of *nianhua* history and culture." The centerpiece project was the Nianhua Village, an ambitious attraction built at the location of former printshops from the Qing dynasty. It is not clear what historic structures related to the print trade remained in the area, as no formal survey or study was conducted before everything was torn down to begin construction of the Nianhua Village in 2004.

³¹⁰ These developments in the region were catalyzed by the China Western Development 西部大开发, a national campaign that began in 2000 to build infrastructure in energy, telecommunications, transportation, and education, as well as increased ecological protection and foreign investment. In 2000, China also joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), which marked a new phase of China's integration with global politics and trade. For an in-depth analysis of these developments in relation to Sichuan, see Christopher McNally, "Driving Capitalist Development Westward," *China Quarterly*, no. 178, (June 2004): 426-447.

The allocation of state funds for the construction of the Nianhua Village was directly tied to the expansion of China's heritage bureaucracy, which has been expanding rapidly towards the identification and management of intangible forms of culture over the past decade. In 2000, central state authorities launched the "Project to Preserve the Intangible Heritage of China's Ethnic Minority Groups" and in 2004, China signed on to UNESCO's "Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage," publicly aligning its policies with the global prestige of UNESCO. Also in 2004, significant funding for heritage protection was included in the centralized state budget, sparking the nation's largest survey of ICH that would result in the collection of hundreds of thousands of objects and countless hours of audio and video recordings documenting about 870,000 items.³¹¹ In the rhetoric of the policies, these activities draw on the heritage discourses and core values adopted by UNESCO, yet the proclamations to protect and preserve ICH are not always carried out in practice.

Mianzhu's Nianhua Village is a compelling example of how authorized discourses around ICH are used to further privilege the tangible assets of heritage over its intangible counterparts. In maintaining a distinct separation between tangible and intangible assets, the focus on ICH has not supported a critique of existing policies, but has further legitimized the state's expanded role in managing cultural resources that were once beyond its jurisdiction. Instead of prompting a critical discussion around the social implications of collecting, isolating, and displaying a community's cultural objects in a

³¹¹ The program lasted from 2005 to 2009. According to incomplete estimates, researchers have visited 1.15 million folk artists and practitioners. With an overall investment of 800 million RMB, they have collected 290,000 items of precious materials and documents, made text records of about 2 billion Chinese characters, audio records of 230,000 hours, 4.77 million photographs and compiled 140,000 volumes of general survey studies, covering altogether about 870,000 items of intangible cultural heritage across China. See Xinhua News Agency, "Protection and Promotion of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage," news release, June 2, 2010, accessed November 5, 2010, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-06/02/content_20171387_2.htm.

museum, the introduction of ICH discourses only spurred a state-led effort to further expand their activities into the realm of heritage tourism, another sector of the economy that could be used to promote the *nianhua* in the state collections.

The promotion of the state's *nianhua* collection played a central role in the overall design and layout of the Nianhua Village, which is adorned with countless painted murals on the exterior surfaces of the homes, shops, walkways, and gates. Mianzhu's Cultural Affairs Bureau worked with investors and developers to contract the murals to a professional advertising company, essentially outsourcing the visual program of the entire complex. The murals are almost entirely based on the historic works held in the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, along with a few recreations of familiar *nianhua* themes.

The murals' key design elements, such as the placement, colors, and execution of the murals, were left up to the advertising company, who speedily took to the task without consulting the residents or shop owners who already lived in the village. The murals simplify many of the elements in the historical prints by reproducing only the most basic lines and shapes. The historical prints were thus rendered into a uniform set of images through the advertising company's use of standardized lines and colors. This may be a design strategy to make the prints more legible and graphic so that they function as highly visible murals to be easily discerned from a distance. In the same way advertising billboards work, the murals can be seen across the valley and from the main road, marking out a well-defined set of buildings to be gazed upon as touristic space. For sociologist John Urry, who has theorized the social relations of tourism, "the tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience," where visual elements may be "objectified or captured through

photographs, postcards, films, models, and so on. These enable the gaze to be endlessly reproduced and recaptured.”³¹²

As a marketing tool, the placement of the newly painted murals is geared towards framing the village and heightening its sensual appeal for the touristic gaze, to set it apart from the ordinary residential areas surrounding it. Their presence thus reflects a new set of concerns that completely overrides how the images would have been displayed in the past. For instance, the historic “beautiful maiden” prints that were designed for the intimate space of the bedroom are blown up as larger-than-life outdoor murals, such as the three beautiful maiden images painted onto the walls of a courtyard (**fig. 72**). Two of the standing figures face one another on either side of the door, suggestive of protective door deities. A revamped version of the *Bicycle-riding Maiden* print appears on the wall of the building on the left, in a bright orange costume and blue cap. The light shades of color and fine details seen in the historical print are absent here, as the mural painters opted for contrasting colors and bold lines.

In contrast to the print ephemera and handmade spring couplets seen in various stages of decay on the household doors in Mianzhu, these murals do not attend to the spatial and temporal elements of ritual renewal that usually activate the images’ auspicious meanings. Permanent and weatherproof, the murals establish new forms of engagement with the historic works, as brightly colored billboards, photo opportunities, or talking points for tour guides and hosts. The murals also direct movement through the village, which doubles as an outdoor gallery through which visitors engage in leisurely walks to gaze at the works. While moving through the space, I noted how the enlarged images of the past appeared frozen in time against the white walls, as if sterilized from

³¹² John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 2002), 3.

any association with ritual print ephemera. It seemed as if the museum was simply turned inside out, so that the small-scale works displayed behind glass were now transposed onto large, monumental surfaces that guided the viewer from one building to the next. The Nianhua Village is thus transformed into an outdoor exhibition space for the works inside the Museum, although the Museum's spatial and temporal ordering of the pieces and their written captions are no longer present to provide a sense of *nianhua*'s historical or cultural contexts. Instead, the onus is clearly set on the viewer to make sense out of the new configuration of traditional and modern elements.

On one hand, the Nianhua Village sustains the idea that heritage is tied to the tangible assets of the past by foregrounding the works in the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum in its murals. On the other hand, it presents *nianhua*'s intangible heritage as a temporal and touristic experience of a historical site, where strategic elements are included to emphasize the affective experience of moving through, being in, and consuming a physical place. For instance, the village is equipped with bilingual English-Chinese signs, souvenir shops, and amenities for tourists, all of which signal the urbanization of the rural in the name of preserving the intangible past (**fig. 73**). With the many accoutrements of convenience, the village offers cleanliness, comfort, and legibility to urban tourists from around the world, signaling Mianzhu's qualified participation in the broader circuits of international tourism. As anthropologist Mary Hancock has pointed out, heritage "is not only that which is *lost*; it is *produced* and *marketed* in the context of economic development, as tourist product and as gentrifying status symbol."³¹³

³¹³ Mary Hancock, *The Politics of Heritage from Madras to Chennai* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 145.

To further enhance the Nianhua Village's status as a site of ICH, Mianzhu's Cultural Affairs Bureau began producing and circulating brochures, posters, and orally transmitted rhymes to market the project. One of the rhymes goes: "Memorial archways are erected, public squares are constructed, *nianhua* murals fill the walls, an inviting exhibition hall has been built, and every house is busy making pictures" 立的有牌坊, 修的有广场, 年画上了墙, 展览官修得好安逸, 家家户户画画忙.³¹⁴ These singsong rhymes are reminiscent of the orally transmitted rhymes that were recorded in interviews with elder printmakers yet they also call up the many state slogans that are repeated in official discourses. In this context, they are deployed as a slick media campaign to attract more state funding and tourism to the Nianhua Village. In addition, sculpted rocks inscribed with Confucian ideals have been added to the site to help narrate the significance of the village and its murals. Reflecting the propagandistic messages of "social harmony" 和谐社会 that gained popularity in official discourses of the time, these "cultural stones" 文化石 bear red calligraphic characters such as "filial piety" 孝 and "loyalty" 忠 (fig. 74).

As a whole, the village presents a vision of ICH that blurs the boundaries between the residential, commercial, touristic, and political realms. It reflects what A.K. Ramanujan calls "rurban" space, where urban and rural practices merge and become continuous at the fringes of an urban center.³¹⁵ The traditional references in the village are not based on a close study of Mianzhu's historic neighborhood, but are rather generic quotations of traditional architecture such as ceramic tiled roofs with upturned corners,

³¹⁴ Yin Tianrun 尹天润, "Xiaode Shejiantai nianhua cun jianshe" 孝德射箭台年画村建设 [Filial piety and virtue: the construction of the Nianhua Village at Shejiantai village], in *Zhongguo Mianzhu nianhua* 中国绵竹年画 [China's Mianzhu nianhua], ed. Yu Jundao 于俊道 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 223-226.

³¹⁵ A.K. Ramanujan, "Towards an Anthropology of City Images," in *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New Delhi: Oxford Press, 1999): 52-72.

double leaf wooden doors, and covered awnings (**fig. 75**). Some of the larger buildings are also arranged as *siheyuan* housing, with a main gate that opens to an inner courtyard surrounded on all sides by living spaces or print workshops. These traditional elements are combined with modern features such as brick and concrete walls, glass windows with steel bars, sidewalks, and parking lots. In between the buildings and on the edges of the village are farm plots, orchards, and pens filled with chickens and ducks.

In her study of heritage building in Chennai, India, Mary Hancock has commented on the contradictions of such rurban heritage sites, where “heritage themed resorts, house museums, and cultural centers call forth the iconic past of the village even while transforming the villages of the hinterland with the introduction of new commercial and residential spaces.”³¹⁶ The Nianhua Village replicates a popular template for heritage building in China where old structures are torn down and replaced with heritage-themed recreational areas and shopping complexes. In a recent example that made global headlines, the Sichuan Oriental Buddha Kingdom Company allegedly destroyed a number of ancient Mahaoya tombs that date back two millennia while constructing a replica of a Bamiyan Buddha figure for a Buddhist theme park at Leshan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that was to be protected from such activities.³¹⁷ On a much larger scale, the construction of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River has destroyed countless historic townships and archaeological sites at a time when heritage protection is touted as a national priority.³¹⁸ As capital and development flows into rural areas, historic

³¹⁶ Hancock, *The Politics of Heritage*, 175.

³¹⁷ Reported in Hannah Beech, “The Shock of the New,” *Time Magazine*, March 2003, accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,430902,00.html>

³¹⁸ The International Council on Monuments and Sites described the Three Gorges Dam region as the “the most spectacular example” of the continuous loss of historic heritage as a result of worldwide dam construction. See Dinu Bumbaru, *Heritage at Risk: ICOMOS world report on monuments and sites in danger* (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2000): 10.

sites and naturally scenic areas are undergoing massive construction projects that are informed by “an interpretation, manipulation, and invention of the past for present and future interests.”³¹⁹ These interests are not always in line with protecting the nation’s so-called cultural heritage although heritage discourses are often invoked to support urbanizing activities.

In the case of the Nianhua Village, I was not able to get detailed information on how many homes or what kind of structures existed in the area prior to the building of the village complex. Residents in the area could only tell me that all the old structures were torn down in order to build the heritage attraction. Many of the families I spoke to were not even from the neighborhood; they were recruited from surrounding areas because the state offered them economic incentives to move into the sparsely populated area, a rather inaccessible region near the foothills that is a half hour bus ride from the nearest business district in town. In exchange for moving there, the residents become an essential part of the entire tourist attraction. Virtually every aspect of life in the village is on view, as visitors mingle with local residents in their gardens, courtyards, and agricultural work areas (**fig. 76**). The result is a surreal environment, where the signs frame real life as cultural performances. In this situation, authenticity is not only constructed through the architecture and *nianhua* murals, but through the physical presence of rural families, printmakers, and shop owners. Among these “laboring bodies,” moreover, “are visitors themselves, whose participation in hands-on craft and performance workshops is also framed as a means by which craft traditions are sustained.”³²⁰

³¹⁹ Selina Ching Chan, “Temple Building and Heritage in China,” *Ethnology* 44, no. 1 (2005): 65.

³²⁰ Hancock, *The Politics of Heritage*, 160.

Laurajane Smith has described this phenomenon as the “heritage gaze,” which is not always directed to a particular object or event, but to the broader emotional, political, or cultural *affects* of a heritage site.³²¹ Drawing on a definition of “affect” as a form of embodied thinking that may be indirect and non-reflective, Smith argues that the heritage gaze points to the processes of thinking, feeling, and remembering that shape the significance of a particular site. Although authorized heritage discourses often position the viewer in a passive role, Smith points to how viewers play an equally important role in performing the meaning of a site. The Nianhua Village is not only a staged environment, it is alive and inhabited by local residents, who move through the site with wheelbarrows and shovels as they attended to the crops and livestock surrounding the complex. When visitors arrive, they mingle with the resident farmers and shopkeepers, bringing capital and a cosmopolitan feel to the village. Although the complex interactions between the residents and visitors is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note that the village’s status as a *nianhua* heritage site must be continually maintained and negotiated within the community.

In addition to providing incentives for residents to relocate to the village, the local authorities also used economic incentives to lure restaurants, businesses, and most importantly, *nianhua* printmakers. The only lineage-holding workshop to take up the offer was the Chen family workshop. In 2007, the entire Chen workshop and extended family moved to the Nianhua Village, where large living spaces, farmland, and a large print and painting workshop was provided for them. Heavily promoted by the state, Chen’s workshop has become the main attraction in the village. In a photo of the entrance to the workshop, two large door deities are permanently painted onto the two sets of

³²¹ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 56.

double leaf doors (**fig. 77**). These door deities are not Chen's creations but reproductions of a set of door deities on display at the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum. A plaque centered over the entrance advertises the workshop as "Mianzhu's folk *nianhua* workshop" 绵竹民间年画坊. On either side of the door, two painted couplets read: "In planting, a thousand Mianzhu peasant families can work the hoe and the brush. Famous in the nation for ten thousand beautiful works, the more rustic the more glorious they are!" 根植绵竹千家农户亦锄亦笔, 载誉中华万卷锦绣越土越洋.

There is no mention of the Chen family name here, as the sign suggests a large collective of *nianhua* producers. In merging together the image of the farmer and the folk artisan, the sign can be read as a culmination of over twenty years of state efforts to shape "local flavor" as rustic, rural, and inextricably tied to the land. The term used for "rustic" is also the character for "earth" (*tu* 土), a rather derogatory word often used to describe an uncouth country bumpkin. In this context, it is unabashedly celebrated as a novel or even sensational aspect of Mianzhu *nianhua*. Yet even while praising the rustic, the painted murals and gold calligraphy are not rustic at all but rather sophisticated creations of an urban advertising team.

Unlike Chen, Li Fangfu refused the offer to join the village although he was under pressure to do so. In resisting, Li has distanced himself from both the museum and government projects, including all *nianhua* promotional activities as well as offers to collaborate with other workshops and storefronts. During our interviews, he was eager to explain his reasons, including his determination to maintain full control over his workshop as well a desire to stay in the urban center of Mianzhu, which he thinks is the best place for selling his works. The street sign in front of his shop reads: "Self-made,

self-distributing, unique talent of Chinese Folk Art”自产自销—中国民间艺术一绝 and deliberately markets his independent status (**fig. 78**). Li’s defiant stance of autonomy serves as a powerful foil to the Nianhua Village’s claim on authority. In keeping his urban workshop, Li offers a competing perspective on what constitutes an authentic Mianzhu *nianhua* workshop. In advertising his workshop as a “self-made” and “self-distributing” entity, he suggests the absence of an intervening power, such as a middleman who might take a cut of the profit or a censoring critic who might influence the creative process.

The Nianhua Village has thus respatialized the politics of the industry and introduced new rifts and tensions in the *nianhua* marketplace. The distant location of the village draws people out of the city, potentially leading people to bypass urban *nianhua* shops like Li’s studio, which is nestled away in a non-descript urban neighborhood near the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum. At the same time, the businesses in the Nianhua Village enjoy the added advantage of the state’s economic incentives and its official marketing campaigns that draw clients from near and far. In relocating to the Nianhua Village, the Chen family workshop is now included in all the official promotional material, which has boosted his workshop’s fame nationwide. At the same time, his workshop’s presence offers direct and legitimizing evidence that the building of the Nianhua Village has indeed supported the preservation of ICH in Mianzhu.

Racing for the Intangible: the Nianhua Festival as Performative Statecraft

For its Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), UNESCO released a revised definition of ICH that marked a shift in discourse towards recognizing the changing nature of ICH:

The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.³²²

In this reformulation, ICH is both “transmitted from generation to generation” and “constantly recreated” in response to the present. In stressing the evolving and contemporary nature of ICH, the revised definition offers a response to critiques concerned with the “fossilization” of ICH as a result of heritage protection activities that privilege certain traditional practices at the expense of emerging innovations. The Convention also explicitly addresses the responsibility of the signatory states to deal with the issue by safeguarding ICH in an inclusive rather than exclusive manner: “Each State Party shall endeavor to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups, and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain, and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management.”³²³ In establishing these new guidelines,

³²² “UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Article 2, October 17, 2003,” accessed October 15, 2011, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.phpURL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

³²³ Ibid., Article 15.

UNESCO also launched a new round of list making, inviting submissions from around the world to be officially recognized by UNESCO as a protected form of ICH. Eager to gain as many spots as possible, the Chinese heritage bureaucracy leaped into action by hosting heritage festivals, performances, conventions, and media campaigns to promote various forms of ICH that embodied UNESCO's definition. The notion of "cultural diversity" 文化多样性 became a key buzzword for promoting ICH in China, as it highlighted both the inclusive stance of the state as well as the rich wealth of ICH within Chinese territory.

Jumping into the game in 2002, Mianzhu's Cultural Affairs Bureau inaugurated a twenty-day Nianhua Festival 年画节, an annual state-sponsored event that hires thousands of performers to bring to life the theatrical imagery of historic *nianhua* works.³²⁴ The annual festival repackages *nianhua* as a form of ICH with ties to the performing arts such as regional theater, music, and dance. It also demonstrates the state's efforts towards embracing cultural diversity by drawing together many different cultural groups and traditional performances. Despite its best efforts to present an image of a benevolent and inclusive state, the Nianhua Festival's tightly controlled stagecraft also betrays its ideological statecraft.

While UNESCO's push to recognize ICH was intended as a corrective to the privileging of historic objects over embodied forms of cultural activity, the Nianhua Festival continues to privilege the historic prints and paintings as the dominant themes for the annual festival. In the same way that the Nianhua Village promotes the state collection in its murals, the Nianhua Festival showcases the same pieces through

³²⁴ Wang Bing 王冰, "Mianzhu nianhua jie ji" 绵竹年画节记 [A record of Mianzhu's nianhua festival], in *Zhongguo Mianzhu nianhua* 中国绵竹年画 [China's Mianzhu nianhua], ed. Yu Jundao 于俊道 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 208-211.

costumes, props, and performances based those historic works. For instance, in 2004 the festival planners selected the painting *Greeting Spring* as the festival's guiding theme. The festival played a powerful role in publicizing (and authorizing) the painting's status as a form of tangible *nianhua* heritage as well as a record of its intangible heritage. In this section, I will critique the festival's selective approach to narrating the details of the painting. In particular, the religious undertones of the *lichun* festival are omitted, including the scenes of the magistrate receiving the spring deities or making offerings to them before an altar. These activities still bear the taboo of feudal superstition in official discourse although they clearly play a prominent role in the painting itself.³²⁵ While censoring these scenes, the festival greatly amplifies the theatrical acts in the procession scene of the painting, which includes music, theater, and acrobatics.

While the painting depicts a rather small-scale procession with less than fifty people, the Nianhua Festival has expanded the procession to include several hundred performers. For example, the painting depicts a small dragon-dance troupe according to precise ritual protocol, including the auspicious number eight as embodied by eight performers, the sculpted paper dragon effigy, and the masked performer who leads the team (**fig. 79**). In the festival, however, most of these ritual markers are omitted. Instead of an eight-person team, a much larger troupe was hired to carry a giant fabric dragon. In restaging the procession scene in *Greeting Spring*, the Nianhua Festival downplays the *lichun* festival's ritual meaning and recasts the street performances as secular

³²⁵ The festival's selective approach can be understood as part of the province's long-standing policy to strip cultural activities (such as printmaking, painting, theater, music, and other crafts) of their ritual significance by recasting these industries in wholly secular terms as "art" or "live entertainment." For a discussion of theater reform in Sichuan and in China as a whole see Colin Mackerras, "Theatre in China's Sichuan Province," *Asian Theatre Journal* 14, no. 2 (1987) and —, "Tradition, Change, and Continuity in Chinese Theater in the Last Hundred Years: In Commemoration of the Spoken Drama Centenary," *Asian Theatre Journal* 25, no. 1 (2008).

entertainment. The historic two-day festival revolved around its proper timing with the first day of spring on the traditional calendar and was closely tied to agricultural rites that marked the beginning of the planting season. In contrast, the Nianhua Festival is a twenty-day event that is scheduled to take place well in advance of this date, during one of the busiest shopping seasons of the year in the run-up to the Spring Festival. Although the festival claims to revive a historic practice, it in fact erases connections to the past by producing a secularized and spectacularized entertainment-based heritage festival.

The selection of the *Greeting Spring* painting as a central theme for this high-profile event also speaks to the painting's potential as an ideological platform for the festival's political aims. In particular, the festival producers selected aspects of the painting to perform and to narrativize its ideological message of "social harmony," a Confucian notion that has been gaining powerful traction in official discourse since the early 2000s.³²⁶ The painting itself is a highly constructed image of an ideal Confucian society. It can be historically situated within a trend of genre-paintings of prosperous cities that circulated during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the most famous being *Qingming Shanghetu* 清明上河图 by the Northern Song painter Zhang Zeduan 张择端. A common feature of these paintings is the detailed depiction of urban spaces where people of different class backgrounds are amicably engaged in diligent labor, exchange, travel, and festive activities. These scenes of societal accord in urban life are in turn part of a broader Confucian discourse among the elite that values harmonious hierarchy, loyalty, and filial piety.

³²⁶ For a critique of the revival of Confucian ideals in national discourse and heritage programs, see Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, "Lijiao: The Return of Ceremonies Honouring Confucius in Mainland China," *China Perspectives* 4 (2009): 82-100; —, "Jiaohua: The Confucian Revival in China as an Educative Project," *China Perspectives* 4 (2007): 4-20.

In *Greeting Spring*, the sense of congenial hierarchy is conveyed through the dominant role of the magistrate in relation to the procession and its onlookers. The exaggerated size of the magistrate's figure underscores his authority as a benevolent patriarch. He is also depicted with various accoutrements of status, such as his court robe, cap, and glasses. His portly body shape, which is reminiscent of the wide and squat door deity figures seen in Mianzhu, also calls up abundance and moral strength. Carried forth by the procession and its various auspicious performances, the magistrate's imperial authority is paraded and glorified before a welcoming public. Every figure in the painting is carefully depicted to reflect age, class status, and/or a clearly defined role in the procession, making visible the well-ordered social hierarchy that supports the magistrate's position. As he appears before the spring deities to make sacrificial offerings, the ceremony also associates the magistrate's power with a divine mandate.

A similar message is narrated in the Nianhua Festival, where real officials replace the role of the county magistrate seen in the painting. While the painting depicts the magistrate in a tent or before an altar, the focal point of the Nianhua Festival is a large stage for state officials and community leaders to greet the crowd (**fig. 80**). This stage is used as a platform for various state officials to give speeches, and to announce the festival's goals "to develop the resources of traditional folk culture, to strengthen the cultural industries, to expand cultural exchange and collaboration, and to raise Mianzhu's profile."³²⁷ While the performances recreate scenes from *Greeting Spring* to celebrate local history, the insertion of real officials in the place of the magistrate's figure situates the historic festival in a contemporary context. In contrast to the performers in historical costume, the officials perform their own positions of power as "real" leaders. As state

³²⁷ Wang, "A Record of Mianzhu's Nianhua Festival," 209.

officials ascend the stage to oversee hundreds of performers enacting auspicious street theater, the festival celebrates the state's command over a vast array of human and cultural resources.³²⁸ This image has also been played up in the news coverage of the event, where the Nianhua Festival has been lauded as a sign of economic prosperity due to effective state leadership in the cultural domain.

According to Billioud and Thoraval, public heritage festivals across China have advanced a new form of statecraft, where Confucian ideals are used to construct a “national cultural narrative” and coherent national cultural identity as part of China’s “soft power” strategies at home and abroad. The authors observe how during the 1980s, the interest in Confucism was largely limited to tourism and academic endeavors, while the 1990s and 2000s brought about greater focus on its political and symbolical dimensions that promote the morally upright and benevolent character of the state. The “holy city” of Qufu, Shandong, where Confucius was born and buried, has since been transformed into a “symbolic city of Chinese culture.” An estimated thirty billion yuan has been invested to build up Qufu’s heritage sites and museums, and to hold the annual Confucius Culture Festival 孔子文化节. However, the appropriated Confucian messages of harmony and openness contradict the “rigid bureaucratic procedures” that were employed to manufacture consensus for these heritage activities.³²⁹

The unfolding trends in Mianzhu mirror the developments in Qufu as the state-led *nianhua* revival increases its use of *nianhua* for ideological statecraft. As a nationally recognized form of ICH, *nianhua* moves into different realms of political and economic activity, from exported folk art to heritage tourism to staged culture festivals. Although

³²⁸ Such practices gained momentum and reached a height with the extravagant heritage performances produced for the Olympics Games held in Beijing in 2008.

³²⁹ Billioud and Thoraval, “Lijiao: The Return of Ceremonies,” 99.

UNESCO's ICH guidelines specifically advocated for the "widest possible participation" of community members and their active involvement in heritage management decisions, the Nianhua Village and Nianhua Festival does little to address these issues. The state-led efforts to embrace ICH continue to be exclusive and selective activities that are geared toward promoting certain works in the state *nianhua* collection. The contradictions between rhetoric and practice reveals how international agencies such as UNESCO inadvertently catalyze and legitimize the very activities they seek to oppose.

The High-end Heritage Industry: Replicas and Remakes

In the past ten years, a number of independent *nianhua* workshops have opened in Mianzhu's urban core to sell *nianhua* prints, paintings, embroidered images, and industrially manufactured souvenirs. Some of these shops have adopted the lineage names of workshops from Mianzhu's historic print trade, such as the Yunhezhai workshop that borrows its name from a Qing dynasty printshop. High-end souvenir shops have also made loose claims to older lineages by asserting a remote family relationship or personal connection to a well-known family lineage. For instance, the Jiannan hui Feng Workshop claims lineage to the Zhang family line because the owner's father once worked in the Zhang family workshop. To further enhance these claims to the *nianhua* heritage, these shops are usually outfitted with traditional furniture, rustic doorways, and the vintage décor of older printshops.

Although these new workshops are eager to market themselves by claiming access to an established lineage, the actual works they sell often have little to do with the historic print trade. Instead, they are engaged in a growing industry of "replicas"

(*fuzhipin* 复制品) (**fig. 81**). These *fuzhipin* replicas are intentionally made to look aged like the museum originals they are based on. Designed for permanent use, these are usually framed and sold at much higher prices than the print ephemera sold in the Chen and Li workshops. In addition, these shops also sell a wide range of souvenirs adorned with *nianhua* designs such as commercially printed stamps, coasters, fans, pillowcases, t-shirts, hanging charms, and tablecloths (**fig. 82**). Produced by factory workers in various parts of China, these replicas and souvenirs are usually marked with the new workshops' names.

In contrast to the painting term *linmo*, which allows for a degree of interpretation and variation in copying, the term *fuzhi* refers to an exact copy where the intention is to produce an identical reproduction of the original. The difference between these two concepts calls to mind Walter Benjamin's famous observation regarding the loss of the "aura" in mechanically reproduced works of art.³³⁰ Interestingly, it appears the other way around for *nianhua*: it is the mass-produced print ephemera that retain an aura of divine power while the framed replicas appear as the fossilized forms of *nianhua* heritage.

The rapid growth of the *fuzhipin* industry is a direct result of state-sponsored policies that have long encouraged the merging of the industrial sector with the folk art revival. This goal was first set forth by the province in the early 1980s and gradually gained momentum in the 1990s and 2000s with increasing financial investment from the state and private entrepreneurs. I soon learned that many of the owners of the new workshops were not natives but wealthy urban entrepreneurs from nearby cities such as Chengdu or Chongqing. Despite their lack of knowledge of local *nianhua* practices, they

³³⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1936)," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-52.

have established a high-end replica trade that appropriates lineage discourses to market such goods. These developments raise the stakes around lineage discourses by competing with shops that continue to sell relatively inexpensive print ephemera.

However, the works that are worth the most in the *nianhua* industry are not high-end replicas but the works of contemporary folk art produced by art academy trained artists. Since the 1980s, a handful of these artists have attempted to reposition Mianzhu *nianhua* in the realm of contemporary art, including Liu Zhumei, Hou Shiwu, Jin Pingding 金平定, and Hu Guangkui 胡光葵. Liu Zhumei is the most prominent and active figure in this group today. A self-fashioned “folk artist” 民间画家 and native of Mianzhu, she is currently a resident artist and researcher with the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum as well as a mentor for this present study. In the late 1980s, Liu trained in Beijing at the Central Academy of Fine Arts under the renowned folk art researcher Bo Songnian. Her training in a prestigious folk art program allowed her to acquire skills in both traditional printmaking and contemporary painting; it also gave her access to the national and international art markets.³³¹

Liu’s works make use of a wide range of auspicious imagery, such as door deities and beautiful maidens, yet she produces permanent works of art that are not intended for ritual use. In her widely published image *Straw Cutting Maidens* 割草女 (1995), Liu uses the distinct forms of printing and painting found in historic Mianzhu *nianhua* works (**fig. 83**). This painting on canvas depicts three repeated figures of a maiden who has upturned pigtails and carries a basket full of straw from which a sickle protrudes. The three figures echo the “three twists of the body” 三掉身 in the maiden’s posture, a compositional

³³¹ Having earned prestigious awards early in her career, Liu’s works have been widely exhibited across China including major folk art exhibitions in Beijing and Hong Kong as well as Taiwan.

element that is widely seen in Mianzhu's door deity prints. Various details call up the printing process used in Mianzhu's *nianhua* workshops. The maidens' dark green costumes are printed with stamped designs of stylized white flowers, while golden flowers are stamped next to the maiden's feet. The cut straw may reference the auspicious notion of an abundant harvest, but it may also call up the use of straw for papermaking.

In certain areas of the painting, particularly in the thinly outlined baskets hanging on the back of each maiden, lines overlap with the figures, echoing the printed outlines of *nianhua* works before the colors are added. A rough application of pink wash on the maidens' faces and the thick strokes of color on the aprons call up the rustic "beautiful maiden" prints found in Mianzhu. Finally, the individually painted hairs on the maidens' foreheads appear stiff and flat as if they were the carved lines of a woodblock. In contrast to *nianhua* prints however, the background is completely painted to create an atmospheric effect full of layered texture.

These details reveal Liu's familiarity with the methods of printing and painting that distinguish Mianzhu's *nianhua* prints from other regional print centers. The work quotes the defining characteristics of historic prints, resituating these methods in the context of contemporary folk art. In her own words, she has "chewed up tradition as well as contemporary art approaches, in order to spit them out in her art works." For Liu, this is a metaphor for her holistic approach to printing and painting, which she sees as an embodied expression of her life experience as a native of Mianzhu as well as an academy trained artist.³³²

³³² Liu Zhumei, in an interview with the author, Mianzhu, Sichuan, December 2006.

In many works, Liu appropriates elements from Mianzhu's historic *nianhua*, such as her 2001 *Door Deity* painting (**fig. 84**). The outlines of the two door deities in this work are copied from a set of Qing dynasty prints held in the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, with the only altered element being the exaggerated facial contours and eyes. The alternating cool and warm colors reflect the widespread use of contrasting colors in Mianzhu's door deities. The symmetrical balance of the figures is further emphasized with the contrasting red and green backgrounds that seem to mark out two large doors. These two halves are joined in the center by a heart, Liu's handprints, and a phrase for repelling the portentous: "Holding weapons to guard against wrongdoing" 执仗为防非.

The placement of this phrase over a centerline calls up the ritual placement of strips of paper with auspicious phrases over the opening of a door. In this regard, the painting references the ritual use of *nianhua* in the home. In quoting historic *nianhua* as well as their current forms of ritual consumption, Liu's paintings reflect an intimate understanding of *nianhua* as a living tradition. However, in contrast to local workshops that continue to produce ritual goods for either the local population or visiting tourists, Liu's permanent art works are geared towards urban art collectors, galleries, and museums around the world. As such, they have a much higher asking price and no two works are ever identical.

Liu's works are circulated in many national and international folk art exhibitions, where she is often framed as a representative of "traditional Mianzhu *nianhua*." In published commentaries on her work, she is also described as an "innovator" working to push traditional *nianhua* into new arenas of art and culture. Along with the works of other academy trained artists working in this vein, Liu's paintings have been widely described

as “innovative *nianhua*” 创新年画.³³³ However, as recycled tropes, “new” or “innovative” *nianhua* are labels that call up references to the 1950s print reforms that referred to politically reformed prints as “new *nianhua*.” As I have argued earlier, the temporal divide between old and new *nianhua* has long been used to relegate *nianhua* tradition to the past, as fossilized artifacts to be confiscated or collected for storage in state institutions.

For this emerging group of folk artists, selectively appropriating the visual elements of prestigious works has become a proven method to situate oneself within the international folk art marketplace while claiming access to Mianzhu’s *nianhua* heritage. Due to their urban upbringing and professional training, academy trained artists are immediately privileged in their efforts to access the folk art market at large. However, for those trained in the local *nianhua* industry, these opportunities are often beyond reach. In a recently published interview, Chen Gang of the Chen family workshop expressed a strong desire to move into new media and to break into the lucrative contemporary art market. However, he continues to struggle for access to the elite networks of museums, galleries, arts publishers, and collectors that regularly support academy trained artists.

Conclusion

In assessing the role of heritage discourses in Mianzhu’s resurgent *nianhua* industry, it is necessary to acknowledge the contested nature of “heritage” as a site of competing discourses and practices. In aligning itself with UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage discourses, the state-led *nianhua* revival has further expanded its activities into heritage tourism and festival production while continuing to promote state *nianhua*

³³³ Shen, *Touring Mianzhu Nianhua*, 199.

collections. Instead of taking up ICH as a critique of existing notions of heritage that focus solely on tangible assets of the past, state authorities have simply taken up ICH discourses to further promote these assets in different sectors of the marketplace. The Nianhua Village and Nianhua Festival essentially reproduce the problems of the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum by isolating certain historic *nianhua* designs as the privileged representatives of tradition and heritage. Like the museum, these new heritage attractions focus on putting historic objects on display in ways that narrate the demise of a living tradition. While the museum transforms the ritual objects of the past into folk art artifacts for visual contemplation, the village and the festival reactivates these works as markers of an intangible heritage from a remote and distant past. Instead of putting the past on display in the form of objects, the past is put on display in the form of a heritage-themed village or temporary street festival. Thus, these new forms of heritage management can be read as virtual extensions of the Nianhua Museum rather than genuine efforts to engage the living, embodied, and evolving practices of Mianzhu *nianhua*.

Most significantly, the introduction of ICH discourses reveals the state's vested interests in keeping the tangible and intangible aspects of *nianhua* distinct and separate. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, the notion that heritage must be "rescued" and protected in the form of tangible assets helped reframe and legitimize another round of state intervention in the *nianhua* industry. In isolating the tangible assets of *nianhua*, the revival promulgates the idea that historic *nianhua* are already divorced from the realm of embodied and living practices. It is a move that masks the problematic provenance of the objects themselves while dealing a severe blow to those emerging producers who still rely on historic *nianhua* for rebuilding a lost source of livelihood. These policies lend the

state-led *nianhua* revival an advantageous edge in the marketplace, where it has greatly capitalized on the circulation and reproduction of the historic *nianhua* held in its collections.

The introduction of UNESCO's ICH discourses has failed to activate a critique of these revival activities in Mianzhu. Instead of producing a discourse that directly engages the inseparable ties between objects and practices, the notion of intangible heritage simply reifies this divide by creating a separate category of heritage management upon which existing practices may be uncritically transposed. This conceptual framework thus supports the expansion of the state-led *nianhua* revival into new realms of activity without necessitating a discussion around the objectification and isolation of cultural objects that prompted UNESCO's interest in ICH in the first place. In addition, the rush to gain official recognition as a form of ICH further hinders the possibility of debate and critique as state agencies focus on short-term gains and the staged presentation of ICH for global audiences. In this regard, ICH discourses establish new standards and expectations of cultural performance where the orchestrated production of heritage is considered politically expedient and preferable to the existing forms of embodied *nianhua* knowledge and practice.

In their engagement with these official revival activities, local *nianhua* producers and consumers have also played an important role in accepting, rejecting, or reshaping authorized heritage discourses. In particular, I have stressed the re-appropriation of historic *nianhua* held in state collections as a way of asserting alternate claims on heritage. The redesign and recirculation of historic *nianhua* as inexpensive ritual ephemera can be understood as a critical site of resistance to heritage revival activities

that stubbornly situate these works in the past rather than the present. The appropriation of historic *nianhua* as folk art replicas or as innovative forms of contemporary art also poses a challenge to revival activities that attempt to characterize *nianhua* as a distinctly rural activity limited to traditional woodblock printing methods. Although the *nianhua* revival insists on reproducing a static and consumable past, the marketplace itself speaks to the changing role of *nianhua* in the present and the wide range of embodied practices that are involved in such disputes.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

To return to the central problem laid out in the introduction, a study of the contemporary *nianhua* industry requires a different set of methodological approaches than those used to analyze the *nianhua* held in protected archives. In each chapter, I have thus taken up a different set of issues to both critique the existing modes of *nianhua* research and to offer a way forward for addressing the living practices that currently shape *nianhua*. In rethinking the issues around agency, narrativity, and heritage, I have stressed the need to examine how these concepts are negotiated and performed in situated contexts, especially in contested arenas where there is much at stake for all the players involved. In doing so, this study challenges the idea that *nianhua* can serve as stable and fixed sites of meaning, either as discrete entities imbued with agency or as narrative texts to be decoded and “read” like a linear script. Instead, I have stressed the multivalent nature of *nianhua* and the performative processes that activate certain meanings over others in order to achieve specific aims.

In setting out to address a living archive, this study has examined diverse works that are made to *perform* their status as *nianhua*, be it the ritual ephemera circulating in seasonal markets and households or the folk art objects marketed in the heritage and tourism industries. Instead of privileging any one set of practices over the other, I have drawn attention to how the very notion of *nianhua* is contested and remade in these different contexts. In particular, I have pointed to the dialectical interactions of official *nianhua* archives and the temporary *nianhua* archives circulating in the seasonal markets, revealing the unstable nature of both. These discussions have thus contextualized both

past and present *nianhua* in terms of the contemporary industry, as active sites of negotiation.

In assessing the overall results of this study, I will stress two key points. Firstly, in taking a performative view of *nianhua* practices, this study emphasizes change and innovation as inherent aspects of the *nianhua* industry. The developments in Mianzhu involve many emerging forms of *nianhua* that arise with the changing dynamics of the marketplace. What holds these diverse works together is a preoccupation with pursuing the auspicious in all its different forms, a concept that is highly contested and tied to the reappropriation and reclamation of high profile works held in folk art archives.

Secondly, this study demystifies *nianhua*'s attributed function to "pursue to the auspicious, repel the portentous" as a key site of negotiation in the growing *nianhua* industry. Moving away from an approach that locates ritual efficacy in static forms of visual representation, this study has focused more on the strategic *presentation* or *activation* of *nianhua*'s efficacious potential within specific spatiotemporal configurations, including temporary household displays, markets, workshops, and heritage attractions. While existing studies have focused on the cosmological or familial concerns tied to *nianhua* use in the home, this study underscores the pursuit of auspicious time and space as a vital source of social status and livelihood in the marketplace.

An Industry Based on Innovation

The rise of Mianzhu *nianhua* over the past thirty years reflects a range of competing discourses shaping the industry rather than any overarching system of shared beliefs or ideals. The messy and unpredictable interactions of official agencies,

entrepreneurs, scholars, workshops, buyers, and tourists reveal a lack of consensus concerning what constitutes a work of *nianhua*. While the folk art literature defines *nianhua* as the products of the historic print trade, this study has demonstrated how the term has come to include a range of commercially printed ephemera as well as scroll paintings, souvenirs, replicas, murals, and even mixed media works on canvas. Instead of relegating *nianhua* to the past, I have argued for the need to acknowledge its present-day developments as a living archive that responds to new trends and technologies in the marketplace, just as it has always done in the past.

In Chapter Two, I stressed this point by examining the innovative practices shaping the seasonal *nianhua* markets in Mianzhu. I argued for a performative view of the ritual practices involved in both *nianhua* production and consumption. For *nianhua* users, it is possible to see how *nianhua* are strategically selected and displayed in diverse configurations to suit the immediate needs of the household. These displays reflect the changing trends in the marketplace as well as the changing architectural forms in the city and the countryside. They also show a strong preoccupation with the proper timing and placement of *nianhua* rather than a strict adherence to an iconographic program.

Similarly, a performative approach is evident on the production end, where emerging workshops compete to produce the most ritually efficacious *nianhua* to boost their workshop identities and to attract customers. On one hand, Wang Xingru presented the ritually efficacy of his works in terms of the genealogical mark, a living trace that establishes both a spatial and temporal link to his ancestral line. On the other hand, the competing Li and Chen workshops linked the ritual efficacy of their works to their territorial claims involving the northern or southern sites of historic printmaking in

Mianzhu.

These examples advance the argument that *nianhua*'s ritual agency is not simply represented or mediated by a fixed object but continually negotiated and performed in different social contexts, giving rise to new processes of ritualization in both production and consumption. The ephemeral nature of *nianhua* in the seasonal markets points to a highly unstable object that merges seamlessly with its lifecycle of renewal and decay. Notions of auspicious time and space appear to be a central concern in the seasonal exchange of *nianhua*, especially during the Lunar New Year when *nianhua* are closely integrated with a host of ritual activities tied to the renewal of time, space, and social relations.

Building on this, Chapter Three takes a performative view of narrativity, where the auspicious significance of *nianhua* may be presented through the immediacy of touch, sound, gesture, and movement in a storytelling session or an exchange of auspicious speech. Challenging interpretations that identify core narratives in *nianhua*, I have argued that narrative density plays a prominent role in both past and present *nianhua*, as layers of visual, mnemonic, and aural cues to be activated by knowledgeable viewers, depending on the immediate needs of the situation. The interview sessions and examples discussed in this chapter show that *nianhua* do not necessarily convey narratives in a linear or structured fashion comparable to written or verbal texts but are much more fluid and dynamic in terms of their narrative potential. In other words, I have stressed a creative and agentive view of narrativity that may engage any work of *nianhua*, and not only those categorized in folk art typologies as narrative illustrations or “theater-based *nianhua*.”

In these chapters, the interviews have played an important role in demonstrating the performative nature of *nianhua* interactions. The highly situated and co-creative nature of an oral history interview or storytelling session sheds light on *nianhua* as active sites of meaning making in the present. They reveal the dialectical interactions between *nianhua* and their immediate social contexts, blurring the boundaries between the archive versus the repertoire, or the mental versus the material realms. As eloquently set forth by Diana Taylor, the material “archive” can never be isolated from its attendant “repertoire” of embodied practices.³³⁴ Similarly, the repertoire is not reducible to archival documents, which at best offer representational traces of the actual event. The inseparable and dialectical nature of the archive and the repertoire challenges the archive’s status as a stable and timeless entity, and firmly plants it in relation to the present.

Yet one of the drawbacks in conducting and documenting the interview sessions is that one is inevitably caught in the act of reducing the repertoire to the archive. On one hand, I have argued that *nianhua* are continually shaping and shaped by its lived environments and immediate social interactions. I have thus stressed the importance of embodied knowledge, orality, gesture, and touch. Yet on the other hand, in the very act of incorporating these cultural performances into written research, I am carrying out the very archival activities I set out to critique: the processes of selecting, translating, and regimenting the embodied repertoire into academic text. This contradiction points to the problematic nature of academic research, where the valued currency is not the repertoire but the fixed archival record: “Our currency is not so much pictures as text - those written words we inherit in the archival record, which is still primarily textual, and those words

³³⁴ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

we create by our placing our manuscripts and records under archival responsibility.”³³⁵

I have responded to this problem by pointing to what Paul Zumthor calls the “impossible closure of the oral text” that can never be fully replicated in the archive or reduced to a singular interpretation.³³⁶ I have also drawn attention to those embodied aspects of an interview session that often get lost in textual translation, including the shifts and rhythms in tone of voice, gestures, and eye contact. These critical strategies may shed light on the process of translation by pointing to what is no longer visible, but they do not constitute adequate solutions for overcoming the privileged status of the textual archive in academic research. This is an area that requires much more work in rethinking the way research is conducted and represented, especially in regards to the “multimedialization of discourse” where language is understood as just one among many forms of media used in discourse.³³⁷

In this study, I selected interview excerpts that best demonstrated the performative dimensions of *nianhua* as well as the high stakes involved in presenting a living repertoire of oral and ritual practices. I have thus highlighted the conversations with *nianhua* producers who creatively deploy these practices to rebuild a lost source of livelihood and to continually reposition their workshops in a competitive marketplace. This should not be confused with an effort to reinstate authorial intention as a basis for *nianhua* interpretation, as it is a critical move to situate Mianzhu’s *nianhua* producers within the broader politics of the competitive *nianhua* marketplace and the ongoing

³³⁵ Nancy Ruth Bartlett, “Past Imperfect (l’imparfait): Mediating Meaning in Archives of Art” in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, ed. Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2007), 121.

³³⁶ Paul Zumthor, “The Impossible Closure of the Oral Text,” trans. Jean McGarry, *Yale French Studies* 67 (1984): 25-42.

³³⁷ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, *Looking In: The Art of Viewing*, (Amsterdam: G & B Arts International, 2001), 164.

negotiations of meaning shaped by officials, scholars, entrepreneurs, and buyers alike. In doing so, the idea is to move away from a prescriptive view of the *nianhua* industry and highlight the inherently unstable, innovative, and adaptive practices that continually shape it.

Throughout the chapters, I have thus pointed to the dialectical interactions between the seasonal *nianhua* marketplace and the officially sponsored print campaigns of both the past and present. Chapter Four dealt with the rise of the heritage industry as yet another round of official activities that spark local contestations of meaning around the value and significance of Mianzhu's *nianhua* industry. Most significantly, the official adoption of UNESCO's "intangible cultural heritage" discourses reveals the state's vested interests in keeping the tangible and intangible aspects of *nianhua* distinct. Instead of acknowledging the inseparable ties between *nianhua* and the living repertoire of ritual practices in the community, officials used the notion of intangible heritage to legitimize a host of officially staged cultural performances such as the annual Nianhua Festival.

Despite the lack of recognition, local *nianhua* producers and consumers have continued on with their seasonal round of activities, responding to the heritage industry when it is necessary and relevant to their everyday lives. The redesign and recirculation of historic *nianhua* as inexpensive ritual ephemera can be understood as a critical site of resistance to heritage revival activities that stubbornly situate these practices in the past rather than the present. The appropriation of historic *nianhua* as folk art replicas or as innovative forms of contemporary art also poses a challenge to revival activities that attempt to characterize *nianhua* as a distinctly rural activity limited to traditional woodblock printing methods. Although the *nianhua* revival insists on reproducing a static

and consumable past, the marketplace itself speaks to the changing role of *nianhua* in the present.

In tracing these contestations of meaning, it is evident that the survival of historic *nianhua* archives in state collections play a central role in legitimizing a wide range of state-led campaigns, including the traveling exhibitions of the early 1980s, the building of the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum to house the works, and eventually the construction of large folk art heritage attractions such as the Nianhua Village or annual Nianhua Festival. The presence of these historic works gave local and provincial authorities a great advantage in lobbying for state funds and resources to launch a folk art industry in Mianzhu. Over the years, state officials have repeatedly mined the historic works for new meaning, strategically repackaging the past in ways that best suit their institutional interests.

Clearly there are high stakes involved in privileging the state's *nianhua* archive while banishing the embodied repertoire of ritual practices to the past, a position long supported by the folk art scholarship's focus on archival research. In defining heritage as the tangible assets of the past, state agencies have justified collection activities that remove *nianhua* from local families and workshops under the rubric of protection and preservation. However, in acknowledging the role of *nianhua* within embodied forms of knowledge transmission, this study has critiqued the consequences of such actions and challenged the state's self-appointed role as the rightful custodians and narrators of historic *nianhua*. In considering *nianhua* as a living archive, it is possible to critique the constructed nature of both the permanent and ephemeral archives in circulation. This unmask the state's continual efforts to maintain the privileged status of its archives, by

repackaging, reproducing, and recirculating the historic *nianhua* in their possession. These official activities must struggle to keep up with the broader array of *nianhua* activities developing in the community at large as the notion of the authentic or historic original holds little ground in a seasonal *nianhua* industry based on the mass reproduction of inexpensive ephemera.

It is important to note that the state revival activities I have analyzed here are not an isolated phenomenon unique to Mianzhu. Since the early 1980s, very similar state-led revival activities have been implemented in major *nianhua* centers across China, including Yangliuqing, Wuqiang, and Weifang. At all three sites, *nianhua* museums housing state collections have opened to the public along with the state-sponsored construction of large-scale *nianhua*-themed tourist attractions. The debates addressed in this dissertation are thus directly relevant to the broader trends occurring in China's growing *nianhua* industry.

Demystifying the Auspicious

In addition to underscoring the vital importance of theorizing the archive in relation to its attendant repertoire of embodied activities, this study also makes a key contribution in rethinking the auspicious or portentous concepts associated with Chinese *nianhua*. In the introduction, I reviewed the literature that identifies a shared system of auspicious signs, symbols, motifs, and themes in Chinese popular art, a view first established in early 20th century Sinology where scholars produced visual grammars to organize and categorize auspicious designs in a way that pays little attention to their contexts of use. The legacy of this approach has carried forth in *nianhua* research, where

works have been treated as visual or historic texts encoded by a static system of signs and symbols. In taking a performative view of *nianhua* however, I have argued for an alternate approach that treats *nianhua* as unstable and multivalent entities that give rise to diverse auspicious or portentous meanings when analyzed *in situ*.

A key problem is that existing studies have tended to focus on issues of production and representation with less attention given to the issues of circulation and use. When ritual consumption is discussed, it has been largely confined to the insular space of the rural household, a protected space that reifies the notion of a prescriptive and timeless tradition shaped by a shared sign system. In moving the discussion into the realm of the *nianhua* marketplace, this study examined the interconnected spaces of the household, marketplace, and workshop to argue that meaning is not fixed in *nianhua* but continuously performed in different situations that take on the changing conceptions of the auspicious as tied to people's everyday needs and livelihood. In many cases, *nianhua* are often circulated and displayed in ways that mark out auspicious time and space so that meaning is not simply represented but *presented* in specific spatiotemporal configurations of the home or marketplace. The resurgence of the *nianhua* industry in the wake of the Cultural Revolution was not simply an attempt to fill a "spiritual void" or to return to traditional values, but a result of many complex social factors tied to people's survival needs, including the exchange of ritual commodities for livelihood and people's attempts to reestablish social ties and networks at the local level.

The notion of "pursuing the auspicious, repelling the portentous" is thus broad and open-ended; it encompasses the many acts of ritual renewal during the Lunar New Year as well as everyday efforts to strengthen social relations and to attract "all that is

good” to the home or business. It is an inclusive concept that is not only tied to cosmological concerns, but also the mundane concerns of daily life. For those directly engaged in the *nianhua* industry as producers or distributors, knowledge of auspicious sites and times carries symbolic capital that can boost one’s position in the marketplace. A vivid example is the state funded construction of the Nianhua Village and the appropriation of historic sites to recreate auspicious environments through painted murals and traditional architectural forms. The staging of the Nianhua Festival at the end of the year also capitalizes on the auspicious Lunar New Year season. This is not unlike the way Mianzhu’s early print guilds competed for auspicious sites and dates to hold their seasonal print markets and guild banquets.

Another key point of intervention here revolves around *nianhua*’s problematic status as a form of folk art, where auspicious or portentous meanings are interpreted in terms of visual representation. In stressing the dialectical interactions of the archive and the repertoire however, this study unpacks the visual dimension of *nianhua* as a synaesthetic practice, where all the senses are engaged. In particular, I have underscored the aural dimensions of *nianhua*, where narrative cues and rebuses activate auspicious speech and storytelling. In some cases, mundane objects are appropriated and displayed as *nianhua* simply due to an aural association with the auspicious. This includes the use of ephemeral blocks of ice or chunks of coal to stand in for protective door deities.

In light of the multifaceted and multisensorial nature of *nianhua*, I have avoided the use of a single disciplinary lens to provide a fixed definition of *nianhua* as folk art, print culture, or visual culture. These categories illuminate different aspects of *nianhua*, often revealing more about their disciplinary boundaries than the everyday activities of

Mianzhu's *nianhua* makers and users. In the introduction, I argued for an interdisciplinary perspective that acknowledges the different discourses that inform *nianhua* studies, including the anthropological research in Chinese popular religion as well as the research in art history and visual culture. Building on the work of Craig Clunas who also writes at the intersection of visual and material culture studies, I have set forth the notion of the living *nianhua* archive, a concept that underscores the unstable, contingent, and constructed nature of *nianhua*.

The notion of the living archive has been a productive framework for challenging the privileged status of historic *nianhua* and for moving the discussion towards the contestations of meaning in Mianzhu's contemporary *nianhua* industry. However, the question remains of how to define the boundaries of this living archive? Where does it begin and where does it end? What, finally, constitutes a work of *nianhua*? In a sense, every chapter of this study has been probing this question, exploring the different realms of ritual practice, narrativity, and folk art heritage to map out the actual terrain of *nianhua* as they appear in their lived contexts. Although the term has come to include new media and changing modes of display and use, the notion of "pursuing the auspicious, repelling the portentous" is still a central defining feature that determines what is and isn't suited for display as *nianhua*. However, this notion is in itself open-ended and does not necessarily signal a shared set of beliefs and values. Just the contrary, it is this open-ended aspect of it that allows for *competing discourses* to come into play on a continual basis.

While earlier studies by Wang Shucun and Bo Songnian have also cited "pursuing the auspicious, repelling the portentous" as the defining feature of *nianhua* across time

and space, there has been no concerted effort to nuance and situate the concept as a site of negotiation, contestation, and innovation at the local level. This is what sets this study apart from the existing literature on *nianhua*, as the focus is on deconstructing *nianhua* discourses to get at the local and regional specificities of how the concept is taken up and deployed. As seen in Mianzhu, the local dialect names for the different items of ritual ephemera are still in use alongside the state-led *nianhua* revival and its dissemination of folk art discourses. Ritual practices for pursuing the auspicious and repelling the portentous are still vibrant in everyday life just as museums and heritage sites are being built to reconstruct the imagined world of *nianhua*'s rural past.

The big picture that emerges here is a veritable palimpsest of past and present practices superimposed on each other and evolving in tandem so that it becomes quite impossible to tease out the continuities and changes of the *nianhua* industry. Indeed both past and present examples point to innovation, change, and reinvention as inherent aspects of the *nianhua* industry in Mianzhu. The historic documents tied to Mianzhu's print trade reveal an industry that evolved continuously in response to the changing politics and marketplace trends of the region. The early 20th century appropriation of foreign novelties such as bicycles, umbrellas, and Western style fashion as auspicious elements in Mianzhu *nianhua* speaks to the enduring association between auspiciousness and all things fresh and "new," especially in the context of the Lunar New Year rituals of renewal.

The notion of a living archive speaks to this continual renewal of the industry, as captured by the auspicious phrases, "out with the old, in with new" or "One loud burst of the firecrackers to be rid of the old year, in with the new peach charms and out with the

old ones” 爆竹一声除旧岁，总把新桃换旧符。 The “new *nianhua*” of the 1950s print reforms and the “*nianhua* revival” of the 1980s and 1990s are clearly appropriations of the auspicious speech tied to the annual renewal of *nianhua*. Ironically, the state-led efforts to renew *nianhua* have ended up constructing a rigid and fixed notion of *nianhua* that is based on idealized images of the past.

Susan Sontag has described photography as the “ceaseless replacement of the new” and Thomas Martin has described the Internet as a “living glossed manuscript, still and indefinitely in the process of production.”³³⁸ Interestingly, these phrases can just as easily describe the *nianhua* industry, which circulates fresh works every year. The perpetual act of renewing *nianhua* in both production and consumption speaks to its resistance to the archive; it can never be fully placed under “house arrest” or consecrated to a final resting place in a protected archive as long the practices of renewal continues to shape the industry.

These issues apply to the widespread resurgence of ritual life in China since the 1980s, which has coincided with an immense increase in ephemeral goods, of which prints and paintings compose only a fraction. During ritual festivals and holidays, local and regional markets are filled with paper sculptures, temporary altars, processional objects, costumes, incense, lanterns, toys, and edible goods. The notion of “pursuing the auspicious, repelling the portentous” is a central concern for many of these industries, which have flourished and shaped daily life in China on a vast scale. It is a simple phrase that is continually invested with new meaning and currency. The flexible and open-ended

³³⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 68; and Thomas R Martin, “Propagating Classics” (lecture, annual meeting of the American Philological Association, Dec. 28, 1997).

nature of this concept is perhaps the vital key that has allowed many ritual practices to continually adapt to a rapidly changing world.

Future Directions and Post-Earthquake Reconstruction

The acknowledgement of living *nianhua* practices, in its various embodied forms, holds profound implications for future research in regards to China's rapidly developing countryside. In particular, this study demonstrates the high-stakes involved in folk art research methodologies, especially the uncritical separation of the archive and the repertoire. If folk art discourses and authorized heritage discourses continue to isolate the material archive as a static body of collectible objects and commodities, the attendant repertoire of embodied activities will be inevitably relegated to the past and marginalized. There is an urgent need for greater critical discussion around the celebrated notions of tangible or intangible "folk art heritage," especially in terms of how China's evolving ritual industries are shaped by these discourses.

As large sums of money are allocated for heritage protection and revival, it becomes increasingly urgent to acknowledge the local contestations of meaning that occur in the nationally recognized "folk art centers" of rural China. In this study, I critiqued the involvement of international agencies such as UNESCO and other heritage foundations that have been working with the central Chinese government to implement the protection of intangible cultural heritage. Most significantly, I have found that the alignment of national and international agencies has legitimized ever-greater forms of state involvement in cultural activities with little or no protection afforded the local communities that rely on such goods for their livelihood. This is one area that desperately

calls for greater research in China, as state leaders in Beijing continue to expand the “largest heritage bureaucracy on the planet.”³³⁹

A key problem is the removal of works from local communities, which may be profoundly destructive to those who rely on such works for their livelihood. In the case of Mianzhu *nianhua*, few records document the processes by which existing state collections were formed although many elders have lamented the loss of precious lineage documents. The on-going expansion of folk art collections in China runs the risk of repeating past mistakes unless critical awareness is raised around the role of prints, paintings, and other ritual goods in maintaining family lineages and other forms of knowledge transmission. Unless these problems are addressed, the national heritage revival will play a hand in destroying the very traditions it seeks to protect.

The speed at which the heritage industry is growing in China has left the critical scholarship struggling to keep up. There is a great need for research that deals with the intersecting activities of UNESCO programs, the Chinese heritage bureaucracy, and local communities. In Robert Shepherd’s important study of heritage building activities in Tibet, he unmaskes UNESCO’s seemingly neutral and depoliticized language by discussing how its aim to preserve the ‘universal’ heritage of the past entails “strenuously ignoring the political realities of the present.” Shepherd’s study stresses the need to examine the political and institutional agendas that fuel the partnership between UNESCO and the Chinese state, often at the expense of local entities:

Far from being either a global project beyond politics or simply a technical effort aimed at preserving fragile examples of cultural diversity, the UNESCO World

³³⁹ Geremie Barne, ed., "A Tale of Two Lists: An Examination of the New Lists of Intangible Cultural Properties," *China Heritage Newsletter* 7 (2006), accessed December 21, 2011, http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=007_twolists.inc&issue=007.

Heritage Program is deeply political, given that it explicitly assumes World Heritage status to be an issue for states and not local communities.³⁴⁰

As thousands of new heritage sites are being constructed in China today, there is a great need to situate these developments in their local, national, and global spheres. Shepherd's observation certainly resonates with the *nianhua* revival activities discussed in this study. However, I have focused primarily on local contestations of meaning and much work is needed here in regards to connecting the dots with larger trends in heritage building around the world.

In the wake of the massive May 12, 2008 earthquake that struck Sichuan, these issues hold profound implications for the reconstruction efforts in Mianzhu. Located less than 100 kilometers from the epicenter in Wenchuan, Mianzhu suffered severe damage from the earthquake. Countless buildings were leveled and many lives were lost, altering the very fabric of life in the region. When I finally communicated with my contacts in Mianzhu, I was relieved to hear they were unharmed although many had lost their homes and were forced to live in government provided tents or temporary housing.

In the weeks that followed, friends and colleagues updated me on the damage at the Nianhua Village and the storage facilities at the Cultural Relics Bureau. Over half of the structures at the Nianhua Village were so severely damaged that they would have to be rebuilt (**fig. 85**). The families that lost their homes and workshops were relocated to temporary shelters while reconstruction efforts got underway. The Mianzhu Nianhua Museum was not badly affected and its collection remained intact. The city has since

³⁴⁰ Robert Shepherd, "Cultural Heritage, UNESCO, and the Chinese State: Whose Heritage and for Whom?" *Heritage Management* vol. 2, iss 1 (Spring 2009): 55-80.

made the decision to revamp the entire area as news of the earthquake immediately attracted a steady flow of donations, investments, and media coverage.

According to a recent 2011 announcement released by Mianzhu's city government, an astonishing sum of 16 billion yuan has been raised from state agencies and private investors to rebuild the Nianhua Village, which has been upgraded by to a high level "AAAA" tourist attraction under the revised rating system of the China National Tourism Administration. The money will go to the reconstruction of the Nianhua Village, which will include an "ancient street of Chinese *nianhua*" and three heritage museums based on different themes.³⁴¹

As these grand developments unfold, it is an opportune moment to involve the local community in the revitalization of the *nianhua* industry. More than ever, it is a vital time to approach *nianhua* as a dynamic and living entity rather than a fossilized remnant of the past controlled by a few elites and officials. The earthquake's destruction of *nianhua*'s tangible assets inevitably puts the spotlight on the great wealth of embodied *nianhua* knowledge that rests with the people of Mianzhu. This study has only scratched the surface of this topic and much research is needed in regards to the oral, performative, theatrical, and lineage-making practices involved in the transmission of *nianhua* skills and knowledge. As long as the heritage building industry maintains a sharp distinction between tangible versus intangible forms of heritage, it will fail to acknowledge and support the living traditions it proclaims to protect. The idea of a living *nianhua* archive attempts to move past these binary constructs in order to create a space where more voices can participate in defining the meaning and value of *nianhua* in the contemporary

³⁴¹ Cited in *Mianzhu nianhua cun yinglai 16 yi touzi* "绵竹年画村引来16亿投资" [Mianzhu nianhua village attracts 16 billion yuan in investment] *Takung Pao* 大公报, August 3, 2011.

marketplace. This study offers a working model in this regard and it is my hope that it will inspire researchers to engage more directly with the living communities that produce and use *nianhua* on a daily basis.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Street-level view of an urban residential neighborhood in Mianzhu, Sichuan. Narrow cobble-stoned alleys lined with one story housing are squeezed in between tall apartment buildings. Photograph by April Liu.

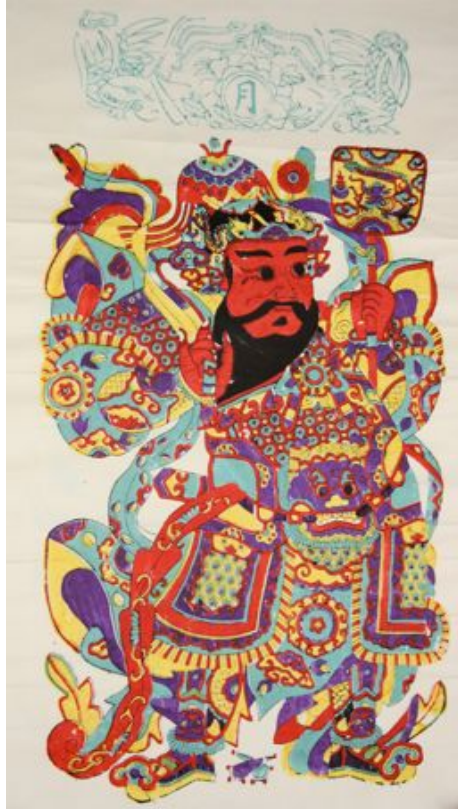


Figure 2. A comparison of multi-block color printing from a north China workshop in Weifang, Shandong (left) and the hand-painted colors from Mianzhu, Sichuan (right).



Figure 3. An exterior view of a household doorway displaying digitally printed door deities of the demon queller Zhongkui and hand-painted spring couplets and lintel hanging. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 4. An exterior view of a household doorway displaying digitally printed ephemera. In the middle, a calendar advertisement for a children's medicine company has been appropriated for display as a protective *nianhua*. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 5. Example of an early 20th century Shanghai calendar poster (*yuefenpai nianhua*) from the Kwong Sang Hong Company based in Hong Kong, a manufacturer of household supplies. The poster depicts an auspicious scene of two beautiful women standing in a garden, surrounded by luxury commodities on all sides. The company name is at the top, sandwiched between a lotto announcement and calendar.



Figure 6. The inaugural state calendar of 1912 for the Republic of China, showing the newly adopted symbols of the state, including a portrait of president Sun Yat-sen, the five-colored flag, and calendrical information for both the traditional luni-solar calendar and the newly adopted Gregorian calendar.



Figure 7. *Peasant Girl, Factory Boy.* An example of state sponsored “new *nianhua*,” produced in Mianzhu during the 1950s. A peasant girl riding an auspicious phoenix and a male factory worker riding a dragon take the place of door deities.



Figure 8. A map of major *nianhua* production centers across China. Drawn by April Liu.

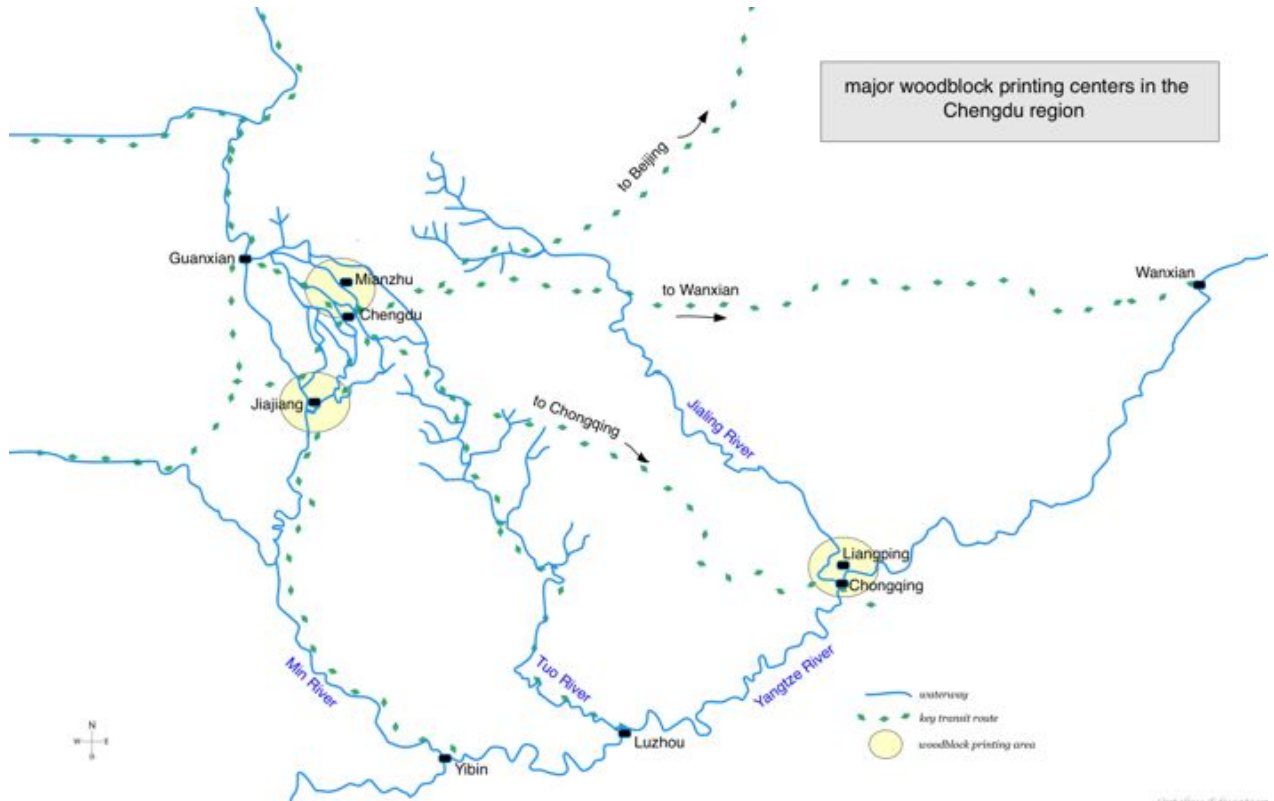


Figure 9. Mianzhu, Jiajiang, and Liangping, the three major woodblock-printing areas near Chengdu, are connected by waterways and transit routes for trading. Drawn by April Liu.



Figure 10. A 1962 photograph of Wang Tianbao's *nianhua* workshop in Mianzhu where "traditional prints" were sold alongside the reformed "new *nianhua*" during the print reform campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. A group of observers admire a reformed print in the foreground while the prints hanging on the back wall depict traditional door deities.



Figure 11. *Warrior Door Deities* early 20th century, woodblock print, Mianzhu.



Figure 12. *Cat Deity*, early 20th century, woodblock print, Mianzhu. These protective “square prints” were displayed indoors near food storage rooms and kitchens to ward off hungry rodents.



Figure 13. An unidentified scene from *Journey to the West*, late 19th century, horizontal scroll painting or “picture strip,” Mianzhu, Sichuan. © Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, Canada.



Figure 14. The labor-intensive phase of carving requires great precision to ensure smooth and fluid lines capable of withstanding multiple printings. Cherry and pear wood are preferred materials for the durability they provide.



Figure 15. Detail of a carved block from the late 19th century, showing a darkened color from repeated use.



Figure 16. In the finishing stages, a painter applies colors and details over the printed outline. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 17. The photograph above shows a collection of small size stamps used to add finishing touches to a print. Below is a detail of gold stamps applied to a dried print.



Figure 18. *Warrior Door Deity*, late 19th century, woodblock print, Mianzhu. The slightly raised white outlines are a characteristic trait of Mianzhu *nianhua* known as *mingzhang minggua*. The detail of the crown on the right shows the use of white pigments to outline certain darker areas, such as the deep blue parts of the costume, creating depth, contrast, and movement.



Figure 19. Exterior view of the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, opened in 1996 to showcase the expanding state *nianhua* collection and to boost local tourism. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 20. Exterior view of the Nianhua Village, a combination of shops, restaurants, farming plots, and living spaces. The entire neighborhood is dotted with large murals of historic *nianhua*, painted by a privately contracted advertising company. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 21. A black and white photograph taken by in the early 1980s shows a makeshift outdoor stand selling prints in a winter street market.



Figure 22. A 2004 photograph shows how Mianzhu's *nianhua* street markets have expanded in scale and scope, with a greater variety of goods and a more regimented use of street space.



Figure 23. *Tianshuijiao*, late 19th century, woodblock prints, Mianzhu, Sichuan.



Figure 24. Exterior view of a household doorway in an urban residential neighborhood in Mianzhu. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 25. Exterior view of an urban household doorway in Mianzhu with a calendar advertisement displayed in the center framed by a set of hand-painted spring couplets and lintel hanging. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 26. Digitally printed door deities, spring couplets, and lanterns adorn the doorway of a well-to-do rural household in Mianzhu. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 27. An urban doorway in Mianzhu with a *fengshui* mirror displayed over the center of the door. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 28. Interview session with Wang Xingru in his studio. A long worktable sits beside the Wang family altar set against the back wall (left). Wang Xingru stands over his box of lineage documents as state *nianhua* researchers Liu Zhumei and Ning Zhiqi take notes (right). Photographs by April Liu.



Figure 29. Front cover of the Wang family genealogy chart.



Figure 30. The arrangement of the couplets on the genealogy cover (above) mirrors the symmetrical placement of spring couplets around the studio entrance (below). Photograph by April Liu.

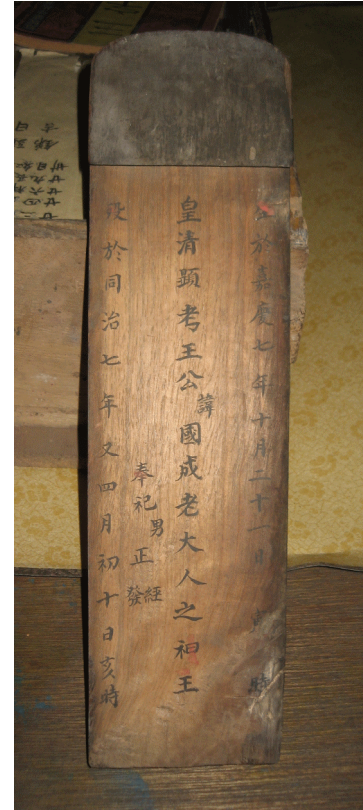


Figure 31. A detail of the Wang family altar with a black and white photograph of his grandfather in the center (left) and a detail of the Wang family's ancestral tablet, which bears the names of his forefathers (right).

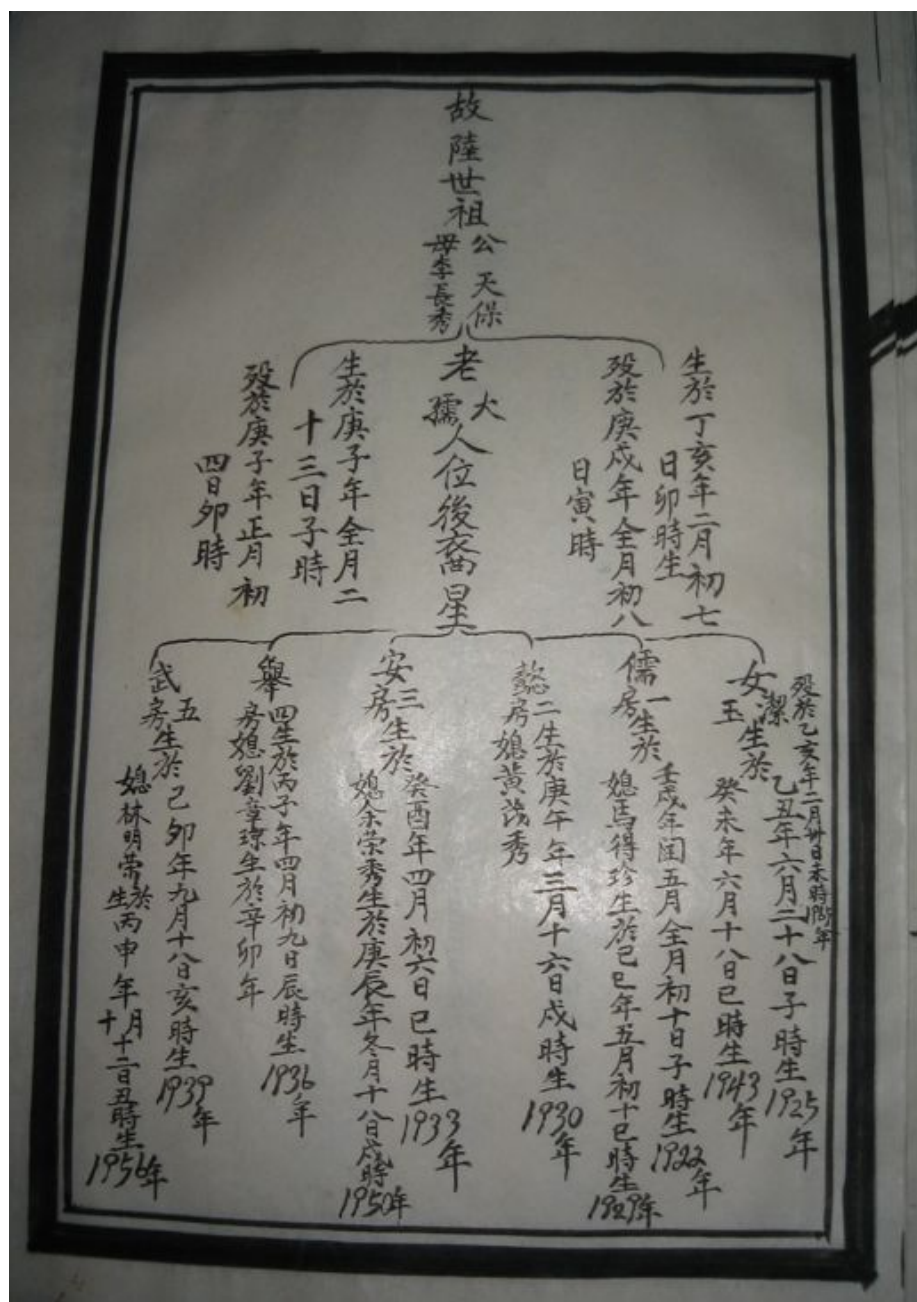


Figure 32. Each inside page of the Wang family genealogy chart represents a single generation, which is numbered at the top of each page. The names of the parents of that generation are followed by the names of their offspring and their birthdates.

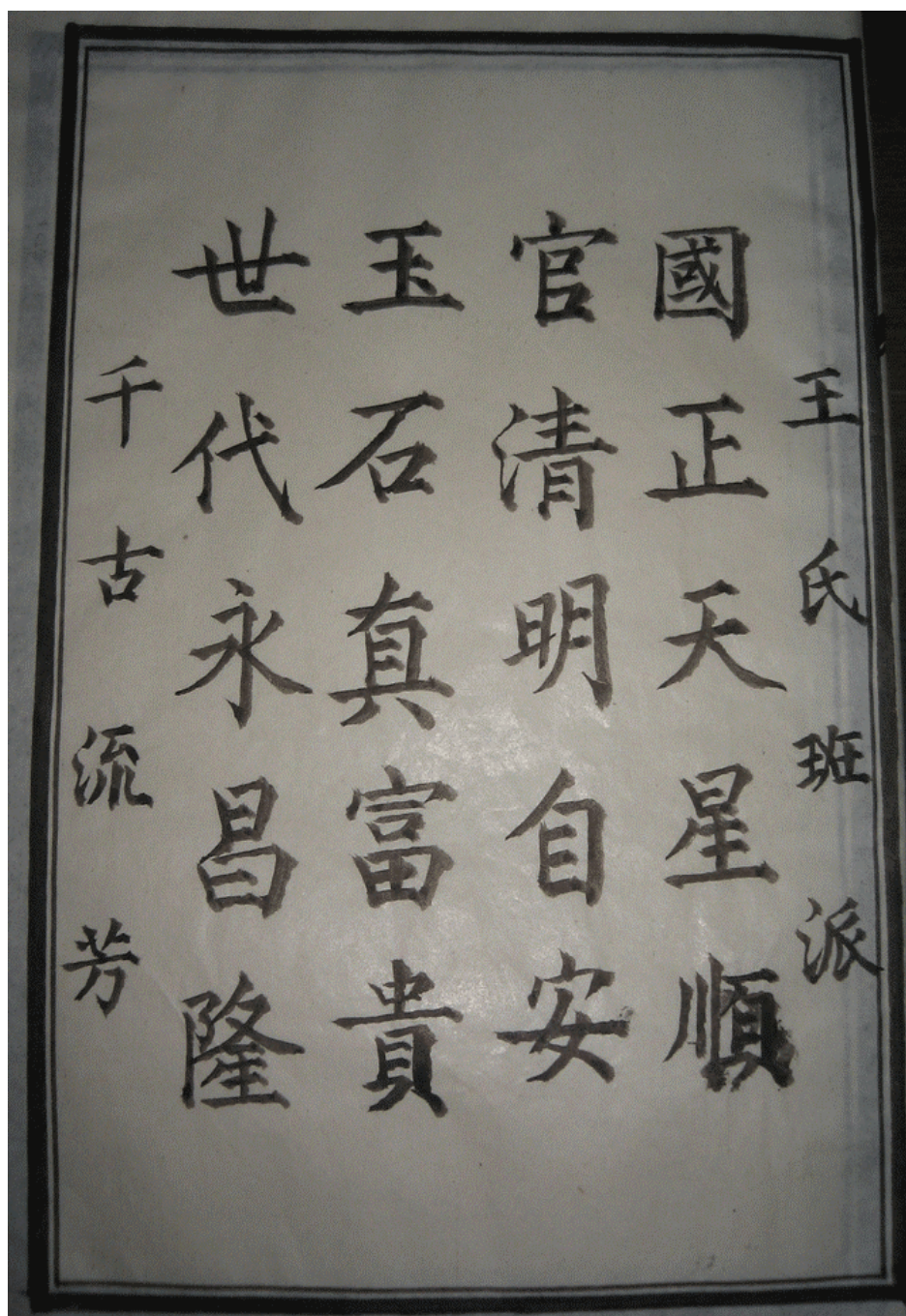


Figure 33. The back cover of the Wang family genealogy chart. The text reads, “A riteous nation is harmoniously ordered like the stars in the sky, may upright officials bring us peace. True wealth and honor are as precious as jade, may every generation prosper.” Translated by April Liu.



Figure 34. “Honoring the Deity of Agriculture,” a section of the *Plowing and Weaving Pictures*, Jiao Bingzhen, commissioned by Kangxi Emperor, set of hand-colored prints, ca 1696. © British Museum Trustees.



Figure 35. “Honoring the Deity of Agriculture,” a section of the *Plowing and Weaving Pictures*, Wang Zhengfa, ink on paper, late 19th cent.

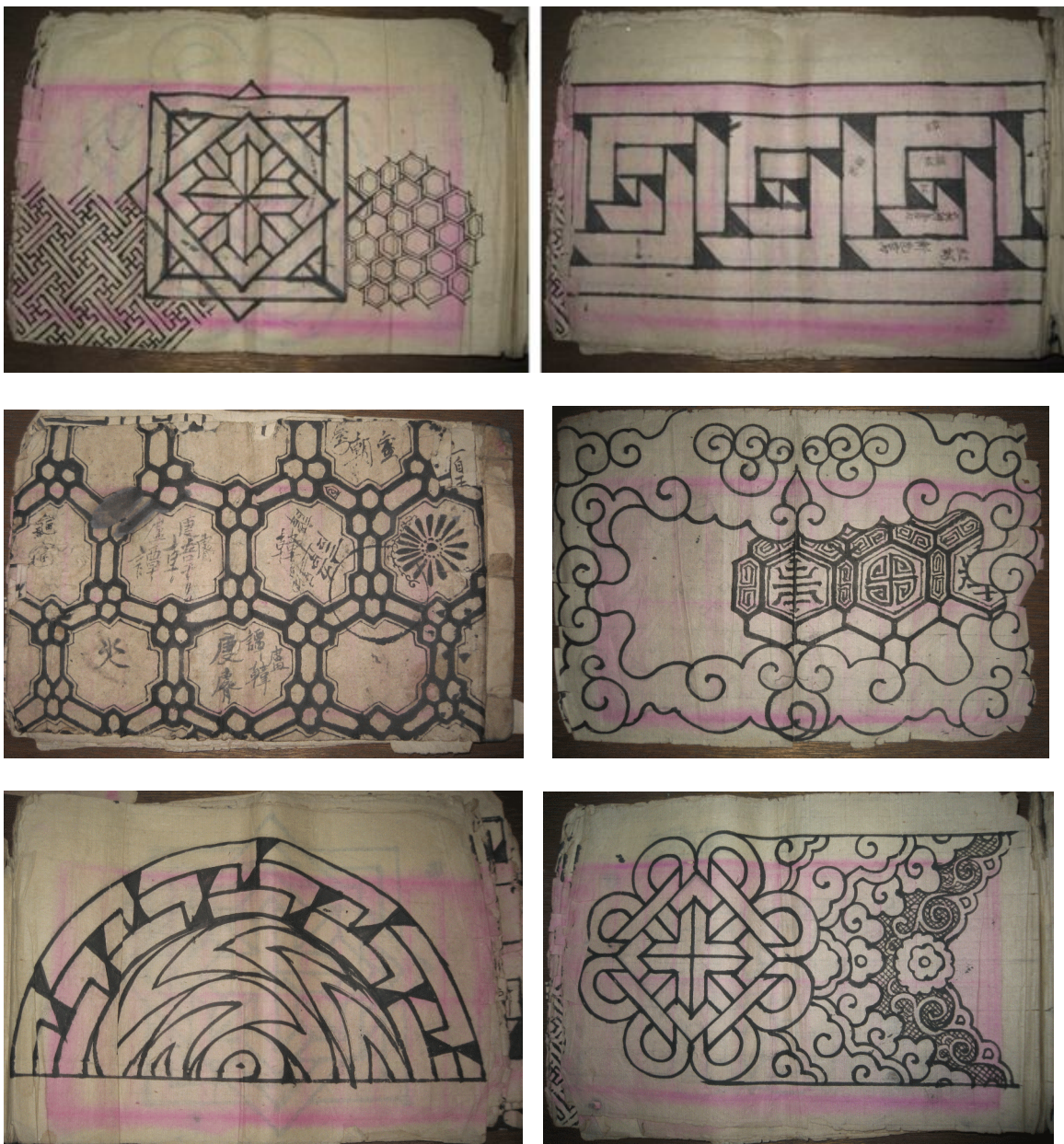


Figure 36. Examples of Wang Xingru’s ink on paper sketches, stored in his lineage box.



Figure 37. *Double Longevity*, Wang Xingru, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 2004. Auspicious patterns from Wang's sketches are incorporated into many aspects of the painting.

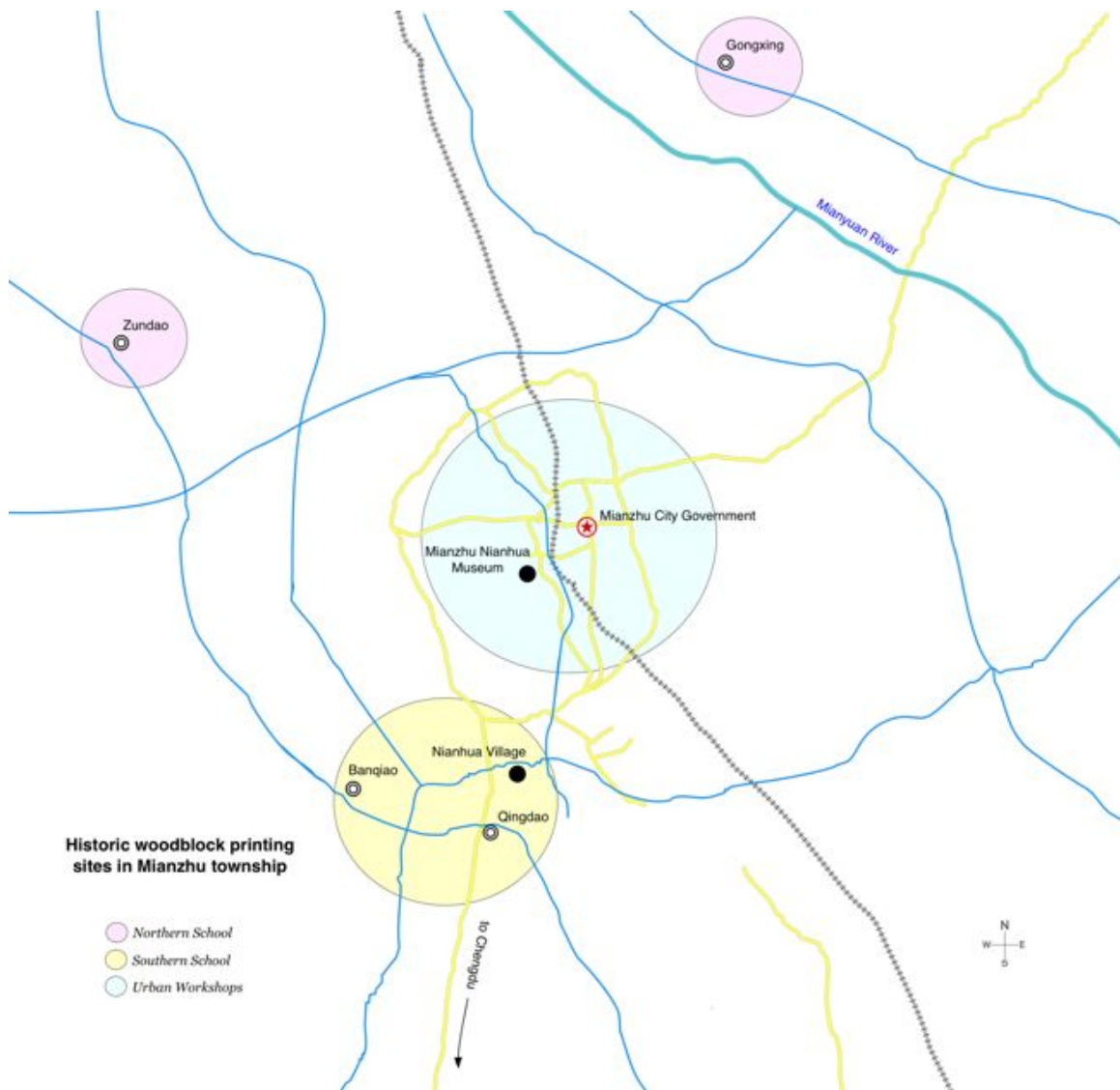


Figure 38. Map of Mianzhu's historic nianhua sites, showing the territorial claims of the Northern and Southern Schools of Mianzhu *nianhua*.



Figure 39. Interview with Li Fangfu in his studio. From left to right: April Liu, Li Fangfu, and Han Gang.



Figure 40. The walls of Li Fangfu's *nianhua* shop are covered on all sides with hanging scrolls. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 41. *Warrior Door Deities*, Li Fangfu, woodblock prints, 2006.



Figure 42. View of the painting and stamping room at the Chen family's Southern School workshop at the Nianhua Village. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 43. *Boys Playing*, detail of two woodblock prints from a set of seven, design by Chen Gang, Chen family workshop, 2007.



Figure 44. Photograph of Yao Chunrong painting, taken in the early 1980s by state researchers.



Figure 45. Group interview session with Wang Xingru, winter 2007.



Figure 46. Wang Xingru hanging up his scroll painting of the Medicine King in preparation for a storytelling session.



Figure 47. *Medicine King*, Wang Xingru, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 2004.



Figure 48. On the left, researcher Ning Zhiqi looks up at the painting while Wang Xingru on the right extends his pointing stick out to begin narrating the story of the Medicine King.



Figure 49. *Medicine King*, unknown workshop, undated woodblock print, Yangliuqing, Tianjin.



Figure 50. Interview with Chen Gang at the Chen family workshop, July 2006.
Photograph by Han Gang.



Figure 51. Video still of Chen Gang explaining the process of carving as he points to the carved block as an example of “yang carving,” where the negative space is carved away to leave the lines protruding out of the block.



Figure 52. In the promotional material for the Chengdu Sichuan Opera Theater, a photograph of Mu Guiying captures the highly stylized gestures and costumes of Sichuan theater.



Figure 53. *Female Door Deities*, late 19th – early 20th century, woodblock prints, Mianzhu, Sichuan. The figures are associated with the female warriors Mu Guiying and Qin Liangyu, although there are no distinguishing features to tell them apart.



Figure 54. In Sichuan’s famous “face-changing” theater, a performer takes on multiple roles in a single performance by rapidly removing thin layers of painted silk masks that are tightly bound to the face.



Figure 55. *Five Honourable Sons*, late 19th century, handscroll, ink and color on paper, Mianzhu, Sichuan. © Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, BC, Canada.



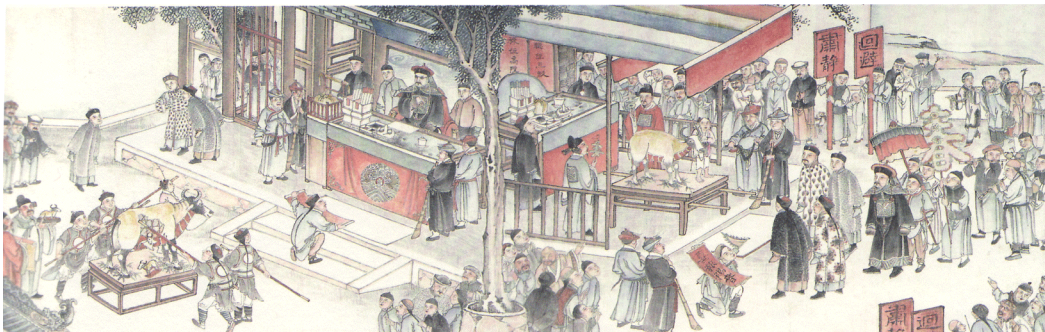
56a.



56b.



56c.



56d.

Figure 56. *Greeting Spring*, Huang Ruigu, handscroll, ink and color on paper, ca. late 19th century. The painting is comprised of four horizontal scrolls that add up to approximately six meters in length.



Figure 57. Detail from *Greeting Spring*. The magistrate is carried on a sedan chair as he leads the procession out of the town gates.



Figure 58. Detail from *Greeting Spring*. The magistrate and his official entourage are preparing to make sacrificial offerings to the spring deities in a ritual activity known as “Welcoming Spring.”

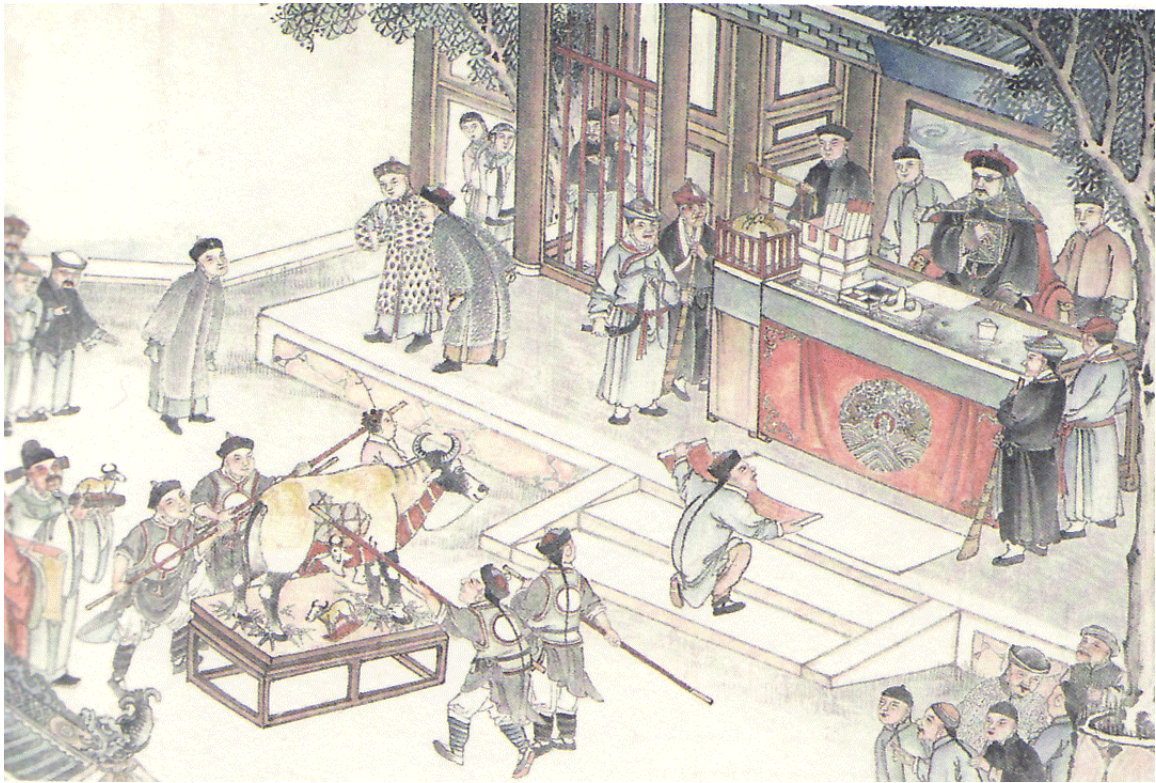
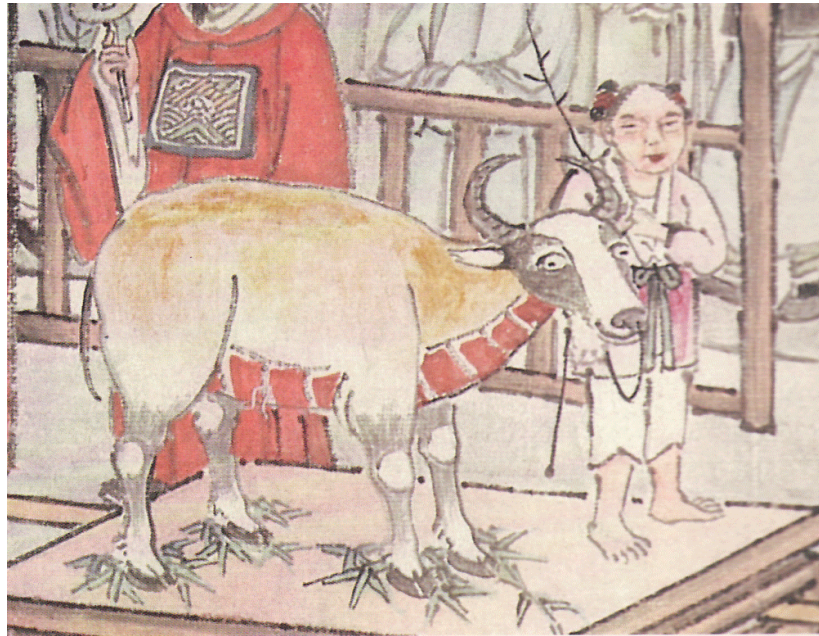


Figure 59. Detail from *Greeting Spring*. The magistrate is depicted in front of the county bureau on a raised seat behind a table, presiding over the ritual of “Beating Spring.”



60a



60b

Figure 60. Top, 60a: Detail from *Greeting Spring*, showing correspondences between the depiction of the spring deities and the calendrical information for that year. Below, 60b: *Spring Ox Picture*, ca. late 19th century, woodblock print, Shanxi.

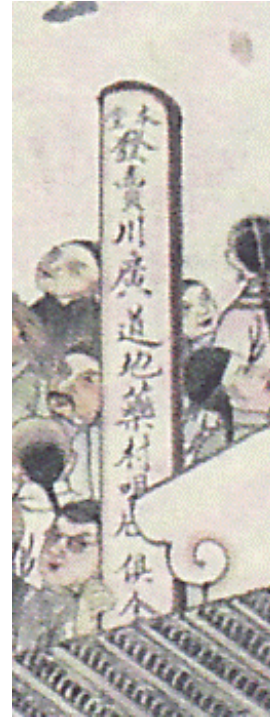


Figure 61. Detail of *Greeting Spring*, where a prominent shop sign reads: “Our shop sells genuine chewable medicines of Sichuan and Guangdong.”



Figure 62. Detail of the six “raised pavilions” being carried through the crowd.



Figure 63. View of entrance lobby at the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 64. Upper level of the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 65. Examples of *shinutu* or “beautiful maiden pictures,” woodblock prints, early 20th century, Mianzhu.



Figure 66. *Bicycle-riding Maiden*, woodblock print, ca. late 19th cent., Mianzhu.



Figure 67. *Swan Cigarette Print Ad*, digitally printed copy of a 1930s lithograph from Shanghai. The “beautiful maiden” format is used to advertise foreign goods and services, especially in Shanghai’s rising print industry of the 1920’s and 30’s.



Figure 68. Press conference event at the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum, with hired artisans performing embroidery of *nianhua* designs, 2006. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 69. *Bicycle-riding Maiden*, Chen family workshop, woodblock print, 2006. In redesigning the historic print from the state collection (**fig. 66**), Chen highlights his unique skills in painting and stamping.



Figure 70. Li Fangfu in his studio, explaining the lifelike qualities of his door deity paintings. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 71. *Tianshuijiao*, Li Fangfu, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 2005. Taking what was a small-format image made with left over papers and paints, Li transforms the historic format into a carefully painted work on oversized vertical scrolls. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 72. Nianhua Village, Mianzhu. View of a rural household in the village, with three “beautiful maiden” images painted onto the walls of a courtyard. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 73. Bilingual sign installed at a crossroads at the Nianhua Village, pointing to “Fresh Plum Garden” and “Happy Land Garden,” attractive names given to the different farming plots integrated within the site. Vegetables and fruit trees can be seen in the background. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 74. Nianhua Village, winter 2007, Mianzhu. View of an area under construction, where painted stones bearing the characters for Confucian values are being permanently installed. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 75. Exterior view of a private residence at the Nianhua Village in Mianzhu. Traditional architectural features such as the upturned tiled rooftops and courtyard design are combined with modern forms and materials such as concrete walls and parking lots. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 76. Local residents carrying out agricultural work in the Nianhua Village as part of their daily routines. Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 77. Exterior view of the entrance to the Chen family workshop at the Nianhua Village, 2007. Two large door deities are permanently painted onto the two sets of double leaf doors. A plaque centered over the entrance reads, “Mianzhu’s folk *nianhua* workshop.” On either side of the door, two painted couplets read, “In planting, a thousand Mianzhu peasant families can work the hoe and the brush. Famous in the nation for ten thousand beautiful works, the more rustic the more glorious they are!” Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 78. The street sign in front of Li Fangfu's workshop reads: "Self made, self distributing, unique talent of Chinese Folk Art." The sign draws attention to his independent status apart from the state-run Nianhua Village.



Figure 79. The 2005 Nianhua Festival's dragon dancing performance (below) is inspired by this particular detail from the *Greeting Spring* scroll paintings (above).



Figure 80. Top: detail from the *Greeting Spring* painting, showing a scene that inspired the Nianhua Festival. Center: performers in historic costumes appear in the 2005 Nianhua Festival carrying the same large sign for “spring” as seen in the painting. Below: the central stage for the festival, where officials and honored guests preside over the performances.



Figure 81. Souvenir shop in Mianzhu with various *fuzhipin* replicas on display.
Photograph by April Liu.



Figure 82. Recent incarnations of *nianhua* in new media, including a stamp series bearing images of high profile prints (left) and hanging charms for the car (right).



Figure 83. *Straw Cutting Maidens*, Liu Zhumei, acrylic on canvas, 1995.



Figure 84. *Door Deities*, Liu Zhumei, acrylic on canvas, 2001.



Figure 85. The Nianhua Village immediately after the 2008 Great Sichuan Earthquake, photographs by Wang Hong.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adorno, Theodor, W. "Valéry Proust Museum." In *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Sherry Weber, 175-85. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.
- Aijmer, Goran. *New Year Celebrations in Central China in Late Imperial Times*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003.
- Alcoff, Linda. "The Problem of Speaking For Others." In *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*, edited by Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman, 5-32. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- Alekseev, V. M. *The Chinese Gods of Wealth*. Lecture delivered at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, March 26, 1926. London: School of Oriental Studies and The China Society, 1928.
- Alekseev, V. M., Maria Rudova, and L. N. Menshikov. *Chinese Popular Prints*. Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1988.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast. *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Andrews, Julia. *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Austin, John L. "Performative Utterances." In *Philosophical Papers*, edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 220-239. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- . *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962
- Bai, Qianshen. "Image as Word: A Study of Rebus Play in Song Painting (960-1279)." *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 34 (1999): 57-72.
- Bal, Mieke. "Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture." *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 5 (2003): 5-32.
- . *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.
- . *Looking In: The Art of Viewing*. Introduction by Norman Bryson. Amsterdam: G & B Arts International, 2001.

- Barme, Geremie, ed. "A Tale of Two Lists: An Examination of the New Lists of Intangible Cultural Properties." *China Heritage Newsletter* 7 (2006). Accessed November 3, 2011. http://www.chinaheritagenewsletter.org/features.php?searchterm=007_twolists.inc&issue=007
- Bartholomew, Terese Tse. *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art*. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2006.
- Bartlett, Nancy Ruth. "Past Imperfect (l'imparfait): Mediating Meaning in Archives of Art." In *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, edited by Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, 121-33. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Beech, Hannah. "The Shock of the New." *Time Magazine* (March 2003). Accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,430902,00.html>
- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 217-52. New York: Schocken, 1969.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2009.
- Biberman, Efrat. "On Narrativity in the Visual Field: A Psychoanalytic View of Velazquez's Las Meninas." *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 237-53.
- Bickford, Maggie. "The Symbolic Seasonal Round in House and Palace: Counting the Auspicious Nines in Traditional China." In *House Home Family: Living and Being Chinese*, edited by Ronald G. Knapp and Kai-yin Lo, 349-372. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005.
- Billioud, Sébastien and Joël Thoraval. "Lijiao: The Return of Ceremonies Honouring Confucius in Mainland China." *China Perspectives* 4 (2009): 82-100.
- . "Jiaohua: The Confucian Revival in China as an Educative Project." *China Perspectives* 4 (2007): 4-20.
- Bo Songnian 薄松年. "Xing shuai cunwang zhong de nianhua yishu" 兴衰存亡中的年画艺术 [The rise, fall, preservation, and loss of nianhua art] *Art Observation* 美术观察 2 (2005): 8-10.
- . "Fuyou xianming difang tese de Mianzhu nianhua" 富有鲜明地方特色的绵竹年画 [Mianzhu nianhua with strong local characteristics]. In *Mianzhu nianhua jingpin ji* 绵竹年画精品集 [Selected works of Mianzhu nianhua], edited by Hou Rong 侯荣, 18-23. Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2005.

- . *Zhongguo nianhua shi* 中国年画史 [History of Chinese nianhua]. Shenyang: Liaoning meishu chubanshe, 1986.
- Bo Songnian and David Johnson. *Domesticated Deities and Auspicious Emblems*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Bonds, Alexandra. *Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2008.
- Bordahl, Vibeke. *The Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling*. Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1996.
- . *The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China*. Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1999.
- Brokaw, Cynthia, and Kai-Wing Chow, eds. *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Bruun, Ole. *Fengshui in China: Geomantic Divination between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003.
- Bumbaru, Dinu. *Heritage at Risk: ICOMOS World Report on Monuments and Sites in Danger*. Munich: K.G. Saur, 2000.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.
- Cha Qing 查庆 and Lei Xiaopeng 雷晓鹏. "Sichuan Sun Simiao chongbai, yaowanghui xisu ji qi xiandai kaifa" 川西孙思邈崇拜, 药王会习俗及其现代开发 [The modern development of Sun Simiao worship and Medicine King festivals in western Sichuan]. *Sichuan jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* 四川教育学院学报 [Journal of Sichuan's College of Education] 12 (2007): 21-48.
- Chan, Selina Ching. "Temple Building and Heritage in China." *Ethnology* 44, no. 1 (2005): 65.
- Chao, Emily. "The Maoist Shaman and the Madman: Ritual Bricolage, Failed Ritual, and Failed Ritual Theory." *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 4 (1999): 505-34.
- Chao, Yuan-ling. *Medicine and Society in Late Imperial China: A Study of Physicians in Suzhou, 1600-1850*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009.
- Chard, Richard. "Rituals and Scriptures of the Stove Cult." In *Rituals and Scriptures in Chinese Popular Religion*, edited by David Johnson, 3-54. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995.

- Chau, Adam Yuet. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Chavannes, Edouard. *The Five Happinesses: Symbolism in Chinese Popular Art*. Translated by Elaine Spaulding Atwood. New York: Weatherhill, 1973. Originally published as *L'expression des vœux dans l'art populaire chinois* (1901).
- Cherry, Deborah. *Art History: Visual: Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Chun, Allen, John Clammer, Patricia Ebrey, David Faure, Stephan Feuchtwang, Ying-Kuei Huang, P. Steven Sangren, and Mayfair Yang. "The Lineage-Village Complex in Southeastern China: A Long Footnote in the Anthropology of Kinship [and Comments and Reply]." *Current Anthropology* 17, no. 3 (1996): 429-40.
- Chung, Him. *China's Rural Market Development in the Reform Era*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004.
- Clunas, Craig. *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997.
- . *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003.
- Cooper, Eugene. "The Annual Round of Agricultural Tasks in Dongyang County: Synoptic Illusion or Symbolic Capital?" *Asian Folklore Studies* 59 (2000): 239-64.
- Dauth, Ursula. "Strategies of Reform in Sichuan Opera since 1982: Confronting the Challenge of Rejuvenating a Regional Opera." PhD diss., Griffith University, 1997.
- Day, Clarence Burton. *Chinese Peasant Cults (Shanghai, 1940)*. Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Publishing Co., 1974.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Dikotter, Frank. *Things Modern: Material Culture and Everyday Life in China*. London: Hurst & Company, 2007.

- Dolby, William. "Chinese Drama." In *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature, 2nd ed.*, edited by William H. Jr. Nienhauser, 13-30. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Doolittle, Justus. *Social Life of the Chinese: With Some Account of Their Religious, Governmental, Educational, and Business Customs and Opinions*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865; reprint, Taipei: Ch'eng-wen Publishing, 1966.
- Dore, Henri. *Researches in Chinese Superstition*, vol. 1-3. Translated by M. Kennelly. Shanghai: T'usewei Printing Press, 1920.
- Duara, Prasenjit. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1995.
- Esfehiani, Amir Moghaddass. "The Bicycle's Long Way to China: The Appropriation of Cycling as a Foreign Cultural Technique (1860-1941)." Paper presented at the Proceedings of the Thirteenth International Cycling History Conference, San Francisco, 2003.
- Eyferth, Jan. "Socialist deskilling: The struggle over skills in a rural craft industry, 1949-1965." In *How China Works: Perspective on the Twentieth Century Industrial Workplace*, edited by Jan Eyferth, 41-58. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Anthropology with an Attitude*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Feng Shudan 冯树丹. *Sichuan xiju yishi* 四川戏剧逸史 [A history of Sichuan theater]. Chengdu: Sichuan sheng xijujia xiehui, 1992.
- Feng Tiren 封体仁. "Mianzhu shanghui shihua" 绵竹商会史话 [Records of Mianzhu's trade association history]. In *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao ji* 绵竹文史资料辑 4 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies], edited by Wang Peisheng 王培生 and Zhang Changlu 张昌禄, 112-119. Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1995.
- Feuchtwang, Stephan. *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Flath, James. *The Cult of Happiness: Nianhua, Art, and History in Rural North China*. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2004.
- Fong, Wen C. "Why Chinese Painting Is History." *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 2 (June, 2003): 258-80.

- Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author." In *Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 101-120. New York: Pantheon Books, 1970.
- Fraser, Sarah. *Performing the Visual: The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Friedman, Edward, Paul Pickowicz, and Mark Selden. *Resistance, Resistance, and Reform in Village China*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Gao Wen 高文, Hou Shiwu 侯世武, and Ning Zhiqi 宁志奇. *Mianzhu nianhua* 绵竹年画 [Mianzhu nianhua]. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990.
- Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Gittings, John. "Excess and Enthusiasm." In *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, edited by Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, 27-46. Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999.
- Goodrich, Anne. *Peking Paper Gods: A Look at Home Worship*. Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1991.
- Hammond, Charles "The Righteous Tiger and the Grateful Lion," *Monumenta Serica*, 43 (1996): 191-211.
- Han Chenwu 韩成武. *Shisheng: huanyou zhongde Dufu* 诗圣: 忧患中的杜甫 [The sage-poet: Dufu's world of adversity and sorrow]. Baoding, Hebei daxu chubanshe, 2000.
- Hancock, Mary E. *The Politics of Heritage from Madras to Chennai*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Holm, David. *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Hoskins, Janet. "Agency, Biography, and Objects." In *Handbook of Material Culture*, edited by Christopher Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Küchler, Mike Rowlands and Patricia Spyer, 74-84. London: Sage Publications, 2006.
- Hou Shiwu 侯世武 and Liu Zhumei 刘竹梅. "Mianzhu nianhua gailun" 绵竹年画概论 [Introduction to Mianzhu nianhua]. In *Mianzhu nianhua jingpin ji* 绵竹年画精品集 [Selected works of Mianzhu nianhua], edited by Hou Rong 侯荣, 11-17. Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2005.
- Hsiao, Li-ling. *The Eternal Present of the Past: Illustration, Theater, and Reading in the Wanli Period*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

- Hu Du, Liu Xingming, and Fu Ze. *Chuanju cidian* 川剧词典 [Dictionary of Sichuan theater]. Beijing: Zhongguo xiju cuhubanshe, 1987.
- Huang Zonghou, 黄宗厚. "Mianzhu nongcun de Chuanju huodong 绵竹农村的川剧活动 [Sichuan theater activities in Mianzhu's rural villages]." In *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑14 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol. 14], edited by Wang Peisheng 王培生 and Zhang Changlu 张昌禄, 102-107. Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1995.
- Hung Chang-tai. "Repainting China: New Year Prints (Nianhua) and Peasant Resistance in the Early Years of the People's Republic." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no.4 (2000): 779-810.
- Idema, W.L. *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period*. Leiden: Brill, 1974.
- Jackson, Anthony and Jenny Kidd, eds. *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011.
- Jiang Jingchen 姜敬沉. *Jiefang qian Mianzhu chengguan gehangye gaikuang* 解放前绵竹城关各行业市场的分布概况 [Overview of Mianzhu's pre-liberation urban industries]. In *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑14 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol. 14], edited by Wang Peisheng 王培生 and Zhang Changlu 张昌禄, 120-134. Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1995.
- Johnson, David. *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual: "Mu-Lien Rescues His Mother."* In *Chinese Popular Culture*, edited by David Johnson, 1-45. Berkeley: University of California, Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1989.
- Jullien, Francois. *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1999.
- Kafalenos, Emma. *Narrative Causalities. Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series*. Edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006.
- Kardos, Michael. "God of the Gate, Protector of the Door: Door Gods (Menshen) in Chinese Popular Religion." MA thesis. University of British Columbia, 1998.
- Kirshenblatt Gimblett, Barbara. "Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production." *Museum International* 56, no. 1-2 (May 2004): 52-65.
- . *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

- Knapp, Ronald. *China's Living Houses: Symbols and Household Ornamentation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.
- Kuo, Jason C., ed. *Visual Culture in Shanghai, 1850s-1930s*. Washington, DC: Lightning Source Inc., 2007.
- Laing, Ellen Johnston. *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth Century China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004.
- . "Reform, Revolutionary, Political, and Resistance Themes in Chinese Popular Prints, 1900-1940." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 12, no. 123-175 (2000): 73-122.
- . "Persistence of Propriety." In *Unofficial China: Popular Culture in the People's Republic*, edited by Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul Pickowicz, 156-71. Boulder: Westview Press, 1989.
- Laing, Ellen Johnston and Helen Hui-ling Liu. *Up in Flames: The Ephemeral Art of Pasted-Paper Sculpture in Taiwan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Landesberger, Stefan R. "The Deification of Mao: Religious Imagery and Practices During the Cultural Revolution and Beyond." In *China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives*, edited by Woei Lien Chong, 139-84. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Layton, Robert. "Art and Agency: A Reassessment." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9, no. 3 (2003), 447-64.
- Lee, Leo Ou-fan. *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China 1930-1945*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press. 1999.
- Leese, Daniel. *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Lewis, Mark E. *Writing and Authority in Early China*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Li Lulu, 李露露. *Zhongguo jie* 中国节 [Chinese festivals]. Fuzhou, PRC: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2005.
- Lippiello, Tiziana. *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series, no. 39. Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica; Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 2001.

- Liu Zhumei 刘竹梅. "Re ai nianhua shiye de Zhang Xianfu 热爱年画事业的张先富 [Zhang Xianfu's passion for the nianhua industry]." In *Mianzhu nianhua ziliao xuanbian si* 绵竹年画资料选编四 [Mianzhu nianhua selected research documents vol. 4] edited by Mianzhu Nianhua Society, 1-6. Mianzhu: Mianzhu Nianhua Society, 1982.
- . "Mianzhu nianhua laoyiren Yao Chunrong" 绵竹年画老艺人姚春荣 [Mianzhu nianhua elder Yao Chunrong]. In *Mianzhu nianhua ziliao xuanbian si* 绵竹年画资料选编四 [Mianzhu nianhua selected research documents vol. 4], edited by Mianzhu Nianhua Society, 7-11. Mianzhu: Mianzhu Nianhua Society, 1982.
- , Ning Zhiqi 宁志奇, "Mianzhu nianhua huashi ji yishu chengjiu" 绵竹年画画师及艺术成就 [The huashi designers of Mianzhu nianhua and their artistic achievement]. In *Zhongguo Mianzhu nianhua* 中国绵竹年画 [China's Mianzhu nianhua], edited by Yu Jundao 于俊道, 103-113. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007.
- Loon, Piet van der. "Les Origines Rituelles Du Theatre Chinois [The Ritual Origins of Chinese Theater]." *Journal Asiatique CCLXV* (1977): 144-68.
- Lu, Sheldon Hsiao-peng. *From Historicity to Fictionality: The Chinese Poetics of Narrative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Lu Shengzong 吕胜中. "Huaxiang? bowuguan? shu" 画乡? 博物馆? 书 [Hometown of Chinese nianhua? a museum? a book]. In *Mianzhu nianhua jingpin ji* 绵竹年画精品集 [Selected works of Mianzhu nianhua], edited by Hou Rong 侯荣, 11-17. Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2005.
- Mackerras, Colin. "Theatre in China's Sichuan Province." *Asian Theatre Journal* 14, no. 2 (1987): 191-204.
- . "Tradition, Change, and Continuity in Chinese Theater in the Last Hundred Years: In Commemoration of the Spoken Drama Centenary." *Asian Theatre Journal* 25, no. 1 (2008): 1-23.
- Mair, Victor and Bender, Mark eds. *The Columbia Anthology of Chinese Folk and Popular Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Martin, Thomas R. "Propagating Classics." Lecture presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Philological Association, December 28, 1997.
- McIntyre, Tanya. "Chinese New Year Pictures: The Process of Modernization, 1842-1942." PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 1997.
- McNally, Christopher. "Driving Capitalist Development Westward." *The China Quarterly* 178 (2004): 426-47.
- Mianzhu Historical Documents Work Committee, 绵竹政协文史资料工作组. "Mianzhu muban nianhua" 绵竹木板年画 [Mianzhu's woodblock nianhua]. In *Mianzhu*

- wenshi ziliao xuanji 绵竹文史资料选辑 1 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol. 1], 31-40. Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1982.
- Mirzeoff, Nicolas. Introduction to *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, edited by Nicolas Mirzeoff, 1-26. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Mohanty, Chandra. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Murray, Julia K. *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustration and Confucian Ideology*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2007.
- Naquin, Susan. *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Ning Zhiqi 宁志奇. "Mianzhu nianhua zhong de fengci youmo nianhua" 绵竹年画中的讽刺幽默年画 [Satire and humor in Mianzhu nianhua]. In *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 26 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol. 26], edited by Yu Jundao 于俊道, 83-88. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007.
- "Sichuan qingdai chuantong minsu de zhengui huajuan Mianzhu Yinchuntu" 四川清代传统民俗的珍贵画卷,《绵竹迎春图》 [Mianzhu's 'Greeting Spring Picture': a Qing dynasty scroll painting and treasure of traditional folk culture in Sichuan]. In *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 9 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol 9], edited by Liji Zeng 曾立基, 38-45. Mianzhu, PRC: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui 1990.
- Noland, Carrie. *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Osborne, R and J. Tanner, eds. *Arts Agency and Art History*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Pagani, Catherine. "The Theme of Three Kingdoms in Chinese Popular Woodblock Prints." In *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture*, edited by Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung, 87-110. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Pan Peide 潘培德. "Sichuan Mianzhu nianhua huigu yu zhanwang" 四川绵竹年画的回顾与展望 [Reflections on Mianzhu nianhua's past and future Prospects]. *Meishu Tongxun* 美术通讯 2 (1990): 12-14.
- . "Gu wei jin yong, tui chen chu xin: cheng tan mianzhu nianhua bao xin zhong de ji ge wenti" 古为今用, 推陈出新: 诚谈绵竹年画创新中的几个问题 [The ancient serving the present, out with the old, in with the new: a candid discussion of the challenges facing the revival of Mianzhu nianhua]. In *Mianzhu nianhua ziliao xuanbian* 绵竹年画资料选编 4 [Anthology of Mianzhu nianhua research materials,

- vol. 4], edited by Mianzhu Nianhua Society, 5-9. Mianzhu: Mianzhu Nianhua Society, 1982.
- Pan, Qing. "Creativity Within Copying: A Comparative Study of Copying as a Way of Learning in Euro-American Painting and Chinese Painting Traditions." PhD diss., Columbia University, 2007.
- Pang, Laikwan. *Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2007.
- Pinney, Christopher. "Piercing the Skin of the Idol." In *Beyond Aesthetics: Art and the Technologies of Enchantment*, edited by Chris Pinney and Nicholas Thomas, 157-80. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001.
- Pollock, Della. *Remembering: Oral History Performance*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Ramanujan, A.K. "Towards an Anthropology of City Images." In *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, edited by Vinay Dharwadker, 53-73. New Delhi: Oxford Press, 1999.
- Rawson, Jessica. *The Agency of, and the Agency for, the Wanli Emperor*. In *Art's Agency and Art History*, edited by R. Osborne and J. Tanner, 95-113. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Reed, Christopher A. *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937*. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2004.
- Roberts, Jeremy. *Chinese Mythology A to Z*. New York: Facts of File, 2004.
- Rozelle, Scott, Vince Benzinger, and Jikun Huang. "Continuity and Change in China's Rural Periodic Markets." Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics Working Paper. Davis, CA: University of California Davis, March 2002.
- Rudrum, David. "Narrativity and Performativity: From Cervantes to Star Trek." In *Theorizing Narrativity*, edited by John Pier and Jose Angel Garcia Landa, 253-76. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008.
- Sangren, P. Steven. "Traditional Chinese Corporations: Beyond Kinship." *Journal of Asian Studies* 43 (1984): 391-415.
- Scheffler, Harold W. "Filiation and affiliation." *Man* 20 (1985): 1-21.
- Scher, Philip. "Copyright Heritage: Preservation, Carnival, and the State in Trinidad." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 453-84.

- Sedgwick, Eve K. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Shen Hong 沈泓. *Mianzhu nianhua zhi lü* 绵竹年画之旅 [Touring Mianzhu nianhua]. Beijing: Zhongguo huabao chubanshe, 2006.
- Shepherd, Robert. "Cultural Heritage, UNESCO, and the Chinese State: Whose Heritage and for Whom?" *Heritage Management* vol. 2, iss 1 (Spring 2009): 55-80.
- Shi Weian 史维安. "Sichuan sheng wenhua guanzhang peixunban jianggao" 四川省文化馆长培训班讲稿 [Lecture for the Sichuan cultural affairs directors' training]. In *Mianzhu nianhua zhiyin - Shi Weian yu minjian yishu* 绵竹年画知音—史维安与民间艺术 [Mianzhu nianhua: Shi Wei An's collected writings on folk art], edited by Hou Rong 侯荣, 129-65. Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 1984.
- . "Mianzhu menshen yishi" 绵竹门神轶事 [Mianzhu door deity anecdote]. *Deyang Daily* 德阳日报, March 2, 1996.
- Sichuan Mianzhu County Gazetteer Editing Committee 四川绵竹县志编纂委员会. *Mianzhu Gazetteer* 绵竹县志. Mianzhu: Sichuan kexue jishu chubanshe, 1992.
- Siu, Helen. "Recycling Rituals: Politics and Popular Culture in Contemporary Rural China." In *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People's Republic*, edited by P. Link, R. Madsen, and P.G. Pickowicz, 121-137. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989.
- Skinner, William. "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China." *Journal of Asian Studies* 24, vol. 2 (February 1965): 195-228.
- . "Rural Marketing in China: Repression and Revival." *The China Quarterly* 103 (1985): 393-413.
- Smith, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Doubleday, 1977.
- Stafford, Charles. *Separation and Reunion in Modern China*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Stapleton, Kristen. *Civilizing Chengdu: Chinese Urban Reform, 1895-1937*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- State Council. "Representative Items of National Intangible Cultural Heritage" 国家级非物质文化遗产代表作. Issued by the State Council and published in *China Cultural Relics News*, (January 6, 2006). Accessed October, 2011.
http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/007/features/501_firstlist.pdf.

- Sturken, Marita and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Sun, Shirley Hsiao-ling. "Lu Hsun and the Chinese Woodcut Movement, 1929-1936." PhD diss., Stanford University, 1974.
- Sun Xiaofen 孙晓芬. *Qingdai qianqide yimin yian Sichuan* 清代前期的移民填四川 [The populating of Sichuan by migrants in the early Qing]. Chengdu: Sichuan daxue, 1997.
- Svasek, Maruska. *Anthropology, Art, and Cultural Production*. London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007.
- Takung Pao* 大公报. "Mianzhu nianhua village attracts 16 billion yuan in investment" 绵竹年画村引来16亿投资, August 3, 2011.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2003.
- Tuohy, Sue. "Cultural Metaphors and Reasoning: Folklore Scholarship and Ideology in Contemporary China." *Asian Folklore Studies* 50, no. 1 (1991): 189-220.
- UNESCO. *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity: Guide for the Presentation of Candidature Files*, 2001, electronic document. Accessed October 15, 2011. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001246/124628eo.pdf>.
- . *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, October 17, 2003, electronic document. Accessed October 15, 2011. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.phpURL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
- Unschuld, Paul. *Medicine in China: Historical Artifacts and Images*. Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2000.
- Urry, John. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage, 2002.
- Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Wang Bing 王冰. "Mianzhu Nianhua Jie Ji" 绵竹年画节记 [a Record of Mianzhu's Nianhua Festival]. In *Mianzhu Wenshi Ziliao Xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 26 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol 26], edited by Yu Jundao 于俊道, 208-211. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007.
- Wang Chaosheng 王潮生. *Zhongguo gudai gengzhitu* 中国古代耕织图 [Plowing and weaving pictures of ancient China]. Beijing: Zhongguo nongye chubanshe, 1995.

- Wang, Di. *Street Culture in Chengdu: Public Space, Urban Commoners, and Local Politics, 1870-1930*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Wang Dingou 王定欧. *Sichuan juehuo* 四川绝活 [Sichuan theater arts]. Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2007.
- Wang Shucun 王树村. *Zhongguo xichu nianhua* 中国戏出年画 [Chinese theatre-based nianhua]. Beijing: Beijing gongyi meishu chubanshe, 2006.
- , *Zhongguo menshen hua* 中国门神画 [Chinese door deity pictures]. Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2004.
- , *Zhongguo nianhua shi* 中国年画史 [Chinese nianhua history]. Beijing: Beijing gongyi meishu chubanshe, 2002.
- Ward, Barbara. "Not Merely Players: Drama, Art, and Ritual in Traditional China." *Man* 14, no. 1 (1979): 18-39.
- Wei Chuanyi 魏传义. "Mianzhu nianhua diaocha dailiao" 绵竹年画调查材料 [Mianzhu nianhua interview records]. In *Zhongguo Mianzhu nianhua* 中国绵竹年画 [China's Mianzhu nianhua], edited by Yu Jundao 于俊道, 136-140. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007.
- Welch, Patricia. *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*. Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle, 2008.
- Wichmann, Elizabeth. *Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991.
- Wilkinson, Endymion Porter. *Chinese History: A Manual*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Xinhua News Agency. "Protection and Promotion of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage," news release, June 2, 2010.
- Yang, Dali. *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. "Putting Global Capitalism in Its Place: Economic Hybridity, Bataille, and Ritual Expenditure." *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (August/Oct 2000): 477-509.
- , "The Lineage-Village Complex in Southeastern China: A Long Footnote in the Anthropology of Kinship [Comments to]." *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 3 (1996), 445-446.

- Ye Xiaoqing. *The Dianshizhai Pictorial: Shanghai Urban Life, 1884-1898*, Michigan Monographs in Chinese Studies 98. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 2003.
- Yin Tianrun 尹天润. "Xiaode Shejiantai nianhua cun jianshe" 孝德射箭台年画村建设 [Filial piety and virtue: the construction of the nianhua village at Shejiantai village]. In *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 26 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol. 26], edited by Yu Jundao 于俊道, 223-226. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007.
- Yu Jundao 于俊道, ed. *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 26 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol. 26]. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2007.
- Zhang Minglun 张明伦. "Luetan jiushi Mianzhu ji ge shichang de 'jingjiren' huodong" 略谈旧时绵竹几个市场的 经纪人活动 [A discussion of a few early industries in Mianzhu and the activities of 'entrepreneurs.' *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 8 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol. 8], 152-57. Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui 1989.
- Zhang Shaoqian. "The Supremacy of Modern Time: Reshaping the Image of China in Early Twentieth Century Calendar Posters." *Modern Art Asia* 6 (March, 2011). <http://modernartasia.com/Zhang%20Calendars.pdf>
- Zhang Zhaoyuan 章肇源. *Mianzhu shisong* 绵竹诗颂 [A selection of Mianzhu poetry]. Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1998.
- Zhao Jiliang 赵继良. "Jiefangqian Mianzhu shangye jingji qingkuang diandi" 解放前绵竹商业经济情况点滴 [A view of Mianzhu's pre-liberation economy]. In *Mianzhu wenshi ziliao xuanji* 绵竹文史资料选辑 13 [Anthology of Mianzhu's historical studies, vol. 13], edited by Wang Peisheng 王培生 and Zhang Changlu 张昌禄, 152-57. Mianzhu: Sichuan sheng mianzhu xian zhengxie xuexi wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui 1989.
- Zhao, Xiaohuan. *Classical Chinese Supernatural Fiction: A Morphological History*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.
- Zumthor, Paul. "The Impossible Closure of the Oral Text." Translated by Jean McGarry. *Yale French Studies*, 67 (1984), 25-42.

APPENDIX 1

Mianzhu *Nianhua* Timeline, 1912-2011

1912

The Republic of China is established, with Sun Yat-sen as the provisional president. The modern Gregorian calendar is adopted and the term *nianhua* is widely popularized with the mass printing of the first state calendar.

1913

In north China, intellectual and state-led campaigns to reform theater, popular literature, and woodblock printing lead to the confiscation of 6,000 *nianhua*. Fifty forms of “reformed *nianhua*” are circulated. These events do not greatly affect Mianzhu’s flourishing print trade, which reaches a height of development at this time.

1927-1938

Sichuan passes through the hands of five warlords. Intense fighting and economic decline severely damage the region’s print trade. Many printshops and paper-making shops close down in Mianzhu.

1933

The arts journal *Yifeng* publishes a special edition on folk art, marking the inception of folk art studies in China.

1937-1945

The Second Sino-Japanese War ensues and the wartime capital is relocated to Chongqing, Sichuan. The influx of people to the region gives a boost to Mianzhu’s print trade.

1942

Communist leader Mao Zedong delivers the Yan’an directive on arts and literature, setting the stage for over twenty years of *nianhua* reform to come.

1951

The “Sichuan Farmers’ Art Exhibition” is held at the Sichuan Provincial Exhibition Hall in Chengdu, initiating the Communists’ mobilization of rural printmakers in the region.

1957

Chengdu-based state researcher Wei Chuanyi publishes a report of his interviews with Mianzhu’s elderly printmakers, providing key summaries of Mianzhu’s historic print trade based on oral history.

1958-1961

The Great Leap Forward implements reforms that lead to economic downturn and mass famine in Sichuan.

1960

Sichuan's Cultural Affairs Bureau launches a provincial directive to "rescue Mianzhu's *nianhua* heritage." A major effort to collect historic *nianhua* is led by Shi Weian and Fu Wenshu, state researchers at the Sichuan People's Arts Museum.

1963

The "Chinese Folk Art Exhibition" is held in Beijing, including many woodblock prints from Mianzhu. Upon viewing the exhibition, poet Guo Moruo writes a verse in commemoration of Mianzhu *nianhua*.

1966-1976

The Cultural Revolution leads to a nationwide attack on traditional arts and culture, including an outright ban on *nianhua*.

1978

The 11th National Congress convenes, launching reforms that encourage rural autonomy and economic liberalization. The relaxed policies towards cultural production coincide with a resurgence of *nianhua* street markets in Mianzhu. A state-led *nianhua* revival is launched in Mianzhu and *nianhua* production teams are immediately put to work.

1980

The Mianzhu Nianhua Society convenes and releases the first volume of the *Mianzhu Nianhua Research Materials Anthology*, an annual publication that lasts until 1996. The China Exhibition Company organizes a global traveling exhibition of Mianzhu *nianhua*, destined to reach Hong Kong, France, United States, Japan, Upper Volta, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chile.

1982

The construction of a Chinese Folk Art Museum in Beijing is announced, sparking a nationwide effort to collect *nianhua* to be sent to the capital. In Sichuan, eighteen counties are mobilized to collect *nianhua* from local households.

1983

The groundbreaking "Sichuan Folk Arts Exhibition" opens in Chengdu, funded by the province and organized by the Sichuan People's Art Museum. Works are selected from across the province, with many examples of Mianzhu *nianhua* included.

1984

Shi Weian publishes his "Lecture for the Sichuan Cultural Affairs Directors' Training," a detailed roadmap for provincial officials leading the folk art revival movement. His focus on "local flavor" sends researchers into remote rural areas to collect folk art.

1991

Gao Wen, Ning Zhiqi, Hou Shiwu publish *Mianzhu Nianhua*, a definitive volume on the history of Mianzhu *nianhua* that includes excerpts of interviews and color plates of the state *nianhua* collection.

1993

Mianzhu receives official status as a national “Folk Art Hometown,” drawing in large sums of state funds for revitalizing the *nianhua* industry and local tourism.

1995-1996

Private investment and government funds are allocated to build the Mianzhu Nianhua Museum to house the state’s growing *nianhua* collection. The museum opened in 1996 with a storage room, exhibition halls, production workshops, and a gift shop.

2002

The first annual state-organized Nianhua Festival is inaugurated in Mianzhu to “protect folk arts, develop folk tourism.”

2006

Mianzhu *nianhua* is officially included on China’s “First List of Intangible Cultural Heritage,” issued by the State Council. The list includes 501 items, including 12 *nianhua* centers across China.

2007

A highly anticipated Mianzhu *nianhua* stamp collection is released across the nation, attracting widespread attention to Mianzhu’s folk art tourism industry.

2008

On May 12, the Great Sichuan Earthquake strikes at the epicenter of Wenchuan, registers 8.0 on the Richter scale, and leaves an estimated 69,000 dead. Less than 100 kilometers away, Mianzhu is severely damaged by the earthquake. Many structures at the Nianhua Village are leveled to the ground. Artifacts from Mianzhu’s Cultural Relics Bureau are relocated to emergency storage facilities at the San Xingdui Museum. Reconstruction efforts get underway to rebuild Mianzhu’s damaged *nianhua* sites.

2011

Mianzhu’s Nianhua Village is categorized as a high level “AAAA” tourist attraction under the revised rating system of the China National Tourism Administration. Mianzhu’s city government announces 16 billion yuan in investment funds for the immediate reconstruction and development of the Nianhua Village, including an “ancient street of Chinese *nianhua*,” and three additional heritage museums based on different themes.