

The Cult of Happiness:

Paper Gods, Popular Culture, and Revolution in Rural North China

by

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Abstract

Since the late Ming Dynasty the Shandong village of Yangjiabu has been a major production centre for the highly expressive and symbolically rich works of art known as 'New Year's wood-block prints', or *nianhua*. Being mass produced by the millions of copies annually and distributed throughout North-China on the occasion of the Lunar New Year Festival these icons serve as an excellent chronicle of the cosmology and popular culture of the Chinese peasant. In the twentieth century, the Chinese Communist Party recognized *nianhua* as a potential propaganda tool and undertook reforms of the genre toward achieving cultural revolution in the countryside. As a result we have been left with both a pictorial and a textual chronicle of the attempts to reform the classical and ritualistic perceptions of the Chinese peasant in the 1940s and 1950s. *Nianhua* therefore serve as a unique narrative and historical representation of a people who left few other indications of their ideals and reactions to change, and of the modernizing state which sought to direct them.

Table of Contents

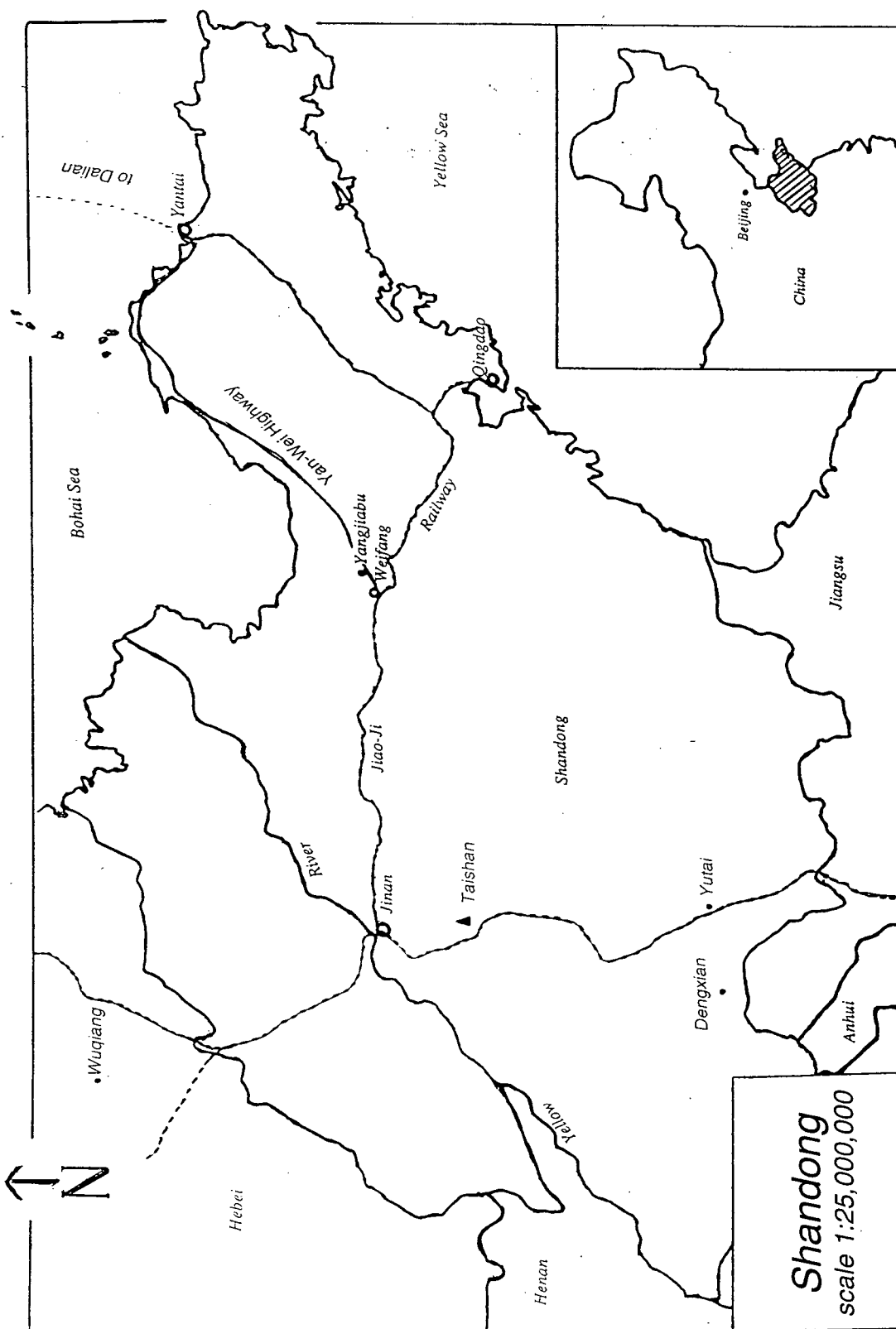
	page #
Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Illustrations and Tables.....	iv
Map.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
1.1)The Narrative of Village Discourse in Early Modern China.....	4
1.2)A History of Prosperity: The Rise and Fall of Yangjiabu.....	8
2)Nianhua Symbolism on the Front Line: CCP Reforms in Yen'an	18
3)Yangjiabu 'Newly Risen'.....	28
Conclusion.....	36
Epilogue.....	37
Bibliography.....	38
Appendix I.....	42
Appendix II.....	43
Appendix III.....	44

List of Illustrations

1.1) Hearth God and God of Wealth, Late Qing Dynasty, 69x35.5 cm.....	6
1.2) Martial God of Wealth, (Reading Spring and Autumn Annals at Night), Early Qing Dynasty, 55x 34 cm.....	7
1.3) Judge Bao Assumes Office, circa 1870, 25x43.5cm.....	7
1.4) The Ruse of the Empty City, Daoguang Reign of Qing Dynasty, 27x45.....	12
1.5) Getting Rich Year After Year, Early Republican Era, 36x48.5 cm.....	16
2.2) Strive for Sanitation, 1943, by Gu Yuan.....	24
2.3) People Enjoy Prosperity, 1943, by Gu Yuan.....	24
2.4) Bumper Harvest, 1939.....	29
3.1) Peasants Inspect Tractor, circa 1950, by Li Qi.....	31
3.2) Shen Wansan, Mid Qing Dynasty, 25x43.5cm.....	35
3.3) Labouring Fisher, 1950s.....	35
3.4) Reservoirs are Good, 1959, 33x48cm, by She Banghua.....	38

All illustrations come from the authors collection except 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, which have been copied from Beifang Muke, and 3.1 copied from Bo Songnian's 'Zhonguo Nianhua Shi.

Map I: Shandong Province, Peoples Republic of China, by author.....	iv
Table I: <i>Nianhua</i> production levels from 1949-1988.....	Appendix III



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I am truly beholden to my supervisor, Dr. Diana Lary, for helping me to turn my vague interests in China's rural culture into something of a specialization, and for patiently nudging me in the direction of this fascinating area of research. Dr. William E. French has been very gracious in advising me on comparative cultural history, reading my drafts, and helping me to challenge my own assumptions. Mona Kaiser's editorial expertise has helped to clarify all of the above. I must, however, claim any shortcomings of this paper as my own.

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When French sinologist Edouard Chavannes and Russian folklorist Basil Alexeev visited the east-central Shandong village of Yangjiabu (楊家埠) in 1905, they found themselves not simply in a quaint agricultural setting but in a booming folk-art production center.¹ Since the late Ming Dynasty, Yangjiabu had been printing and supplying printed paper gods and charms known as 'New Year's wood-block prints' or *nianhua* (年畫) to markets as far flung as Manchuria and Jiangsu.² By the early twentieth century, Yangjiabu had an annual cumulative printing run reputedly as high as 70,000,000 copies and was home to as many as one hundred individual *nianhua* production firms which ranged in size from single family operations to expansive organizations which maintained branch operations throughout the North China plain.

By the time Chinese Communist intellectual Cheng Yanqiu arrived at Yangjiabu in 1950 he found the industry significantly reduced and struggling to recover from the spasms of social upheaval that had wracked North China for much of the previous two decades. Separated by nearly half a century, the European and Chinese intellectuals had distinctly different motives in visiting the village. Alexeev, the ethnographer, sought to evaluate and preserve for posterity the *nianhua* iconography of Chinese popular religion.³ Cheng, on the other hand, represented a group of state reformers who intended to co-opt the classical artistic forms for the purposes of promoting the revolutionary culture of the newly victorious Chinese Communist Party (CCP). By the mid-twentieth century, the industry that Alexeev once saw as an expression of peasant popular culture had been appropriated and overturned, becoming in the process an expression of the reformist state. *Nianhua* and their material and ideological production, therefore, serve several

¹ *Historical Monthly* (Taipei), February 1995, p.10

² *Nianhua* are ritual icons that may represent any of a host of deities or auspicious symbols. The prints are generally purchased in local markets prior to the Lunar New Year Festival and pasted on doors and other interior surfaces in place of the old image, which may be ritually burned. As such, *nianhua* hold a central place in the celebration of the New Year festival.

³ Alexeev also preserved a large collection of *nianhua* in St. Petersburg's Hermitage.

historiographical purposes: as a narrative of popular culture in rural China, as the propaganda of the modernizing state, and finally as a representation of discourse between ruler and ruled.

English language sources on the history of Yangjiabu New Year's Woodblock prints (*nianhua*) are virtually non-existent. There are, however, several art surveys including those of Basil Alexeev (1926) and Bo Songnian (1992) which do, to some extent, cover the iconography of Yangjiabu's art in the context of a wider review. The social and religious background to the art-form, although not specific to Yangjiabu, has been studied by Clarence Day (1942a) in a comprehensive discussion of on the subject of peasant cults as seen through the expression of *nianhua*. Beyond these few examples, however, there is little literature that deals directly with the genre, and nothing that attempts to look at the art-form as a historical representation.

General art surveys of the *nianhua* genre are widely available in Chinese, most notable being those compiled by Wang Shucun. Of general historical accounts of *nianhua*, the most useful is attributable to Bo Songnian, while on the subject of Yangjiabu itself, Zhang Dianying has provided much information gleaned from local sources which are, as always, at the core of doing regional history.

If we wish to expand our reading list to include the interpretive, and to provide some theoretical basis for the study of folk-arts in Chinese history, it is necessary to consider comparable material on popular culture in China. This may be found among studies of popular culture in the late Qing included in David Johnson et al.(ed) (1985), Prasenjit Duara (1988) or in the studies of the communist reforms of *yang-ge* (rice-planting songs) and other popular culture forms undertaken by David Holm (1991), Ellen Judd (1990), and Hung Tai-chang (1994).

Another possibility for comparative work is to leave the context of China altogether and delve into those historical studies of popular culture pioneered by E.P. Thompson (1963) and expanded on by James Scott (1985,1990), or to consider those studies of the role of elites in popular culture by such theorists as E.J. Hobsbawm (1983), Christel Lane (1981), and Mona Ozouf (1988). Finally, one may depart from the field of history to consider the sociological and anthropological observations of Clifford Geertz (1973, 1980), and Victor Turner (1982) in order to develop a methodology for interpreting symbol and its role in culture. All of the aforementioned present useful constructs, and in many ways their conclusions are borne out by the findings of this paper. We must, however, be cautious about over-enthusiastically applying such theories to the Chinese situation to the extent that the historian must hammer data into shape so as to fit the theoretical pattern. In the interest of avoiding such an eventuality, special attention has been given to presenting theoretical suppositions within the context of the historical narrative reconstructed through reference (and inference) to Chinese materials. Finally, the most important and brilliant sources for this paper have been the peasant artists of Yangjiabu, and the fruit of their imaginations as represented by New Year's Woodblock Prints.

1.1) The Narrative of Village Discourse in Early Modern China

錢可通神-"Money Can Get Through to the Gods" *Chinese Proverb*

In his lectures of 1926, Alexeev interpreted *nianhua* to be the narrative of a popular 'cult of wealth' which reveres *Cai Shen* (財神), the 'God of Wealth', and a host of lesser gods and demigods such as Liu Hai and Shen Wansan who support the essential wealth principle. Alexeev demonstrates his thesis through extensive analysis of *nianhua* content such as the following passage transcribed from one of his print samples:

Money is a good fellow, round and square alternately. He will run everywhere. Have you money? Then be glad. Without money no step can be taken. How difficult! With ten thousand in your pocket try hard and you may attain to any nobility, any rank. Such things are handed down from generation to generation. The rich eat and drink what they like from finest dishes with music and song, but the poor man wears his dirty shirt all his life. If you have money, fear not to go wherever you like, even to Yunnan or Kueichou. The years pass until you have a good fortune. Then you buy rank and a button for your cap and you dress in excellent furs. Then you pack up your wealth, hire satellites, armed with foreign pistols, and return home. Everyone comes to congratulate you on becoming a *Cai Shen*, and to admire you. To sum up, all other words and things are useless. The best is money-I say it most emphatically.⁴

In his study, Alexeev comes to the conclusion that popular art of this nature represented an 'apparently illogical' dichotomy in which popular wealth icons, such as money, were superimposed upon other more orthodox principles, namely 'official rank'.⁵ To simply accept folklore as 'illogical', however, is to leave much unanswered. This paper, therefore, begins by arguing that within the synthesis of such opposing symbol lies not only a simple expression of optimistic desire for economic well being, but also a commentary on the elite as seen through peasant eyes, and is as such, a peasant narrative on social organization.

That the peasant viewed the bureaucratic elite from a distinctly local perspective is clearly shown in the content of *nianhua*. Take, for example, Alexeev's transcription which labels the ruling elite

⁴ Basil Alexeev, *Chinese Gods of Wealth*, School of Oriental Studies, China Society, 1928. p. 9

⁵ Ibid. p.3

and the bureaucratic structure as both venal and directly associated with wealth attainment. Whatever truth this may hold, it nonetheless seems directly at odds with the Confucian principle of "wealth and rank unworthily attained...are as fleeting clouds", and yet the two principles seem permanently fused within the context of popular *nianhua* art. Such contradictions likewise abound in the most widely dispensed representation in the Yangjiabu repertoire,⁶ a recutting of a print originating in the Qing Dynasty- 'Hearth God and Civil God of Wealth' (1.1).⁷ A complete discussion of the complexities of this pantheon would require a much more involved treatment, but simply put, these rustic 'Gods of Wealth' clearly display both bureaucratic and wealth attributes. As such they represent a distinct duality, or conjunction of divergent elite and popular traditions in a mildly heterodox interpretation of bureaucratic authority.⁸ As the early twentieth century writer Lu Xun explains, the family who posted the image of the Hearth God in their home would respect him as a ranking member of a heavenly bureaucracy and as 'protector of the home'. In a less orthodox interpretation of his bureaucratic status, however, the wealth attributes of this god identify him as a facilitator of



1.1) *Hearth God and God of Wealth, Qing Dynasty*

At the top of the print is a calendar, dragons and a gleaming pearl, or fire-ball. In the highest tier, the God of Wealth, dressed in official robes, rests on a cushion of gold under a money tree and holds a large ingot of gold or silver. At his sides are the Shop Profiting Fairy and the Wealth Summoning Lad. Below is the Hearth God and his wife, the 'Urn of All Treasure', a large coin, attendants and a pair of dragons. In the lowest tier, once again, is the Hearth God holding a tablet of office and another ingot. His attendants hold two horses, one of which will bear him up to heaven at years end where he will make his annual report to the Jade Emperor on the activities of the family on whose hearth he has spent the previous year. Before him is an incense burner, a heap of treasure and the domestic symbols of dog and rooster. On the outer edges of the print are shown the Eight Immortals of Daoism

⁶ This assumption is based on present day sales.

⁷ Bo Songnian. *Domesticated Deities and Auspicious Emblems*. (Berkeley, 1992) p.58.

⁸ See Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics* (Cambridge, 1981), for a discussion on the Chinese bureaucratization of heaven.

wealth attainment. In addition, because the Hearth God makes an annual report to the supreme deity, he is seen as 'heavenly spy' to the Jade Emperor. And yet by no means did the peasant family perceive his surveillance to be particularly onerous on them, for it was generally believed that when the time came for the Hearth God to file his annual report to the supreme deity, he could be bribed, fooled or even coerced into delivering a favourable report.⁹



1.2) Martial God of Wealth

The 'Civil' and 'Martial' Gods of Wealth possess equally complex personalities. The case of Guandi (CE 162-220) examined by Duara (1988) shows how the historic General became popularized as a central figure in the classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and, among other honours, was canonized as God of War to both the Ming and Qing States. The list of accolades continues in the realm of popular culture where Guandi holds the title 'Martial' God of Wealth (1.2).¹⁰ Guandi's alter ego is the spirit of former Yin Dynasty Prime Minister Bi Gan, the

forthright, but perhaps imprudent official who paid with his life for criticising his nephew, the corrupt King Zhou.¹¹ Like Guandi, this paragon of state loyalty was rewarded by popular religion with a position in its hierarchy of deities. The titles 'Civil' and 'Martial' God of Wealth are thus steeped in popular culture while indicating the receptivity of popular culture toward the elite political notion that the righteous state, like the righteously bureaucratized heaven, is a balance of both civil (文) and martial(武) attributes.

⁹ Lu Xun, *Collected Works of Lu Xun Vol.II* (Beijing, 1964) p. 243

¹⁰ Prasenjit Duara, 'Superscribing Symbols', *Journal of Asian Studies*. 1988, 47(4), pp.778-795

¹¹ *Yangjiabu New Years Pictures*. Weifang Museum and Yangjiabu Nianhua Research Institute. (Beijing, 1990) p.31

A third, and final example of popular canonization of the ruling elite is the case of Northern Song official 'Judge' Bao Gong (999-1062). As chronicled in this print (1.3) (circa 1870), Judge Bao was a commoner who refused to leave his unharvested crops even when summoned to the capital to take up the office of chief investigative censor. According to legend, the Lord of Heaven (天官) himself saved the day by dispatching a team of immortals to take



1.3) Judge Bao Assumes Office, Circa 1870

in the harvest, thus allowing Judge Bao

to fill his post without sacrificing his precious grain. Bao's image (here seen wearing the official face-paint of the official) began its ascent to cult figure through a series of Yuan and Ming 'courtroom dramas' which portray him as a stern, but just official.¹² In the popular interpretation, however, Bao's courtly attributes have been supplemented by those of material wealth in the form of the gold and silver that litters the ground beneath the official palanquin.

It would seem, therefore, that these prints represent a conjunction of contradictory ideals, synthesised into a cohesive body by the peasant artist. Orthodoxy is represented therein by the presence of the calendar (a fundamental state responsibility and claim to legitimacy), while the examples of Guandi, Bi Gan and Judge Bao serve the state as symbols of exemplary benevolence and authority. In sharp contrast to 'state' virtues are the 'vulgar' wealth attributes associated with such officials by the rural society that identifies officialdom as the surest path to material prosperity.¹³ Whether or not this artistic representation can be taken as a metaphor for

¹² George Hayden. *Crime and Punishment in Medieval Chinese Drama*. (Harvard, 1978) p. 2

¹³ Local autonomy of symbol comes even more sharply into view if we accept Hodous' view that the Hearth God

elite-peasant relations, or as a representation of how peasants and elites *actually* interact remains to be said. Certainly, it would be erroneous to try to establish such a construct as a working model for village-elite relations, instead, we would be better served to interpret the symbolic content as an *ideal* of social organization, as an interpretation in which the local tradition exerts its influence over elite tradition without going so far as to challenge the legitimacy of a virtuous bureaucracy.¹⁴ Thus the *nianhua* form represents the popular interpretation of a great cultural drama in which actors, sometimes quite literally, play established roles. To paraphrase Geertz, *nianhua* are a 'peasant's' reading of 'peasant' experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves.

1.2) A History of Prosperity: the Rise and Fall of Yangjiabu, 1582-1948

'May you enjoy surplus year after year'- Chinese New Year's Wish

To fully represent *nianhua* as a popular culture narrative it is necessary to extend the analysis from the symbolic to the temporal realms and to examine how these icons interacted with social and economic processes in the countryside. Of course each village's experience was unique, but by studying the history of Yangjiabu, the point from which so many *nianhua* issued, it should be possible to make some generalizations on the state of contemporary popular culture in rural North China as a whole. It seems safe to suggest that as supplier of its icons, Yangjiabu's handicraft industry depended extensively upon popular culture as a market. Let us assume then that the growth of Yangjiabu's *nianhua* industry is a result of a concurrent growth in popular culture. The

originated as the deity of a pre-Confucian 'Cult of the Hearth Fire'. Clarence Day, *Chinese Peasant Cults*, Second Edition (Taipei, 1974 [1941a]) p.87

¹⁴ We might further speculate that *nianhua* such as the Bao Gong prints could have been issued as a subtle criticism of official corruption, a phenomena which seems again be on the rise in the modern revival of his cult. This, however, is difficult to substantiate.

period in which Yangjiabu first began to mass produce *nianhua* in large numbers is significant as the period in which the Ming Dynasty promulgated its 'single-whip' tax reform that established silver as the currency of choice. In economic terms the resulting massive injection of silver into the Chinese market from overseas likely had the effect of commercializing agriculture and expanding the handicraft industry.¹⁵ After a decline during the chaotic decades of the Ming-Qing transition the industry began again to prosper, especially during the Qianlong reign as the number of local ateliers climbed from thirty in 1745 to eighty by 1787,¹⁶ thereby establishing Yangjiabu, along with Tianjin's Yangliuqing and Suzhou's Taohuawu, as one of the three main seats of the *nianhua* industry in China.¹⁷

At the height of its product popularity and prosperity, it may indeed be said that life in Yangjiabu sometimes imitated art. Prosperity in Yangjiabu was reflected in several ways; larger *nianhua* firms established themselves in lavish premises rarely seen in the countryside, ateliers invested profits in extensive land-holdings, and clans inevitably grew in size. Gongmaodian, for example, was established in the 1670s by Yang Weixin and seems to have grown in accord with the very virtues of 'many male progeny and prosperity passed on from one generation to the next' as frequently espoused in the symbolic content of their own product. Yang's two sons went their separate ways with the original Gongmao firm going to the eldest Yang Tianxiang while the second son established the Wanyun firm. Yang Tianxiang then had four sons, Yang Ziling (1729-1816), the eldest, again inheriting the Gongmao firm while the second and third sons established the Gongtai and Gongxing firms respectively. Gongtai further branched out into Beigong Tai, Huifeng Tai, Gongtai Fu, Gongtai Xing, Nangong Tai and so on until by the late Qing there were

¹⁵ See Rawski in Johnson, et al. eds. *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, 1985) pp.3-4

¹⁶ Yangjiabu Village Annals (Jinan, 1993) p.17

¹⁷ There are a number of other less famous centres for the production of *nianhua* such as Mianzhu in Sichuan, and Wuqiang in Hebei.

thirty shops which could be traced back to the original Gongmao firm (it is no coincidence that the name 'Yangjiabu' is roughly translatable as 'Yang Family Market'). In general, the brothers would each receive shares of their father's business, tools and materials, although none had exclusive use of that property and considerable co-operation went on between ateliers. By the 1840s the industry had in this way outgrown Yangjiabu and had begun branching out to surrounding towns and villages such as Hanting, Qijiabu, and Wangjiadao where a total of fifty branch shops were opened.¹⁸

In order to increase market share, many ateliers opened branches in more distant locations such as Shandong's Gezhou and Yingzhou while entrepreneurs such as Yang Jiuqing of the Dongda Xun firm went so far as to cross the Bohai Sea and set up business in Manchuria.¹⁹ Some of the largest customers were found in the Grand Canal counties of Dengxian in southwest Shandong and its neighboring county of Yutai which purchased some forty large oxcart loads of *nianhua* annually. Other prominent markets for *nianhua* included the western Shandong counties of Tai'an, Changqing, Shahe, Pingtu, Xindian, Bozhen and the hill county of Mengshan. Outside Shandong, customers could be found in Jiangsu, Anhui, and Manchuria, as well as in parts of Shanxi, Hebei, and Henan.²⁰ As a predominantly agricultural community, Yangjiabu carried on *nianhua* production during the agricultural off-season. Production traditionally began after autumn harvest (in modern times after seeding of winter-wheat) and continued until after the Lunar New Year. At this time some entrepreneurs might engage in the secondary craft industry of kite-making. After the 15th day of the 10th Lunar month customers from more distant locations could be expected to

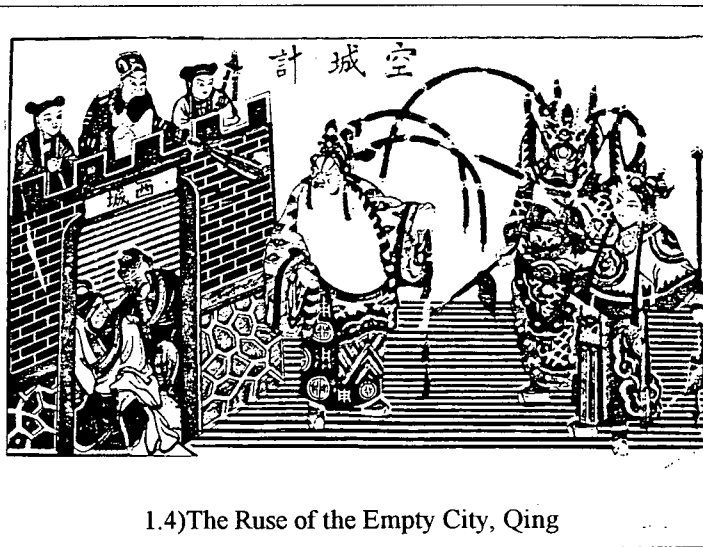
¹⁸ Zhang Dianying, *Yangjiabu Muban Nianhua* (Beijing, 1990), p.140-41

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 25

²⁰ Qu Zhengli ed. *Yangjiabu Nianhua Fengzheng Zhuanji* (1989) p. 118

arrive in Yangjiabu by oxcart, and later local customers, from within a 500-600 *li* (2-300 km) radius of Yangjiabu, would start to arrive with smaller carts.²¹

Success in the *nianhua* industry inevitably resulted in competition both through counterfeit of local styles and intrusion of introduced forms, to the extent that in 1848 competitor firms from Yangliuqing actually leased space in Yangjiabu to market their own products. Yangjiabu responded by forming a guild to regain control of the market by establishing industry standards, instituting a form of



1.4) The Ruse of the Empty City, Qing

copyright ruling to guard against the unauthorized reproduction of prints and even inaugurating a printing 'season' which coincided with the agricultural calendar in order to protect themselves against outside non-agricultural 'specialists'.²² Despite these measures, growing market demand for the Yangliuqing 'opera' *nianhua* (1.4) eventually prompted the Yangjiabu ateliers to add the form to their repertoire.

We should not, however, be unduly optimistic in portraying the market as continuously stable and prosperous.²³ And yet, whereas life may have imitated popular art during periods of prosperity,

²¹ Guo Weizao, *Zhongguo Banhua Shilu* (1962) p.210 Most shops did not have the capital to start yearly production and so would buy materials and hire workers through a cash advance system known as *ke deng huo*. This would also seem to be an important clue in understanding the nature of the industry, that being that the makers of *nianhua* were in fact responsible to retailers, middlemen and probably usurers. The term *ke deng huo* 'customer awaiting product' however indicates that the Yangjiabu firm was in control and not in the direct employ of urban retailers.

²² Zhang (1990) p.147

²³ There is much to suggest that while market activity and the potential for prosperity may have expanded, for the vast majority of pre-modern rural China actual wealth remained firmly within the confines of myth. Far from

the perpetual optimism of *nianhua* content and the resilience of the industry seem to have actually denied some of the harsher realities of life during times of economic hardship. In general, *nianhua* production continued unabated in the face of the sweeping historical changes that struck China in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the mid-nineteenth century social upheaval and natural disaster during the Taiping Rebellion did have the effect of driving the *nianhua* industry into its first depression since the founding of the dynasty as the total number of local shops dropped to sixty.²⁴ Yet in the short run, at least, this decline did not prove to be permanent as the industry defied such potentially destructive influences as industrialization²⁵ and Christian proselytization by rebounding and maintaining steady growth through to the early 1920s. By then there were a total of 160 firms in operation in Yangjiabu and as many as 5,000 buyers could be expected to arrive in the local market annually.

The circumstances of growth in the *nianhua* market at this time supports the thesis that modern economic growth did not necessarily undermine the traditional economy. In contrast, such growth may have had the opposite effect of providing a straightforward stimulus, improving the efficiency with which the product could be brought to markets where more buyers would have had more ready cash in hand.²⁶ The most obvious examples of such developments in the late nineteenth and

undermining the 'Cult of Wealth', however, this eventuality rather contributes to its popularity. Take for example the frequent *nianhua* inscription; "Buy the picture and grow rich". These *nianhua* clearly promise that the buyer will be rewarded with a return of the spent money many times over, in the way that a lottery ticket implies a fabulous gain for a minimum investment. *Nianhua* therefore, as do other forms of ritual and sacrificial 'gold' and 'silver', serve as monetary surrogates which facilitate a 'cult of wealth' even in the absence of the real article. Because *nianhua* could be mass produced and required only readily available paper and ink, and were easy to transport *nianhua* could be purchased for only a few coppers. Bredon mentions the price of one copper for a Hearth God print in 1927 Fuzhou. Bredon *The Moon Year* p.75

²⁴ Yangjiabu Village Annals(1993) p.19. Yangjiabu was occupied in 1855 by an expeditionary force of the rebel army, one of whose members was adopted by a local clan and trained as a *nianhua* artisan.

²⁵ Qu (1989) p.119. The import of commodities such as Scandinavian paper and German and British ink resulted in a change in production processes and essentially a retooling of the industry to accommodate the changes in paper size.

²⁶ Kenneth Pommeranz, *The Making of a Hinterland* (University of California Press, 1993) p. 268

early twentieth centuries include the local introduction of tobacco as a cash crop in 1915, the Jiao-Ji railway which arrived in 1902 connecting Yangjiabu to Jinan and Qingdao,²⁷ and the Yan-Wei highway connecting Yangjiabu to the port of Yantai in 1922. It is quite possible that Yangjiabu may have been able to exploit these developments while continuing to supply festive items for the traditional market which had not been captured by urban industry. In the eastern Shandong village of Taitou, for example, although the villagers were near Qingdao and transportation had greatly improved, the villagers still went to the county town to buy their festive supplies (including *nianhua*) since the city did not produce them.²⁸ The qualitative value of this growth is more difficult to judge since the explosion in numbers of ateliers may also be a result of involutionary growth through a splintering of larger firms into smaller single family oriented enterprises realizing diminishing returns. Generally speaking, however, the claim that Yangjiabu exported as many as 70,000,000 items annually during this period supports the claim that the industry continued to prosper into the 1920s.

This quantitative expansion, however, reached its peak around 1922 when the industrialized competitors of Shanghai and Qingdao began, at last, to cut into the traditional markets of Yangjiabu.²⁹ The difficulties of dealing with industrialized competitors was further compounded by the warlordism and banditry that had a direct influence on Yangjiabu in 1932 when bandits occupied and terrorized the village for a period of two months.³⁰ This instability had the effect of driving the larger *nianhua* ateliers into cities such as Weixian, Qingdao and Jinan as well as across

²⁷ Skinner (1968)p.219 Skinner makes further reference to a 1912 description of the new Jiao-Ji railway as "a mighty artery full of blood and life...flowing through the Province" with the result that "the innumerable sleeping villages on either hand...are waking to fresh vitality and energy" (C.J. Voskamp in R.C. Forsyth 1912, cited in Skinner 1968:219)

²⁸ C.K.Yang, *Taitou* (New York, 1968) p.199

²⁹ Qu (1989) p.165

³⁰ Yangjiabu Village Annals (1993) p.22

the Bohai Sea to Manchuria leaving only a few smaller firms to serve the local popular religious market for such necessities as Hearth and Door Gods.³¹

Equally important in understanding popular culture is the fact that, unlike market fluctuation, the content of *nianhua* at this time changed very little. Beyond adjustments in size to accommodate imported paper, printers made few alterations to the traditional iconography, preferring instead to reproduce the established forms. One local artisan, Liu Mingzhi, did comment on the political scene with prints such as 'Blasting the Japanese Devils' and 'The Righteous Fists',³² and yet, as was the case during the Taiping Rebellion, *nianhua* content generally failed to reflect social change in any explicit way. Since there is no record of anyone else in the village engaging in such political enterprises, the work of Liu Mingzhi remains an anomaly.³³ There are only a few new *nianhua* subjects dating from the Republican era

such as 'Getting Rich Year After Year' (1.5) which goes so far as to reproduce a Republican flag. Other than that attribute, however, this print is virtually indistinguishable from similar Qing Dynasty forms. Other examples carved during the Republican period have no obvious references to contemporary politics.



1.5) Getting Rich Year After Year

³¹ Zhang (1990) p.28

³² Yangjiabu Village Annals(1993) p.382

³³ It is interesting, though not conclusive, that such deviance is attributed to the only artisan of note who was not a member of the Yang clan.

Considering the official iconoclasm of the Nationalist Government (GMD), the presence of the Republican flag in the context of a *nianhua* welcoming the God of Wealth seems somewhat incongruous. The practical combination of such icons became even more unlikely in 1928 when the Ministry of the Interior began to formally proscribe significant portions of popular religion and to confiscate local temples. One example of this policy is a 1928 pamphlet issued from the Zhejiang Provincial Government to the central government for distribution to other provinces which outlined the standards for discrimination against particular gods, sages and creeds. Those to be retained included members of the 'philosopher group'; the deified 'Sage Kings' of ancient China, as well as Confucius and Mencius. Among the religions, those to be retained included only Buddhism (Sakyamuni only), Daoism (Laozi only), Mohamedanism, and Christianity, as well as some aspects of state religion such as the God of War and the San Guan (who were deified by the former Confucian state and therefore seen as potential allies to the GMD). Gods to be discarded include practically all others including 'stellar or celestial gods', earth gods, atmospheric gods, gods of the harvest (with the exception of the sage king Shen Nong) as well as the whole pantheon of minor and demi-gods associated with money making, animism, and legendary gods. The most notable of these expulsions included the God of Wealth and the Hearth God. The order ends with the declaration that all associated temples should be "razed to the ground so that nothing remains."³⁴ In Hebei's Ding County, however, Sidney Gamble observed that "up to 1935, there seems to have been no serious effort to enforce [the ban] in North China."³⁵ Ineffectual as the suppression campaign may have been, it nonetheless represents an unprecedented recognition by the ruling elite of the power of local tradition to resist the authority of the modernizing state. Lacking the capacity to eliminate it, the state could only act by making rhetorical denunciation of 'superstition' to help forge its own image as a 'modern' state.

³⁴ Day (1942a)p.143

³⁵ S.Gamble, *North China Villages* (Berkeley 1968) p.410

Whatever their potential for effecting 'grass roots' change, any further attempts of the GMD to carry through cultural reform³⁶ were nullified by the 1937 invasion of Japanese occupation forces. Yangjiabu village annals report that local residents offered considerable resistance to their invaders, as only two months later some 30 residents of Yangjiabu banded together with residents of a neighbouring village to attack a Japanese patrol on the nearby Yan-Wei highway killing sixteen Japanese soldiers.³⁷ The village annals also stress the suffering of villagers at the hands of the Japanese. One particularly poignant case is that of Yang Taizhen, a descendant of the prestigious Hoxing De family of shops who had become a technical innovator in 1909 by bringing the first lithographic presses to Yangjiabu. The modern presses, however, were not well suited to the market as demand for *nianhua* could not keep up with potential production levels of the modern presses. Moreover, Taizhen's association with the equipment proved to be his downfall as he constantly had to deal with GMD demands for propaganda and finally had to go into printing grammar texts for schools. Taizhen's ultimate demise finally came in 1939 when his machinery was confiscated by the Japanese and he himself was detained in a Japanese compound in Hanting. Later, while still under detention, the unfortunate Yang Taizhen was attacked and killed by a Japanese police-dog.³⁸ Most ateliers in Yangjiabu either closed at this time or relocated to urban centres.³⁹ One of the few major shops to remain active in Yangjiabu throughout this period was Dongdaxun. In 1942, however, the proprietor of the firm was kidnapped, beaten by thugs and died of his wounds. Soon after, Dongdaxun closed its doors.

³⁶ Although there had still been obvious bandit problems as recently as the preceding year, the regional political climate had become settled enough by 1933 for the county seat of Weixian to hold the first of its bi-annual kite festivals on *Qing Ming Jie*, the traditional 'Tomb Sweeping Festival'. This activity would certainly have been of interest to Yangjiabu considering that kite building was the sister industry of *nianhua*, (a local saying has it that 'kites are *nianhua* that fly). As a community Yangjiabu entered 60 kites in the festival. After holding the festival on schedule again in 1935 and 1937 however the event was finally disrupted by the invasion of Japanese forces on December 18th, 1937 (Lunar Calendar) (Weifang Annals p. 1516)

³⁷ Yangjiabu Village Annals, p. 23

³⁸ Ibid. p.387

³⁹ Qu (1989) p.165, this includes Yang Taizhen, who had moved his operation to Weixian before his demise. see Zhang (1990), p.144

This would seem to be an appropriate juncture at which to close one chapter of the history of a village industry which had for so long resisted change from many quarters, succumbing only after being literally bludgeoned to death. Yet it is the resilience of the industry up to that time that is so remarkable and as such, difficult to grasp. In trying to understand the circumstances it seems somehow 'logical' to interpret growth in the popular 'cult of wealth' during the mid-Qing period (as indicated by growth in the Yangjiabu *nianhua* industry) as simply a result of general social stability and economic prosperity. No doubt these were important aspects of the success of the industry, yet the perpetuation of traditional artistic narratives in spite of considerable economic and social change during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows that the *nianhua* industry and the popular culture on which it depended were not necessarily involved in a direct relationship with the political and economic situation. At first glance, this almost independent industrial development appears to be as "illogical" a phenomena as was the synthesis of opposing elite and popular ideals that Alexeev observed in *nianhua* content. Such a judgement, however, depends upon observing the industry from an elitist perspective. The sense of irrationality begins to dissipate as we come to realize that by perpetuating traditional artistic representations in spite of new social and economic forces, peasants continued to define their own culture on their own terms.

(2) *Nianhua* Symbolism on the Front Line; CCP reforms during the Yen'an period

"The staff of the brush is mightier than the barrel of the gun"-Zhu De

The beginning of the Anti-Japanese War in the 1930s ushered in a radically altered use of *nianhua* symbolism. Where political elites had traditionally left the production of the genre to peasant artists as a means of self expression, the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its policy of the 'mass line' of peasant mobilization resulted in an unprecedented interest in popular culture expression.⁴⁰ By appropriating the form of *nianhua* the revolutionary party was able to train its urbanized arts cadres to tailor party propaganda to what they perceived to be peasant sensibilities, as well as to recreate in their own propaganda an idealized image of the peasant in relation to the state, not unlike the way in which the peasants had once used *nianhua* to create the image of the ideal official in their own discourse.

As Yangjiabu and the *nianhua* industry were languishing under Japanese occupation, the Anti-Japanese War was actually proving to be a stimulus to the 'Newly Risen' Woodcut Movement (新興板畫運動) and *Nianhua* Reform Movement (年畫改革運動) then emerging in the north-western CCP base of Yan'an. While the spirit of these movements may have grown out of the New Culture Movement of the 1920s, its form was not introduced to China until 1931 when writer Lu Xun published the work of Kathe Kollwitz and other European woodcut artists in the arts journal *Bei Dou* (The Big Dipper).⁴¹ Despite persistent GMD attack this new genre acquired a leftist allegiance and quickly found enthusiastic support among Shanghai artistic circles as a number of ephemeral but productive woodcut associations including the 'Eighteen Society', 'MK' and the 'Iron Horse Woodcut Society' emerged over the course of the early 1930s.⁴² By

⁴⁰ see Judd (1981,1990) Holm (1991) and Hung (1994) for discussions of other forms of CCP art propaganda.

⁴¹ Hung Taichung, *War and Popular Culture* (Berkeley, 1994) p.37

⁴² Ibid. p. 240

November 1936, these groups had coalesced into the 'Committee of Shanghai Woodcut Artists' which counted among its ranks such woodcut notables as Li Qun, Chen Yanqiao, Wo Zha, and Jiang Feng. Evidently, GMD suspicions that the society was a hotbed of communism were well founded, for it was from among this core group of thirty-one artists that the newly established Lu Xun Academy of Art (Luyi) in Yan'an began to draw some of its leading members, including Wo Zha, who went on to take up the school's principalship in 1938.⁴³

Thanks to the advocacy of 'national forms' by Lu Xun and the 'New Enlightenment Movement' in the 1930's, Wo Zha and his colleagues were well prepared for the debate that was raging in Yan'an when they arrived. This contention that new and Western art forms should undergo a process of sinification, sometimes referred to as 'putting new wine in old bottles', had been debated amongst 'May 4th' intellectuals such as Gu Jiegang since the mid 1920s. In the communist camp the 'Central Committee Resolutions on the Peasant Movement' had espoused the use of peasant cultural forms as "the best methods to get close to and organize [the peasants]"⁴⁴ as early as July 1926.⁴⁵ This position became official in 1939 when Chen Boda formulated a policy statement that would become the essence of CCP cultural policy throughout the 1940s and 1950s:

This...requires that one selects the forms [the common people] have grown accustomed to over a long period, pack [new content] into the old form and give it appropriate refashioning: only then can they take delight in receiving it [*le yu jieshou*] and digest it thoroughly.⁴⁶

⁴³ Wang Jianqing, Feng Jiannan *Jin-Cha-Ji Wenhua Shi* (Beijing 1989) pp.554-555

⁴⁴ Wilbur and How (1956) pp.301, cited in Hung (1994) p.397

⁴⁵ It has also been suggested (see Judd, 1981) that the debate was in part fuelled by the return of the 'Twenty Eight Bolsheviks' from the Soviet Union where 'national form' had also been a topic of discussion. Hung, however claims that there is little evidence that Communist organizers were aware of Soviet folk art campaigns in the 1930s. (Hung 1994 n.10)

⁴⁶ Chen Boda *zai wenhua zhenxian shang* pp.92-3, cited in Holm *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford 1991)p.53

This policy was quickly put into effect by Jiang Feng and Wo Zha, who conceived the idea of making reformed *nianhua* in early 1938.⁴⁷ Their first experiments 'Bumper Harvest' (五穀豐登) and 'Protect the Hometown' (保衛家鄉) were produced in limited numbers through hand colouring and sent out to be posted in the villages by the Luyi Spring Festival Propaganda Department.⁴⁸

While the two examples of 'Protect the Hometown' are ostensibly *nianhua*, a cursory examination reveals that they bear little resemblance to the traditional product and contain none of the popular symbols which the peasant would expect to see in a festive representation. Thus, other than providing a down-to-earth depiction of peasant and soldier, the artists seem to cater to their own interpretation of Border-Region resistance, and perhaps intend some reference to the Soldier-Peasant-Worker orientation that was the order of the day in Yan'an. Nonetheless, it is evident that the propaganda department clearly recognized the revolutionary use value of *nianhua* in that they represent both the change and continuity, or as Feuchtwang⁴⁹ terms it- 'the annual apocalypse' of the New Year Festival when all is symbolically renewed. As such, few events could be more metaphorically appropriate to revolution, and as a representation of that transition, little could be more symbolic of revolution than *nianhua*. If properly manipulated by the propagandist the ubiquitous *nianhua* could serve this purpose not only through facilitating the transition from one year to the next, but the transition from one political era to the next.

In November 1938, during the Academy's second term, the resident woodcut art students and teachers organized the Lu Xun Academy of Art Woodcut Work Team (魯藝木刻工作團). Shortly thereafter, in the company of the North China CCP Propaganda Department Chief Li

⁴⁷ Bo Songnian *Zhongguo Nianhua Shi* (Shenyang 1986) p.184

⁴⁸ Ai Ke'en *Yen'an Wenyi Huiyi Lu* (Beijing 1992) p.341

⁴⁹ Stephen Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor* (London, 1992)

Dazhang, former '18 Society' member Hu Yichuan led a group of his woodcut students, including Yan Han, Luo Gongliu, Hua Shan and Yang Yun, to join the anti-Japanese front in Jin Dongnan. On their arrival, the group was stationed in the Taihang Mountains where part of the group produced woodcuts for the North China edition of *New China Daily* (新華日報) while others remained at the headquarters of the Eighth Route Army to produce propaganda in various forms including cartoons (連環畫).⁵⁰ Later, the entire unit was dispatched to the newspaper's Taihang Mountain office. Dissatisfied with their work at the newspaper, the group then conceived the idea of producing reformed *nianhua* using traditional techniques. After solving initial problems of material acquisition, and learning the technique from a traditionally trained artisan, the group finally went ahead with the project to design and print several thousand new *nianhua*, having them available for the local market in nearby Xiyang in time for the 1940 New Year Festival.⁵¹ The reformed *nianhua* were reported to have sold extremely well, although the rather low selling price of one *jiao* (.10 Y) for eight pieces might have had an unfair influence on their popularity.⁵²

The genre received its official seal of approval at a February 1940 meeting in Wuxiang where with the immortal words 'the staff of the brush is mightier than the barrel of the gun' (筆桿子會趕上槍桿子), Zhu De formally approved the new *nianhua* as a revolutionary propaganda tool.⁵³ Zhu De repeated this in his July 1940 report on propaganda and art when he put *nianhua* into the context of 'national forms' by declaring that in order to foster socialism amongst the people, artworks must incorporate the finer traditional elements and objects. Zhu stressed the effectiveness of this as demonstrated by the success of the 'new' *nianhua* introduced to the markets around Shanxi and Hebei.⁵⁴ Mao himself added his voice of approval to *nianhua*

⁵⁰ *Geming Wenwu*, 1980 (6) p.41

⁵¹ *Meishu Yanjiu*, 1979 (2) p.4

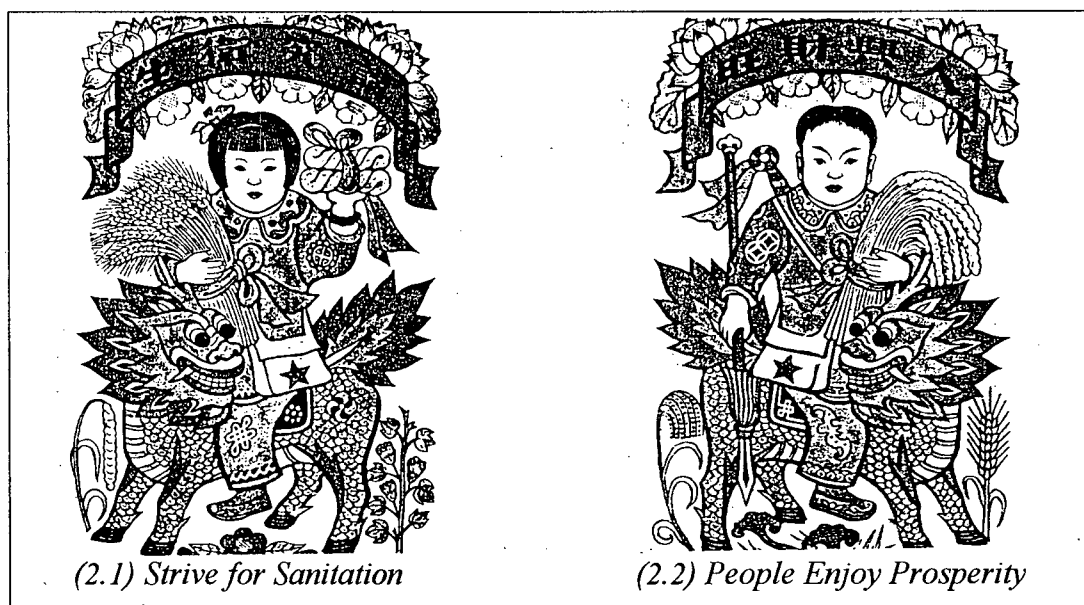
⁵² *Geming Wenwu*, 1980 (6) p.41

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Bo* (1986) p.182

propaganda in slightly less formal terms when he suggested that Gu Yuan, a well known CCP artist, design new 'Door Gods' to replace the traditional styles. "'How shall I draw them" Gu Yuan asked..."You know, I don't believe there really are any gods". Mao answered "Make them look like peasants."⁵⁵

Gu Yuan's Door Gods (2.1,2.2), titled 'Strive for Sanitation' (講究衛生) and 'People Enjoy Prosperity' (人興財旺), actually go quite far to incorporate a number of popular symbolic attributes. They are similar to the traditional 'The *Qilin* Sends Sons' (麒麟送子), with familiar attributes such as the *ruyi* (wish attainment) scepter (beneath the boy's *qilin*), the lucky bat on the boy's pant leg and a Buddhist 'mystic knot' on the girl's, as well as various flower symbols throughout the pictures representing traditional concepts of peace, continuity and prosperity. In an obvious departure from tradition, however, a girl is present where only boys once rode, the children wear the ubiquitous shoulder bag of the CCP, and material wealth has generally been replaced by foodstuffs. Given Gu Yuan's rustic background and CCP training it should not be surprising that he should thus amalgamate popular and 'modern' socialist symbolism in this way.⁵⁶



⁵⁵ Robert Payne *Mao Tse-tung: Ruler of Red China* (London 1950) pp.236-37

For the majority of the Shanghai artistic elite then residing in Yan'an, however, such representations would likely have seemed to be unacceptably 'traditional'.

Following these early experiences in the border region some of the artists remained behind to open a Jin Dongnan branch of the Lu Xun Academy (晉東南魯醫分校木刻工廠).⁵⁷ Meanwhile others such as Hu Yichuan and Gu Yuan returned from the countryside to share their experience with the artists and intellectuals in Yan'an.⁵⁸ The *nianhua* group, however, only became fully organized in Yan'an in the winter of 1942 when the Lu Xun Academy set up a *Nianhua* Research Group (年畫研究組) in association with the Newly Risen Woodcut Movement.⁵⁹ The Yan'an woodcut movement also began to receive national and international attention in 1942 as a Chongqing based woodcut organization invited the Yan'an group to join the association and enter items such as 'Bumper Harvest' in the first annual National Woodcut Exhibition (全國木刻展覽會). The association continued to hold joint exhibits in both Chongqing and Yan'an through 1943 and 1944 where it received the patronage of such notables as artist Xu Beihong and Zhou Enlai, who was actually responsible for transporting woodcuts between venues.⁶⁰

With the surrender of Japan in 1945, communist forces expanded rapidly into liberated territory, occupying cities of the North-East and using captured printing equipment to mechanically reproduce *nianhua*. At this time, anti-Japanese propaganda having become obsolete, the woodcut troupe began to print a new series of *nianhua* including themes of land reform and literacy. In

⁵⁶ Cao Wenhan *Gu Yuan Zhuan* (Changchun, 1989) p.6

⁵⁷ In 1941 another production centre was opened in Jinxibei and that same year Yancheng, Jiangsu the Luxun Academy- Central China Branch was set up and following the lead of their Yan'an counterparts, absorbed popular *nianhua* elements into 'new' anti-Japanese *nianhua*. Bo (1986)p.181

⁵⁸ Cao (1989) p.38

⁵⁹ Ai (1992) p.341

⁶⁰ *Meishu Yanjiu*, 1979 (2) pp.3-5

early 1947, as Liberation forces moved eastward into Jin-Cha-Ji, a number of North China 'art workers' occupied the traditional *nianhua* center of Wuqiang in south-eastern Hebei where they worked with local artisans and established the Central Hebei *Nianhua* Reform Committee.⁶¹ Meanwhile, following the liberation of Shijiazhuang and the establishment of North China University (華北大學) in November 1947,⁶² the Central Hebei *Nianhua* Reform Committee combined with the North China University Art Studios (華北大學美術工廠) and assumed the title of North China Art Society (華北美術社). The group was later renamed the People's Art Society (大眾美術社). At this time the troop concentrated on *nianhua*, producing thirty new forms and printing 600,000 copies.⁶³

While the *nianhua* reform movement had moved decisively toward the expression of various themes through 'national forms' in the 1940s, we must consider a number of factors when inquiring as to the success of the movement in mobilizing peasant forces and instilling a sense of 'socialist realism' into popular symbol perception. First, it is not likely that *nianhua* production in the Border Regions ever attained the levels necessary to reach more than a small percentage of peasant households. While in the Jin Dongnan border region, for example, as the production was limited to a small propaganda team, and given problems in acquiring the necessary materials such as high quality paper, there is little chance that they would have been able to produce more than a few thousand copies annually. Even after expanding into the traditional *nianhua* production village of Wuqiang, where they would have been equipped with proper facilities and experienced personnel, the *nianhua* reform team was only able to produce 600,000 copies, still a fraction of what normal regional demand for traditional *nianhua* would have been.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Bo (1986) p.193

⁶² William Hinton *Fanshen* (New York 1966) p.426

⁶³ Bo (1986) p.193

⁶⁴ Yangjiabu and Yangliuqing had been producing at least 10,000,000 annually.

More important in determining the success or failure of reformed *nianhua* in the border region was the significant social gap that existed between the peasant clients and the cosmopolitan reformer-artists, most of whom had come out to Yan'an from Shanghai and other urban centres. As previously mentioned, these intellectuals had, since the May 4th Movement, rejected traditional arts and turned to Western art forms such as the woodcut, a form which both in application and conception is fundamentally different from the *nianhua*.⁶⁵ The Westernized woodcut, therefore, was the medium of an artistic elite which stood for radical change while *nianhua* was part of the conservative rural tradition. For the Shanghai intelligentsia, both from the standpoints of iconoclasm and elitism, it is unlikely that *nianhua* would ever have been seriously considered as a potential revolutionary art form had it not been for CCP pressure to conform to the Maoist 'Mass Line' doctrine and its arts corollary of 'National Forms'.

When *nianhua* reform became policy during the 1940s the reform artists were compelled to make significant alterations to their style in order to appeal to peasant ideals, yet they nevertheless failed, or refused to cross the perceptual boundary that would make their work recognizable to the peasant as folk-art (as is evident from comparisons of early Shanghai woodcuts, Border Region woodcuts and traditional *nianhua*). When propagandists report that the peasants criticized the new *nianhua* with such earthy comments as: "why is this person's face half black and half white?", "why are there so many lines on this person's face"⁶⁶(in reference to the technique of contrast inspired by Kollwitz), or "this donkey's rump is too high and his ears are too long,"⁶⁷ the propagandists rhetorically prove the wisdom of the peasant and the humility of themselves in 'learning from the peasant', and in the process confirm their obedience to CCP dogma. In reality,

⁶⁵ The woodcut also has a long tradition as an elite art-form in China. It is, however, generally Confucian in nature and therefore quite removed from the woodcuts introduced from the west.

⁶⁶ Ai (1992) pp.373-4

⁶⁷ Geming Wenwu, 1980 (6)p.39

what these artists actually created was not traditional popular art, but rather an idealized representation of the peasantry which was a composite of urban-elite perceptions of the countryside, Marxist ideology and peripheral contact with the peasant. In part this can be seen as a means of inculcating a revolutionary ideology to the peasantry, but more directly, this art should be seen as a representation of the artists themselves, and thus reflects a distinctly non-peasant view.

In 'Bumper Harvest' (五穀豐登) [2.3], for example, a peasant is surrounded by all that he could realistically hope to achieve: a cornucopia of grain, a herd of domestic animals, and two happy, healthy children, all of which, as the looming star would seem to indicate, could be achieved under communism. The print faithfully meets the standards of the various directives for employing folk forms, but clearly these 'folk forms' are the product of the imagination of an artist trying to conform to the mundane directives on 'national form' rather than the popular conception of art and myth.

Ironically, as the *nianhua* record shows, few traditional folk-artists would create such a rustic representation of life. On the contrary, the single unifying element in most *nianhua* forms is that they tend to uphold a singularly *unrealistic* optimism in their representation of life. Moreover, as Holm points out, the New Year festival for which *nianhua* are designed was not merely a time of celebration for the village's human occupants, but for a host of gods and ancestors as well.⁶⁸ Lacking in most of the



traditional attributes the iconoclastic 'new' *nianhua* obviously failed to satisfy traditional symbolic needs and would not likely have been considered *nianhua* as the peasant knew them.

All things considered, it appears that the revolutionary *nianhua* reform movement in the Border Regions was carried out within the confines of an intellectual discourse which was informed by the Marxist principle of appealing to the masses. Because Marxist principle denied those two most counter-revolutionary cultural ideals of wealth and spirituality that were much a part of peasant ideals, the *nianhua* reform movement, at least in the short term, had little chance of achieving a "true" grass-roots revolution in visual culture. In recognition of this one must deduce that far from being an attempt to raise peasant consciousness, the Yan'an based reform movement was in reality an attempt to use the expressive potential of the folk arts to educate cadres and to envision the peasant as they would be in the new age of communism.

⁶⁸ David Holm *Art and Ideology in Wartime China* (Oxford, 1991) p.152

3)Yangjiabu 'Newly Risen'

The commitment to the continued use of *nianhua* as a means of effecting cultural revolution in the countryside was clearly indicated at the end of the civil war when the CCP Ministry of Culture (文化部) issued its November 1949 'Directive Concerning the Development of New *nianhua* Work' (關於開展新年畫工作的指示) The directive announced that :

nianhua should strongly represent the new labouring people, the happiness achieved through a life of struggle and their appearance of healthy heroism...utilizing folk styles and making strenuous efforts to suit the customary tastes of the great masses. It is required that every local arts and culture team concretely initiate and organize art-workers engaged in this genre to always employ the assistance of traditional arts when doing reform work⁶⁹

This directive essentially reiterates Chen Boda's 1939 declaration that "in all arts work, we must first initiate the selection of those few most essential universal points that will most influence the masses."⁷⁰ Toward achieving this end, the Ministry of Culture inaugurated an annual national adjudication of new *nianhua* to solicit contributions from the new socialist art elite, many of whom had attained status during the Yan'an period. Award winning artists such as Li Qi ('Peasants Inspect a Tractor' [3.1]), Gu Yizhou ('Labour Wins Glory') and An Lin ('Chairman Mao Inspecting the Troops') all possessed strong revolutionary dossiers.⁷¹

As is evident from the content of the award winning 'new' *nianhua*, and from the background of their creators, the emergent genre continued to be highly representative of that ideal which had been achieved during the Yen'an period. In example 3.1) 'Peasants Inspect



3.1) 'Peasant Inspect Tractor' by Li Qi, (Circa 1950)

⁶⁹ Bo (1986) p.200

⁷⁰ Ibid. p.199-200

⁷¹ Ibid. p.204

Tractor', a rustic group looks with obvious enthusiasm at a new symbol of the modernizing state. While the tractor was a considerable rarity in North China (thus inviting the curious response),⁷² if circulated in the countryside the representation would have nevertheless served primarily as a symbol of modernization and, in effect, an exportation of revolutionary elite ideals down to the countryside. As will be argued, however, such propagandizing of revolutionary elite culture through the *nianhua* form would inevitably lead to conflict. As long as 'new' *nianhua* were kept within the confines of the award ceremonies and art galleries of the revolutionary party, their glaring dissimilarity to the traditional form was not really problematic, since the differing interpretations of the *nianhua* form were not presented in the same context. If, however, *nianhua* propaganda was forwarded to the villages, or cadres were sent to instruct village artisans on new forms, these contrasting ideals suddenly came face to face. As was the case in Yangjiabu, 'New' *nianhua* such as the tractor icon were placed in invidious comparison with the icons of the 'old' society, thus creating the atmosphere for a clash of revolutionary and traditional ideals.

During the winter of 1950 the first *nianhua* reform team, composed of members of the Central Academy of Art (中央美術學院), Provincial Cultural Federation (省文聯) and Provincial Art Gallery (省藝術館) arrived in Yangjiabu to direct the reform process. Less than a year later, in November 1951, more permanent measures were taken through the dispatch of a Provincial *Nianhua* Brigade (省年畫工作隊), which came down to work directly with local artisans to set up a local committee headed by a local representative, and to produce 'new' *nianhua*.⁷³ Following a 1952 directive from the Central Cultural Bureau 'Concerning Directives on the Reform of Weibei County's Traditional *Nianhua*' (關於改造山東濰北縣舊年畫的指示) yet another team was dispatched to Yangjiabu.⁷⁴ In October, noted wood-cut artist Zhang Yangxi led a joint

⁷² See Hinton's *Iron Oxen* for an account of the tractor in revolutionary North China

⁷³ Yangjiabu Village Annals(1993) p.27

committee of seventeen members from the East China Cultural Bureau (華東文化部) and Shandong Cultural Affairs Office (山東省文化局) in organizing the locally represented Yangjiabu Township *Nianhua* Improvement Committee (揚家埠鄉年畫改進委員會).⁷⁵ That same month nine of these committee members attended the Shandong Provincial *Nianhua* Work Meeting (山東省年畫工作會議) in East Yangjiabu.

The end result of this flurry of reform activity seems to have been concurrence with Mao, who himself had stated that "one could not dig the superstitious ideas out of the peasant's mind but the peasants would automatically shed their superstitions when their material life became substantially improved and secure."⁷⁶ In their 1952 report the Yangjiabu reform committee indicated that entrenched beliefs as well as social and economic networks would not easily be reformed and that a policy of co-operation and toleration of existing structures would be necessary. The report also gives some indication of the reaction in Yangjiabu and in the surrounding market area toward the reforms. In general, the committee found that 1) while most *nianhua* were still 'feudalistic', Yangjiabu relied on them for their livelihood and thus reform must be gradual; 2) producers and peddlers are not interested in making or selling 'new' *nianhua* because they feel there is no market for them; 3) 'new' *nianhua* do not compare with the traditional product in terms of quality and must adapt to customary aesthetics; 4) compared with lithographic products from Shanghai, the people still prefer traditional wood-block prints; and 5) organizational leadership is insufficient.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Zhang (1990) p.29

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ C.K. Yang, *The Chinese Village in Early Transition*, (Massachusetts 1959a) p.194. This policy of tolerating 'little' religions while suppressing mainline ones seems quite the opposite of the earlier GMD attempt to eradicate the cults. This assault on the 'superstitious' elements of Chinese culture essentially amounts to an attack on the cultural symbols of the rural tradition China by the proponents of the urban based elite tradition. Duara (1988, p.792) argues that such symbol destruction, and the subsequent failure to create an alternative set of symbols, contributed to the ultimate downfall of the GMD and cleared the way for the communists. It may be that in the early years, the PRC turned the tables by concentrating their attack on the mainstream religions while tolerating the popular cults.

⁷⁷ Yangjiabu Village Annals (1993) See Appendix for complete transcription

This gradual approach to folk-art reform brought forth the policy of "weeding through the old to bring forth the new" (推陳出新) which involved doing inventory of traditional art forms, prohibiting some, approving some, and revising others.⁷⁸ Reform committees would select from amongst the 'old' and 'new' *nianhua* and categorize them as follows: a) 'harmful' (有毒的) including most of the *Cai Shen* (God of Wealth), *Zhuang Yuan* (Pre-eminent Scholars) and those prints exhibiting money; b) 'reactionary' (反動的) including prints referring to the imperial past and the wealthy Shen Wansan; c) 'superstitious' (封建迷信的) including all gods, d) 'to be reformed' (要修改的) including 'Busy Male Farmers', 'Busy Women' and 'The *Qilin* Sends a Son'; and e) 'can be retained at present' (目前可以保留的) including the various prints depicting non-monetary 'surplus', naturalistic symbols, and various popular tales such as 'The Tale of White Snake'. Predictably, none of the 'new' *nianhua* were to be discarded although several needed to be 'reformed'. Among the 'old' *nianhua* forty eight were deemed acceptable, twenty four were to be 'reformed', eight were reactionary, twenty nine were 'harmful' and seventeen were 'superstitious'.⁷⁹

After the selection process was completed it was then necessary to apply the now familiar maxim of 'putting new wine in old bottles'. Working within the village environment, however, popular resistance and the need to adapt reform to the market (as indicated in the terms of the 1952 report) resulted in a much more literal interpretation of the 'new wine' policy than had been the case in Yan'an. An early example of the form that was to become typical of 'new' *nianhua* in Yangjiabu may be traced to the CCP university of *Lianda* at Zhangjiakou in 1948. While studying at *Lianda*, artist Feng Zhen produced a lithographic print called 'Drama of the "Little Sisters" (*Mei Mei Xi*) which essentially reversed the Border Regions *nianhua* principle of incorporating idealized popular symbols into a generally new form. Instead, Feng adopted the basic design of a

⁷⁸ Ellen Judd *Directed Change in Chinese Literature and Art*, PhD Dissertation, (UBC 1981) p.208 from *Zhonghua quanguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe daibiao dahui jinian wenqi*

⁷⁹ Zhang (1990) pp.194-195 Considering that there were thought to be over 1500 forms extant at the time this 'weeding' only dealt with a fraction of the most popular of the prints.

Qing Dynasty *nianhua* from Tianjin's *nianhua* centre of Yangliuqing and incorporated into it modern anti-American and anti-Chiang Kai-shek symbolism.

The transformation of the popular image of Shen Wansan is a local case in point. The traditional *nianhua* image (3.2) shows Shen, assisted by the God of Wealth and the Dragon Prince, casting his net and bringing it forth filled with treasure. In the reformed version (3.3) Shen has been replaced with another fisherman whose nets are filled with large and plentiful fish. The direct reference to wealth has been eliminated but through a traditional rebus form of reference may still represent 'surplus' (餘). The image is also reminiscent of Mao Zedong's comparison of "the



3.2) Shen Wansan



3.3) Labouring Fisher

partisan leader to a fisherman who casts his net wide but holds the ends very firmly in both hands,"⁸⁰ while the glowing red sun in the background is an obvious reference to the 'Great Helmsman' himself. The old forms were thus intended to provide propaganda with historical context through exploitation of an established media form, and popular legitimacy through an appeal to a sentimental attachment to tradition.

When put into historical context, in fact, the rhetorical harmony of old and new propagated by the ruling elite begins to dissolve in light of the actual levels of acceptance of the new symbolic order.

⁸⁰ Wolfram Eberhard, *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* (New York 1983) p. 108

When subjected to the open market, state sponsored *nianhua* of the early 1950s were unable to occupy more than 10 percent of total *nianhua* sales.⁸¹ This dismal response prompted the local Weifang City Culture Bureau, along with an artist from the Provincial Arts Research Centre (省美術工作研究社創造人員), to start a study session in 1953 which was intended to lobby local artisans to give up the use of 'feudal and superstitious' wood-block prints and to help in making new forms. That year Yangjiabu produced 4,700,000 'new' prints, which made up half of that year's total. This percentage growth in 'new' and traditional forms deemed acceptable by the administration, however, can be largely attributed to the subordination of Yangjiabu producers to the new 'Weifang *Nianhua*' and 'Wei-County, Yangjiabu *Nianhua*' societies. The establishment of administrative mechanisms based in the urban center of Weifang (formerly Weixian) thus indicates a shift in control over the industry from relative local autonomy to a higher level of administration, and an increased capacity of that administration to use local resources to produce propaganda. Yet despite the direct involvement and moral suasion of the Provincial Arts Research Centre in 1953 the total number of iconographic prints continued to rise as production climbed from 3,693,500 in 1953 to 5,250,000 in 1954, thus keeping pace with 'new' and otherwise secular prints.⁸² The continued rise in production of the more contentious prints represent the difficulties for the state in obtaining its desired level of popular acceptance. Having thus failed to obtain popular approval, the state took recourse in further escalating the level of control, taking the industry completely out of private hands and collectivizing it in 1955. The measure indeed coincides with a significant drop in the numbers of iconographic prints produced in Yangjiabu.⁸³

⁸¹ Zheng Jinlan *Weifang Nianhua Yanjiu* (Shanghai, 1991) p.48

⁸² Qu (1989) p.237

⁸³ Yangjiabu Village Annals (1993) p.32

The imposition of state control over symbol production also mirrored escalating control over other agricultural activities. In February of 1957, when Yangjiabu residents would normally have been engaged in printing *nianhua*, their energies were diverted as 300 villagers were sent to begin digging a reservoir near the village. Again in 1959 more than 200 individuals were diverted to work on the Xiashan reservoir, and again in 1960 villagers were sent to dig a reservoir on the Bailang River.⁸⁴ The local response to the projects is not recorded, but in 1959 an artist in the



3.4) Reservoirs are Good, 1959

employ of the state then working in Yangjiabu designed an award winning *nianhua*(3.4) based on the digging campaign.

This work's presentation of chubby babies riding goldfish is strongly reminiscent of those traditional *nianhua* which through visual pun suggests 'a

surplus of male progeny', the lotus, also through visual pun, may represent continuity or peace. The juxtaposition of the reservoir with children, fish, and lotus thus seems to imply the continuing value of the reservoir to posterity. In local context, however, the outward optimism of the print masks the reality of forced labour, disrupted local economic systems, and rural displacement that were the effects of 'rural reconstruction'.⁸⁵ In fact, the main beneficiary of these reservoir projects was the city of Weifang, which at time of writing continues to depend largely on the Xiashan reservoir for its water supply.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ The nearby settlement of the ironically named 'Friendship Village' *Youyi Cun* is an extreme case of people uprooted from the locality of the Xiashan reservoir and relocated to northern Jilin Province before finally being repatriated to Weifang and settled on the outskirts of the city. *Weifang City Annals*

Evidently, the combination of labour diversion, ideological intransigence and economic devastation of the Great Leap Forward wiped out both the production capacity and the market for *nianhua*. The production statistics from this time show a severe decline in the industry with a total run of 1.35 million for 1958, as compared to 5.95 million for the previous year and 10.5 million for 1954. None of the prints of the Great Leap Forward period were of the iconographic form. The industry received a brief respite beginning in 1959 when, in honour of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the PRC, the Provincial Cultural Bureau once again took notice of Yangjiabu, pronouncing it an 'Important Birthplace of Shandong Art' and dispatching a team to produce a number of commemorative prints. The liberal economic policies of 1960 and 1961 permitted *nianhua* production to rebound from a low in 1959 of 1,350,000 to a post liberation high of 11,250,000 copies, half of which were the traditional iconographic subjects that had disappeared in 1958-59.⁸⁶ The recovery of the early 1960s, however, proved to be short lived and despite sporadic state support for the industry, as in the 1962 "National Folk *Nianhua* Exhibit" (全國民間年畫展覽) which brought Yangjiabu artists to Beijing, by 1964 all uncertainty over the future of the industry was settled as the 'Socialist Education Movement' denounced Yangjiabu *nianhua* as 'feudal' and some 1500 sets of traditional printing blocks were destroyed. In September of 1966 production all but ceased after the association of *nianhua* with the 'Four Olds' of the Cultural Revolution.

Owing to the loss of peasant control over production of *nianhua* after 1955, the art-form in the post-collectivization period cannot be considered a representation of the peasant. Instead, since arts production was under the control of the state, it must therefore be seen as state representation. Furthermore, because the continued production of state sponsored icons and rural

⁸⁶ Qu (1989) p.237

reconstruction depended on coercion, it can be argued that *nianhua* did not achieve the goal of effecting actual cultural revolution in the countryside. Instead, the folk-arts of this period represent an internally conceived state ideal of peasant-state relations that existed in contrast to real social processes in the village. This contrast raises the question of the potential of the state to impose its own legitimacy in the countryside through manipulating popular culture. Under earlier forms of social organization the peasantry identified itself as part of a larger culture which included the elite as a legitimate class, but reserved for itself a largely autonomous cultural interpretation. After the founding of the People's Republic of China the ruling elite endeavoured to create legitimacy by eliminating competing ideologies and superimposing itself on popular culture through the appropriation of popular icons. The failure of the CCP to achieve voluntary acceptance, however, led to increasingly severe levels of coercion. The results are a testament to the problem that the state encounters when giving up its right to rule by consensus and attempts to impose direct rule on the village.

Conclusion

During the Qing and early Republican eras the peasant artisans of Yangjiabu used New Year's wood-block prints to express an interpretation of authority and the cosmos that was distinct from that of the ruling elite. Insofar as these divergent cosmologies of elite and popular culture were mutually supportive, and because competing interpretations were expressed through different media and among different social classes, they were able to co-exist despite their inherent contradictions. When the *nianhua* form was appropriated by the Chinese Communist Party in the mid-twentieth century that relationship was inexorably altered when the Maoist state, based on peasant mobilization, called for the exploitation of popular media forms. This co-opting of traditional form was ostensibly a means of carrying cultural revolution through to the countryside

by appealing to the peasant's sense of aesthetics, but in effect served as the discourse of the revolutionary state, envisioning elite ideals of social organization in the village. The export of the symbolic expression of the ruling elite into the context of popular arts thus brought divergent cosmologies into direct conflict within the same form of media. The continued co-existence of competing world-views within the same context was simply untenable causing the state to move toward directed change in order to eliminate contradiction.

Epilogue

In 1970 the *nianhua* co-operative was disbanded and some fifty independent production units reappeared in Yangjiabu. This also marks the beginning of an unsteady comeback of the industry and in 1972 some 450,000 traditional icons reappeared on the market. While the numbers of independent producers dropped again between 1971 and 1974 the production levels remained steady and by 1975 production in all *nianhua* forms was climbing again. By 1984 production had reached levels equivalent to the previous highs of 1950 and the early 1960s, and by 1988 the industry had surpassed production on any level since 1949 at 13,500,000 copies that year.⁸⁷

Although radically altered since the 1950s state involvement in Yangjiabu is still quite evident, as is shown by the recognition of Yangjiabu in a number of high profile government publications, official visits of such dignitaries as Li Ruihuan (Chairman of the Political Consultative Bureau) and government funded heritage projects to restore parts of the old village as a living museum. At present, the government sponsored '*Nianhua* Research Institute' works alongside independent artists in producing *nianhua*, the great majority of which are in the classical form. Given the advent of the responsibility system in the 1980s and its maxim of 'to get rich is glorious' it was perhaps a sagacious manoeuvre to establish the state as patron to the 'cult of wealth'.

⁸⁷ see appendix III for detailed production statistics 1949-1988, source Qu (1989) pp.236-240

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Appendix I

Notes on the current situation in Yangjiabu (Summer 1995)

Today parts of Yangjiabu appears much as it always has, traditional courtyard houses line dusty streets and a number of the original *nianhua* ateliers dating from as early as the Ming Dynasty stand about a central village square. The traditional attributes of the village, however, are a stark contrast to the more recent innovations that have sprung up on its outskirts. A government sponsored project to turn Yangjiabu into an amusement park in the early 1990s has resulted in the appropriation of acres of farmland for the construction of amusement facilities to supplement the research institute and museum. Some of these new constructions are of a neo-traditional appearance, some are grotesquely futuristic, and except during the period of the kite festival, all of them are money losing ventures.

At present, owing to changes in architectural style and other forms of modernization which make the prints socially and aesthetically obsolete, Wu Kaihe (retired artist and CCP cadre) believes that traditional markets, which once covered North and Northeast China, have largely dried up and only continue to exist in comparatively remote and backward areas. Wu, and others in the village, are always quick to point out the international elements of the market, with sales throughout Southeast Asia and the West. There is some evidence of wholesale to foreign customers but Wu Kaihe, for instance, could cite only one German writer who may or may not have purchased some prints. This goes for Yang Luoshu as well who is enamoured with the attention which he has received from overseas contacts, customers and enthusiasts. Fishing through his desk drawer of letters and business cards, however, he comes up with only a scant few names from Japan, Korea, Taiwan and America, the great majority of his contacts being Chinese bureaucrats and television producers. Yang however is currently quite excited about the prospect of his going to Monterey Park, California to attend an exhibition at the behest of a customer.

Wu Kaihe and other non-local residents of Yangjiabu are somewhat cynical about the current state of the industry. Believing that the root motive for the production of the prints is money and money alone they dismiss the idea that artisans may possess any sort of 'artistic expression' motive. The village economy no doubt benefits greatly from the annual 'Weifang International Kite Festival' held in April when the spring skies fill with paper hawks, butterflies, dragonflies, goldfish, Immortals, and huge 'dragon headed centipedes' that snake skyward in lengths of up to a hundred metres. The festival is a major event and does indeed draw kite enthusiasts from around the world giving Weifang its well deserved reputation as 'Kite Capital'. Although Weifang hosts the event, it is Yangjiabu's kites which figure most prominently and the village keeps a small kite workshop employing dozens year round. Of course this is merely a supplement to the crafts-people who work out of their homes. In 1988 village kite production was reported to have reached 720,000 items, numbers which are not likely to have fallen off up to the present. Through the production of all handicrafts an average family operation might now be able to earn as much as RMB 4000 (600 US\$) annually, but is more likely to fall within the RMB1000-2000 range (150-300 US\$). As such the industry is an important supplement to the agricultural income of the village. As to whether this is, as Wu Kaihe maintains, the only reason for its existence is not for us to judge.

Appendix II

Report of the *Nianhua* Reform Committee, 1952

i) Over half of the sales volume of *nianhua* is of the traditional 'feudal' superstitious form. Other types of print contents include Beijing Opera and 'auspicious' prints. Things of this nature must eventually be eliminated. Speaking of the present situation in realistic terms however, because the agricultural economy is depressed after a long period of destructive war and the market for 'new' *nianhua* cannot match that of traditional *nianhua*, it would be inappropriate to invoke the negative effects of taxation or simple proscription or reduction (of traditional forms). Rather we must adopt a patient and gradual program of reform.

ii) Although the sales volume of new prints is minimal, (this can be partially attributed to) the fact that they have not been widely distributed in the villages by the apprehensive independent local peddlers on whom Weibei county has depended in the past. Moreover, shops and village headmen are not interested in promoting the 'new' *nianhua*, even going so far as to pressure others to print a token few of the 'new' *nianhua* while they themselves continue to market the traditional form on the sly, this causes further difficulties for the marketing of new *nianhua*.

iii) As for the innovation of new *nianhua*, they also do not benefit from the finer traditions of folk arts, the depth of research into folk arts is insufficient, skills are inadequate and general creativity and portrayal of personages does not compare with the detail and vividness of the traditional *nianhua*. Composition is also not sufficiently pure and harmonious and coloration is not sufficiently attractive and bright. Therefore, the key to solving this problem is to adapt to the customary aesthetics of the people by co-ordinating new content with traditional folk art styles.

iv) Traditional *nianhua* production cost is low and selling price is cheap, and while they still compare favourably with high quality and more expensive Shanghai lithographic prints, the traditional forms are more popular. They (artisans) have not seized on the market for 'new' *nianhua* because of personal capital difficulties and dwindling numbers of experienced carvers. Knowing that the future of traditional *nianhua* is uncertain they make the ideological mistake of simply continuing to print the traditional form out of consideration for simple profit.

v) Organizational leadership in reform work is insufficient, not only is it connected with the cadre, has not reached to levels of the masses. close co-operation between new and old artists has not developed, local artists, shops and merchants have not entered into any significant level of ideological education.

Appendix III

Table 1: *Nianhua* Production Levels by Year, 1949-1988 (times 10,000)

1st = iconographic

2nd = other (non-iconographic)

