
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Female Characters in Chinese New Year Pictures of Ming and Qing Dynasties: Focusing on Taohuawu New Year Pictures

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| ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the female characters in Taohuawu (桃花坞) New Year's pictures from the Ming and Qing Dynasties from the perspective of human nature. The objective is to re-examine the beauty of the women in these pictures and to provide innovative ideas and aesthetic directions for the creation of new female-themed New Year's pictures in the future. Among those with the theme of family life, the number of works focusing on women is significantly greater than that of men, which indicates that women played very important roles in family life. However, the essential connotation of the New Year's paintings in the Ming and Qing Dynasties can be seen as a microcosm of the real life of women in an authoritarian society. They are often situated in a position of being bound and oppressed, with their behaviors strictly restricted behind the scenes, filled with happiness and richness; thus, their human nature of human being weakened and imprisoned. Many paintings depict women educating their children or doing housework to strengthen the quality of ancient women's hard work and responsibility while they had almost little right in political life. Although there are also powerful female characters in the New Year's pictures, such characters only exist in fictional myths and historical stories, having nothing to do with real life, which was more like spiritual hypnosis for ancient females. Therefore, the author believes that in the process of the inheritance and development of New Year's pictures, Instead of the ancient aesthetic orientation, it is crucial to create content from a perspective of humanity. It is necessary to fully respect women's personalities and spiritual independence so as to better inherit and develop Chinese New Year's pictures.

| KEYWORDS

Ming and Qing Dynasties, Taohuawu New Year's paintings, Female characters, Human nature

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

As a typical representative of Chinese traditional culture, the New Year painting has undergone changes along with cultural transformations. It serves as an important reference for understanding ancient Chinese traditional culture. With a history of more than a thousand years, Chinese New Year paintings originated from the Han dynasty, matured during the Tang and Song dynasties, and reached their peak in the Ming and Qing dynasties. During this period, the technology of New Year paintings continued to improve, and it was influenced by Western paintings. As a result, in terms of themes, contents, quality, and quantity, the art of New Year paintings reached its zenith. Currently, most of the New Year paintings that have been fully preserved and collected are concentrated in this period, making it a rich source of research materials and publications for contemporary scholars studying Ming and Qing New Year paintings.

As research into New Year paintings deepens, efforts to preserve and pass on this cultural heritage are also actively underway. In 2006, China's Taohuawu New Year paintings were included in the first batch of [the](#) national intangible cultural heritage list. With the push from traditional craftsmen, scholars, and the market, a large number of practitioners have begun to advocate for the

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revival of New Year paintings and have increased efforts to commercialize the art form. However, several issues must be carefully considered in this process.

Firstly, due to historical reasons, the inheritance of Chinese New Year paintings has long been interrupted, and there are already very few practitioners in the field, most of whom are elderly. This leaves very little time for the inheritance of New Year paintings.

Secondly, a clearer and more scientific approach is necessary for the inheritance and development of New Year paintings. A balance between artistic and commercial elements must be struck. Without scientific and systematic planning, greater harm may be inflicted upon this cultural heritage.

Finally, the best way to inherit traditional New Year paintings is through innovation, which is crucial to [their](#) long-term development. Inheriting this art form should not simply involve copying or imitating past works but rather creating new works in the context of contemporary social and cultural backgrounds. Only in this way can New Year paintings be rejuvenated and have a better future.

In this context, the mainstream perspective on the research of New Year paintings has always emphasized their historical and artistic value but rarely discussed their themes and content in a critical manner. This has led to a monolithic aesthetic orientation among the general public, which is extremely detrimental to the overall study and development of New Year paintings. This article focuses on the study of female themes in New Year paintings, analyzing the female characters in Ming and Qing Dynasty New Year paintings from a humanistic perspective, using modern concepts of equality, freedom, and liberation. The article examines the historical limitations of the creation of Ming and Qing Dynasty New Year paintings and discusses the survival and living conditions of female characters in these paintings, presenting personal viewpoints that hope to positively influence the innovation of female-themed New Year paintings, and inspire more reflection among New Year painting protectors and practitioners.

2. Methodology

The research method employed in this article builds upon previous studies and utilizes a case study approach. From a humanistic perspective, this study analyzes, summarizes, and organizes the Taohuawu New Year prints from the Ming and Qing dynasties, culminating in a conclusion. The case materials for this study are derived solely from published New Year prints that have received widespread recognition, ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of the research materials.

The woodblock prints from Taohuawu New Year in Suzhou, China, as well as those from Zhuxian Town in Henan, Yangliuqing in Tianjin, Yangjiabu in Shandong, and Mianzhu in Sichuan, collectively form the "Five Great Folk Woodblock Prints" of China. This study focuses on analyzing the Taohuawu New Year prints. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Suzhou was one of the most economically developed regions in China, with a mature urban culture and civic consciousness that appeared relatively early. The scenes depicted in the Taohuawu New Year prints are more closely related to the daily lives of people in that era, as it was far away from Beijing's political center. The prints offered a more complete reflection of reality because of their high degree of creative freedom, which was not influenced by autocratic imperial power. The Taohuawu New Year prints were influenced by Western painting and were more technically advanced than prints from other regions, depicting objects in greater detail. As a result, the prints of the highest quality have been preserved and have increased in value as historical documents. Due to the influence of local international trade, the prints also flowed overseas in large numbers. Many Taohuawu New Year prints can still be found in museums in Japan, the UK, and other countries today. The Taohuawu New Year prints have the greatest international influence compared to prints from other regions, particularly Japanese ukiyo-e prints, which have been extensively studied by Japanese scholars.

In the early days, Taohuawu New Year prints mainly depicted urban life and scenery, both in terms of content and form, and were very close to traditional Chinese painting. The most important thing was that due to the relatively free and developed local economy and culture, people's minds were more open, so many of the works were about female-themed New Year prints, which was very rare in a feudal and authoritarian society. Taohuawu New Year prints had a rich female subject matter, which has great historical value in understanding the role of women in the traditional authoritarian history of China.

3. Theoretical research

3.1 Basic Concepts and History

The term "Chinese New Year paintings" generally refers to the paintings that were traditionally hung in homes during the Chinese New Year. From the earliest hand-drawn New Year paintings, they gradually evolved into woodblock prints. New Year paintings were not exclusive to the folk, and the ruling class of feudal authoritarianism would also hang them, making their scope of application extremely extensive. In concept, there is a distinction between narrow and broad interpretations of New Year paintings. Narrowly speaking, it specifically refers to the paintings hung on indoor and outdoor doors, windows, walls, stoves, and kang during the New Year period, which are produced and sold by various New Year painting workshops. Broadly speaking, the

mainstream view of current New Year painting research is that any painting created by folk artists to reflect the secular daily life and spiritual world of the people and produced and managed by New Year painting workshops is collectively called New Year paintings.

Taohuawu was a place in ancient Suzhou, China, where New Year paintings were produced and sold. As a result, the New Year paintings of Suzhou were later collectively referred to as Taohuawu New Year paintings. In the early days, Taohuawu New Year paintings were mainly hand-painted and could not meet the market demand. Later, relief printing techniques were adopted to achieve mass production and alleviate market pressure.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the development of the economy and the prosperity of culture, urban culture gradually matured, and entertainment cultures such as opera and novels gradually emerged. New Year paintings that could satisfy the spiritual needs of the common people also became popular and developed and were sold from the Double Ninth Festival to the Spring Festival each year.

During the Kangxi and Qianlong periods of the Qing Dynasty, the economy and culture were even more prosperous, and the demand for New Year paintings by the citizens reached its peak. At this time, these New Year paintings even sold overseas, and the impact of Western painting techniques on Taohuawu "Gusu version" New Year paintings spread to Japan, as analyzed by Japanese scholar Genjiro Kuroda in his article "A General View of Chinese Prints". Ono Tadashige's "Collection of Chinese Prints" also elaborates on the influence of the "Gusu version" on Japanese ukiyo-e prints.

During the Taiping Rebellion in China from 1851 to 1854, when the country was in chaos, Taohuawu New Year paintings suffered heavy damage. Hand-painted New Year paintings were basically wiped out in a big fire, and the production and sales of woodblock New Year paintings were forced to move to Shanghai and nearby villages, leading to a decline.

After 1949, the Chinese government began to protect Taohuawu New Year paintings and attempted to revive the production line. Taohuawu New Year Painting Society and Taohuawu New Year Painting Museum were established in Suzhou to continue the tradition.

Classification of Female Themes in Chinese New Year Paintings	Contents of the subject matter
Themes centered around female characters.	· A character alone.
	· The role in the family after marriage.
	· The role in social situations.
Themes involving female characters participation.	· The role in festivals.
	· Roles in customs and rituals.
	· Characters in stories.
	· The role in labor.

Table 1. Classification of Female Themes in Taohuawu New Year Prints.

The female-themed year paintings mainly refer to the year paintings that focus on female subjects. As shown in Table 1, in Taohuawu year paintings, female characters in female-themed year paintings are mainly divided into three categories: women in solitude, women in the family, and women in social scenes. Women in solitude are generally unmarried women depicted in scenes of enclosed or semi-enclosed chambers and courtyards. Women in family roles depict women as mothers in various family scenarios. Social roles refer to scenes where women socialize with men or women. Year paintings that feature female characters but do not primarily focus on women include festival-themed year paintings, customs and rituals-themed year paintings, and story-themed year paintings. Festival-themed year paintings depict traditional Chinese holidays, customs and rituals-themed year paintings mainly depict sacrificial and marriage scenes, and story-themed year paintings mainly depict historical stories and popular fiction stories, as well as some stories about supernatural beings. Female labor roles mainly depict women's work scenes. These year's paintings are the main research objects of this study.

3.2 Literature Review

Scholars and experts studying Taohuawu New Year Prints in China have produced research in two main forms: pictorial albums and historical essays. Among the publications that have compiled this research are "The Development History of Chinese New Year Prints" (2005), which primarily covers the origin and historical development of Chinese New Year prints; "The Art History of Chinese New Year Prints" (2008), which in addition to the historical development of New Year prints, summarizes the creative experiences of folk artists and the unique development patterns of Chinese folk art. The essay also discusses the value of New Year prints to traditional culture and criticizes views that dismiss folk New Year prints. "The Complete Collection of Taohuawu Woodblock New Year Prints" (2018) and "Taohuawu Woodblock New Year Prints" (2012) have collected a large amount of valuable Taohuawu New Year Print materials, serving as an authoritative research library for Taohuawu studies. These books not only collect a large number of folk works from China but also systematically organize overseas collections and private collections, providing immense historical value. The two books provide detailed records of the production background, history, current situation, artistic characteristics, and value of Taohuawu New Year Prints. They also classify New Year prints in detail and document the production process, materials, artisans, sales, and folk customs and stories related to Taohuawu New Year Prints, providing great convenience to subsequent researchers.

In recent years, academic research on Taohuawu woodblock prints has mainly focused on two aspects: artistic aesthetics and market applications. "Exploration of the Color Formation of Taohuawu Woodblock Prints and Others" and "Color Characteristics and Application of Taohuawu Woodblock Prints" concentrate on the aesthetic and historical reasons behind the use of colors in Taohuawu woodblock prints. The principles and techniques of using high-purity and high-saturation colors in woodblock prints are also studied. These papers summarize the meaning and methods of color matching in woodblock prints, as well as the significance of colors in woodblock prints.

"Research on the Decorative Language of Taohuawu Woodblock Prints" and "Modern Design Performance of Taohuawu Print Elements" study the decorative characteristics of various visual elements in woodblock prints and their applications in modern design such as illustrations, decorative paintings, packaging, etc., with the aim of developing the market for woodblock prints.

In "Research on the Carnival Consciousness in Traditional Woodblock Prints," the delicate and exquisite artistic form and cultural implications of Taohuawu woodblock prints for prayer and avoidance of disasters are studied. The paper also discusses the spirit of carnival in the context of Chinese traditional culture and focuses on the spiritual core of traditional woodblock prints.

Research on female-themed woodblock prints is also being carried out. "Analysis of Female Characters in Woodblock Prints" takes Chinese woodblock prints as the research object and focuses on the costumes, story themes, and artistic styles of female characters in woodblock prints, aiming to lead readers to appreciate and understand the women in ancient woodblock prints from the perspective of classical aesthetics.

"On the Images and Living Spaces of Women in Taohuawu Woodblock Prints of Qing Dynasty Jiangnan" studies the beauty of women's figures and ancient utensils from the perspective of the living environment and the use of tools of ancient women. The paper also presents historical facts about women's social roles and discusses how women survived and developed under the authoritarian system. Although both papers are focused on the study of women in woodblock prints, they do not delve into a deeper discussion from the perspective of female awakening and human nature.

The research mentioned above indicates that the study of Taohuawu woodblock prints mainly focuses on historical and aesthetic value research. This type of research serves to protect the woodblock prints themselves and has resulted in a wealth of valuable historical data on the prints. Although some academic papers have analyzed female-themed woodblock prints, there has been a lack of systematic critical discussion from the perspective of modern aesthetics and human liberation, which is where the value of this article lies.

4. Case Study





4.1 Case study of woodblock prints featuring female protagonists.

4.1.1 The solo female character.

<p>Example image</p>				
<p>Name</p>	<p>Woman under the sycamore tree</p>	<p>Melancholy woman</p>	<p>The woman under the door curtain</p>	<p>Women who smoke</p>
<p>Elements in the picture</p>	<p>Rockery, balustrade, round window, sycamore tree.</p>	<p>Beds and tables</p>	<p>Door curtain, cat, door.</p>	<p>Chair, smoking set, pine tree, round stool, vase.</p>
<p>The content of the screen</p>	<p>A woman looks out through a window in the courtyard.</p>	<p>The woman is getting up and getting dressed.</p>	<p>A young woman walked out of the room.</p>	<p>A woman who is smoking.</p>

Table 2. The solo female character 1 (Figure 1/2/3/4)

In her paper, Kim Chun-ok argues that the independent nature of ancient women was suppressed, and women were subordinate to men in this world, which was a common situation in ancient East Asia. The creators of Chinese ancient New Year prints were mostly men and even the majority of buyers were men, so the content of the prints reflected male thinking. The four pictures in Table 2 depict the daily life of Chinese women when they were alone. In figure 1, a woman looks out over the courtyard through the railing, full of longing for the outside world. This picture was used on a fan. Figure 2 shows a young woman getting up and dressing, which is a very intimate scene usually hung in the bedroom or study. The exquisite technique and the seductive red bed curtain, and the delicate woman fulfill men's voyeuristic desires for women in the authoritarian society. Figures 3 and 4 depict a woman about to open the door curtain and another preparing to smoke. According to the scene elements in Table 2, these New Year prints depict women alone at home, with weak and delicate body postures, indifferent expressions, and a sickly softness that fits the aesthetic taste of women in China's ancient authoritarian system. This is the subconscious objectification and confinement of women by the ancients, making women more like caged birds without freedom.

<p>Example image</p>				
<p>Name</p>	<p>Manchu women playing musical instruments</p>	<p>Embroidered woman.</p>	<p>Women who like flowers.</p>	<p>Reading a book by candlelight.</p>
<p>Elements in the picture</p>	<p>Bed couch, huqin, square stool, bonsai.</p>	<p>Long table case, round stool, flower basket.</p>	<p>Beds, tables, bonsai, square stools, paintings.</p>	<p>Candlesticks, chairs, books, casegoods, bamboo.</p>

The content of the screen	The woman is playing the hokum.	The woman is dressed in embroidery.	The woman is enjoying the painting.	The woman is reading.
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Table 3. The solo female character 2 (Figure 5/6/7/8)

The women depicted in Table 3 are scenes of ancient female learning, which are very elegant and luxurious. The woman in Figure 5 is practicing the Huqin, while the woman in Figure 6 is learning embroidery. The woman in Figure 7 is admiring a painting of flowers and birds, and Figure 8 depicts a woman reading by candlelight. Generally speaking, women in ancient China did not have many educational opportunities. In the mindset of a feudal society, being uneducated was considered a desirable quality for women. However, the women portrayed in these New Year prints are skilled in music, chess, calligraphy, and painting, which reflects that in wealthy families during the Ming and Qing dynasties, women receiving a good education was prevalent and socially accepted. This is in contrast to the general belief that women were not qualified to receive an education in ancient times, and the content of these New Year prints breaks through these traditional stereotypes.

For women from impoverished families, admiring these New Year prints can fulfill their thirst for knowledge and fantasies and serve as a form of spiritual compensation for their inability to obtain an education. The furniture and decor depicted in the prints are exquisitely detailed and arranged in a sophisticated manner, portraying the domestic scenes of upper-class society. Although these women could acquire knowledge and skills through the study of music, chess, calligraphy, and painting, these skills were only used for self-expression, pleasing men, and nurturing offspring. Women in the Ming and Qing dynasties had little to no social mobility under the social system, and there was no system for selecting female talent. As a result, their political lives were almost non-existent, making it difficult for them to realize their personal worth.

4.1.2 The Role of Women in the household after marriage.





Example image				
Name	Happy family picture.	The child breaks the branch of the laurel tree.	Woman playing the swing.	Treasure chest diagram.
Elements in the picture	Mother and children, servants, beds, tables and stools, flowers, pets, gongs, whistles, and tea sets.	Mother and child, railings, rockery, flowers and trees.	Swing, mother and son, daughter, courtyard wall, rockery, pine tree.	Architecture, mother and child, flowers and trees, trolleys.
The content of the screen	Mothers play with their children at home.	The mother plays with the children in the yard.	The mother swings with her child in the yard.	The fortune hunter pushed the treasure and gave it to the mother and son.

Table 4. Family companionship pictures. (Figure 9/10/11/12)

In ancient China, women had two important roles in the household: giving birth and accompanying children as they grew up. Table 4 mainly showcases scenes of mothers accompanying their children. In Figure 9, a mother lies on a bed and watches her child play with the assistance of a maid. This is the most common household scene. In Figure 10, the accompanying scene shifts from indoors to outdoors as a child climbs a cassia tree and breaks off a branch with the help of his mother, symbolizing wealth and prosperity. In Figure 11, a mother protects her daughter and son as they swing on a swing within a high wall, creating a heartwarming image. In Figure 12, a mother holds her infant and watches as a heavenly child pushes a cart full of treasures towards her, symbolizing the

arrival of wealth. From these scenes, it is evident that a mother's accompaniment is ubiquitous, whether indoors or outdoors. It is worth noting that in the extensive research of materials for this article, female children are almost absent from the New Year prints; the scenes mostly feature boys and their mothers, aligning with the ancient idea of favoring sons over daughters.



Example image				
Name	Two women playing music.	Mothers educate their sons.	Teaching children by the lake.	Makeup chart.
Elements in the picture	Table and chairs, piano, mother and son, maids, flowers and trees, birds, tea sets.	Mother and child, desk, scroll, seal, round stool.	Mother and son, book, bow and arrow, desk, old painting, view from window, window.	Mother and daughter, round stool, hairpin, coffee table, vase.
The content of the screen	The mother is teaching her son to play the guqin.	The mother is playing with her child in the study.	The mother is teaching her son to study.	Mother is teaching her daughter to dress up.

Table 5. Pictures of studying at home. (Figure 13/14/15/16)

Table 5 in the annual painting mainly depicts scenes of mothers educating their children, where mothers impart their knowledge to the best of their ability. In Figure 13, a mother is playing the piano for her child, dressed in very elaborate and formal attire. In Figure 14, although the mother is not teaching knowledge, the child is playing in the study. In Figure 15, the mother is teaching poetry, but the child wants to play with a bow and arrow, indicating the importance of educating boys in ancient families. In Figure 16, the mother is instructing her daughter to dress her hair, which is also a rare theme. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, children's education was generally conducted in private schools or by hiring specialized teachers, but in the early stages of education, many followed their mothers for enlightenment learning. Liao Bowen wrote in his paper that ancient women, from the dominant maternal society and the autonomous body that gives birth to life, have essentially regressed into living existences under the male-dominated order in society. Chinese women in ancient times were also like this, only able to realize their value through their husbands and children. The identity and status of ancient Chinese women were closely related to the abilities of their children, so sometimes mothers were very proactive in their attitudes towards their children's education in order to consolidate their position in the family. The scenes in the annual paintings are very warm, and the position and role of women in family education and enlightenment are worthy of affirmation. These contents are a kind of affirmation and praise for the contributions of ancient women, but observing from a human perspective, it can also be somewhat poignant.

4.1.3 Socialization of Women in ancient times.




Example image				
Name	Two beautiful beauties.	Two women are playing the guqin.	Women's makeup.	Spying on others drinking wine.
Elements in the picture	Bed couch, bonsai, square stool.	Table, guqin, vase, fan.	Window view, washbasin, make-up tools, table case, bonsai.	Men, bedsteads, pillows, bed tents, jugs, candlesticks, wine glasses.
The content of the screen	Two women are chatting on the bed.	Two women are playing the guqin for fun.	Two women are washing and putting on makeup.	Women are spying on others drinking, and seeking pleasure.

Table 6. Indoor social women. (Figures 17/18/19/20)

The social behavior and spatial mobility of ancient Chinese women were strictly controlled to the extent that unmarried women had difficulties even leaving their homes. This can be seen in the traditional New Year paintings that have been passed down over time. The social scenes depicted in Figures 17, 18, and 19 all take place indoors, with some showing quiet conversation, others showing women playing instruments, and others showing women washing and applying makeup. These scenes are portrayed positively and enjoyed by many, indicating that such social activities were in line with the social norms of the time. Compared to the rough eating, drinking, and playing scenes enjoyed by men and the serious political and social scenes, the indoor social scenes depicted have a distinct difference in nature.

Figure 20 is a particularly special painting, depicting a man drinking and talking intimately with a woman while another woman is peeking nearby, clearly vying for attention. Upon closer inspection, one can see that the woman talking has her feet bound in the ancient Chinese practice of "lotus feet," which was a form of persecution inflicted upon women. Although the New Year painting is exquisitely crafted and the characters elegant, it still represents the oppressive system that women endured in ancient times. Women's social behavior was not only strictly limited but they were also objectified by men. These typical female characteristics, such as "lotus feet," are no longer accepted in modern aesthetics, and thus, when creating New Year paintings on this topic, a critical eye and more humanistic creative ideas should be integrated into the design.


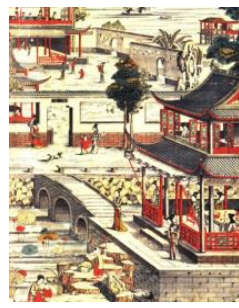


Example image				
Name	Ten women playing soccer figure.	The palace next to the West Lake.	Two women on a boat.	Two women admire the bamboo.
Elements in the picture	Children, landscapes, pet dogs, balloons, balls, guardrails, flowers and trees.	West lake scenery, architecture, trees, children, pets, lotus flowers, small bridge.	Small boat, willow tree, lotus flower.	Bamboo, flowers and plants, fans, birds and bamboo shoots.
The content of the screen	A group of women are playing soccer and watching, and children's pets are having fun together.	A woman and a child are swimming in the beauty of West Lake.	Two women are rowing a boat.	Two women are talking under the bamboo tree.

Table 7. Women in outdoor socializing. (Figures 21/22/23/24)

Table 7 depicts the social scenes of ancient women in outdoor settings. Figure 21 portrays a lively scene of ten beautiful women playing soccer, with children and pets joining in the fun. Figure 22 is a partial view of a Chinese New Year painting, illustrating a magnificent and idyllic scene of Hangzhou's West Lake, featuring women and children. Figures 23 and 24 showcase scenes of boating on the lake and admiring bamboo in the wild, respectively. Although the outdoor women are still portrayed as delicate, they seem to be more energetic than their indoor counterparts. These scenes were created by the artists based on their observations of reality and their own imaginations, recorded in New Year paintings, and are valuable visual materials that reflect the social lives of ancient women. Women displayed healthy and free states in outdoor settings, and their social forms were diverse, albeit strictly limited to interaction among women.





4.2 Analysis of New Year Paintings with Non-Female Main Subjects.

4.2.1 The Role of Women in Festivals.

Table 8. Women over the holidays. (Figure 25/26/27/28)

Example image				
Name	tomb-sweeping festival.	Lantern Festival.	New Year's Day.	Celebrating the New Year in the building.
Elements in the picture	Countryside, small bridge, pedestrians.	Family, interior, decorated with lights and feast.	Scenery, elderly, adults, children.	The scenery, the people who swim.
The content of the screen	People are going to worship their ancestors during the festival, and tourists on the road.	The family is celebrating the Lantern Festival.	People are celebrating the festival on the first day of the first month.	People are partying during New Year's Eve.

In depicting ancient festival scenes, women play the roles of praying for the family's blessings and being busy. The scene depicted in Figure 25 shows a woman on her way to worship her ancestors during the Qingming Festival, meeting a passerby. Figure 26 portrays the busy figure of women and children during the Lantern Festival. The house is decorated with lanterns with riddles written on them, and everywhere is filled with a festive atmosphere. The family gathers together, making it very lively. Figures 27 and 28 depict the New Year's Day festivities, portraying the celebratory atmosphere of the wealthy southern region during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Children are setting off firecrackers while adults are roasting on the indoor stove, creating a peaceful scene. The Lunar New Year is a carnival-like festival in ancient China, one of the most important festivals, and a rare time for rest and relaxation throughout the year.

Example image				
Name	Dragon and Phoenix.	The ritual of tea picking.	Wedding night.	The birthday party of the gods.
Elements in the picture	Dragons, phoenixes, clouds, couples, fairy mountains, pavilions and flowers.	God of wealth, tea picker, golden mountain, silver mountain, ox, Chinese zodiac, taiji bagua, festival.	The wedding room, the children, the bride, the women.	Boat, crane, mahogany, boatman, flower basket, lingzhi, gourd, landscape.

The content of the screen	A couple tie the knot in the presence of the dragon and the phoenix.	Every spring, when the farming season is busy, people pray for good luck.	The bride waits in the bridal chamber while the adults and children prepare for the ceremony.	Fairy in a small boat await to go to the birthday party.
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Table 9. Women preparing for a marriage ceremony. (Figure 29/30/31/32)

4.2.2 The Role of Women in Customs and Traditional Ceremonies.

Marriage is the most important event in folk customs. In Figure 29, a newlywed couple is about to complete their marriage. They are dressed in gorgeous attire, surrounded by various auspicious objects. This type of New Year's picture is hung in the new house, symbolizing a happy and harmonious marriage and family. In Figure 30, during the busy spring farming season, people pray for favorable weather, hoping that their hard work will bring wealth and good luck. The picture shows twelve tea-picking girls representing the twelve months of the year, and each month has a corresponding folk song written on the New Year's picture. The content of the picture is extremely rich, expressing the simple beliefs of ancient Chinese folk customs. Since tea planting and picking were mainly done by women, women occupied an absolute position in the entire picture. In Figure 31, the scene of the "new room disturbance" during a wedding is depicted. The children in the picture are not aimlessly playing, and the games and props they use are strictly regulated. For example, the red dates, peanuts, lotus seeds, and other items are used to symbolize the couple's early birth of a noble child. In addition to the bride, the other women in the picture exist to assist in completing various wedding rituals, helping the bride quickly transition to her new role in the festive atmosphere. Figure 32 shows the scene of Ma Gu, the goddess of longevity in Chinese Taoism, traveling by boat to congratulate the Queen Mother of the West on her birthday. The goddess and her entourage are holding various treasures on their way to the destination. The women in Table 9 are important female roles in New Year's pictures. They play a role in blessing and executing some rituals in folk customs, which cannot be replaced by men. Therefore, the women in this type of New Year's picture have a unique and independent beauty that is rarely seen in other New Year's pictures.

Example image				
Name	Pomegranate and the children.	Monsters bless the birth of children.	Two women and children.	Pray for the exam.
Elements in the picture	Gods, mothers, children, palaces of heaven, pomegranates, vases.	The unicorn, the fairy, the child.	Women, children.	Mother, child, laurel tree, archery.
The content of the screen	Historical figure Zhang Qian rides a unicorn to deliver children.	The gods and unicorns send children to the people.	Women and child are playing together.	The child achieves success with the mother by his side.





Table 10. Women in folk rituals. (Figure 33/34/35/36)

The New Year paintings in Table 10 are related to the customs of childbirth. Figures 33 and 34 depict New Year paintings used to pray to the gods for the bride to conceive and give birth to a child soon. In the paintings, immortals ride on legendary qilin beasts and bring children to mortals. The child in the paintings is usually a boy, reflecting the serious gender bias in patriarchal societies. Figure 35 portrays a pregnant woman praying for a beautiful and intelligent child. In ancient times, it was believed that looking at beautiful things during pregnancy would result in beautiful children, so various New Year paintings of beautiful women and boys were posted for viewing during pregnancy. Figure 36 depicts a scene where a mother prays after giving birth. The mother is shown shooting arrows with her child, hitting a round longan on a tree, symbolizing the hope that her child will excel in imperial examinations and eventually become the top scholar. These works depict the childbirth customs of ancient China, where women made great sacrifices for the family's reproduction. After marriage, they prayed every day to become a mother smoothly and

hoped that their child would be born beautiful and talented. After the child was born, they prayed for the child to achieve success as soon as possible. Behind these beautiful New Year paintings was the hidden anxiety of ancient women about childbirth. In the Ming and Qing dynasties of China, women without children had no status, and therefore, these paintings featuring childbirth became a symbol of the ideal family life with many descendants, as well as a reinforcement of the patriarchal notion of childbirth. Today, modern society has abandoned the harmful childbirth concepts that caused great harm to women in ancient times.

4.2.3 The female characters in the story

Table 11. The women in the story (Figure 37/38/39/40)

<p>Example image</p>				
<p>Name</p>	<p>Play Go.</p>	<p>Zhaojun was married far away.</p>	<p>Illustration of "The West Wing".</p>	<p>Billian catching monkeys.</p>
<p>Elements in the picture</p>	<p>Emperor and consort, table, chairs, chessboard, maids.</p>	<p>Zhaojun, Horse, Soldiers.</p>	<p>Characters in the novel. The scene in the courtyard.</p>	<p>Characters in a play. Scenes from the play.</p>
<p>The content of the screen</p>	<p>The emperor and the consort were playing chess, and the palace maid was picking up the pieces on the floor.</p>	<p>Zhaojun is on her way to get married.</p>	<p>Scenes of male and female interactions in the novel.</p>	<p>The main character in the play is catching monkeys.</p>

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, due to economic development, cultural activities such as dramas and novels were flourishing and greatly beloved by the people. These cultural contents were also depicted in folk New Year paintings. Figure 37 shows the scene of the famous Tang Dynasty story where Emperor Xuanzong played chess with his beloved concubine Yang Guifei. Figure 38 depicts the story of the famous Han Dynasty historical tale "Princess Zhaojun's departure to the frontier," in which the princess married a foreigner to maintain peace and sacrificed her own happiness. She is shown riding on a horse with great power. Figure 39 portrays a scene from the historical novel "The Story of the Western Wing," in which the male and female characters fell in love at first sight and overcome various obstacles to be together. Figure 40 depicts a scene from the drama adaptation of the novel "The Green Peony," in which the protagonist is a powerful female warrior who eventually receives an award from the emperor.

In Table 11, the characters are all female figures that are removed from the reality of ancient life. Unlike other New Year paintings, these female characters are given great power, sometimes even more powerful than males. Women in these paintings can become respected concubines or brave female warriors, breaking free from the constraints of reality to achieve worldly success. This satisfies women's fantasies to the greatest extent, but it remains an unattainable dream.





Example image				
Name	The couple met.	Lots of monsters.	Pansi Cave.	Eight idols.
Elements in the picture	Husband, wife, child, magpie, star, galaxy, maid.	Monsters.	Monkey. Pig. Spiders.	Eight idols
The content of the screen	The couple meets in heaven on the seventh day of the seventh month every year.	Various humanoid monsters.	The storyline in "Journey to the West".	Eight immortals crossed the sea to the east.

Table 12. The woman of myth and legend. (Figure 41/42/43/44)

Table 12 depicts the content of mythological legends. Figure 41 portrays the famous Chinese folktale of "The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl," a tragic mythological story of a goddess from heaven and a mortal man who fall in love and marry, only to be separated by the heavens and forced to only reunite once a year with their children. The story reflects the strong discontent among the people towards the marriage system under a totalitarian regime, where women and children in families become the biggest victims. Women have no say in their destiny under authoritarian rule, unable to maintain the integrity of their families, and each person in the family becomes a sacrifice to this system. Figure 42 depicts various fairy and monster images from folk tales, including female monsters of all kinds. Figure 43 depicts a plot from "Journey to the West," featuring a female spider demon as the main villain who causes great trouble for the protagonist. Figure 44 portrays a group of immortals from a folk tale consisting of eight members, one of whom is a female character. Throughout ancient Chinese mythological stories, the number of positive female roles is significantly lower than that of male roles, and even when female character takes the lead, their abilities are often limited. However, there are many female characters among ghosts and monsters who seduce and tempt men, indicating that even in the imaginary world of gods and ghosts, gender status is unequal, and women are always weakened.

4.2.4 The Role of Women in labor.

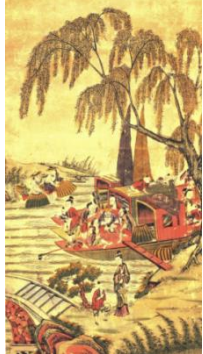



Example image				
Name	A family gathering of fishermen.	The woman selling fish.	A woman in labor.	The fairy who raises silkworms.
Elements in the picture	Fishing boat. Fishermen. Landscape. Fish.	Lady, child, fish, fish trap, basket.	Child. Woman. Looms. Flowers and trees.	Two gods. Horses. The cocoon.
The content of the screen	Woman and child walking on the shore carrying fish. Fishermen on the boat resting.	The fisherwoman carried the fish and turned her head to watch the boy organize his tools.	The woman indoors is knitting, and the woman outside is playing with her children.	The silkworm gods bless the silkworm farmers and keep the silkworm room quiet.

Table 13. The women in labor. (Figure 45/46/47/48)

Although women had a low status during the Ming and Qing dynasties, their role in society's labor force was not weakened. They did not enjoy equal political rights in the authoritarian society, but they bore labor responsibilities that were not inferior to men. The New Year pictures related to labor themes in Table 13 depict women not only as the main force in tea picking but also often appearing in fishing and silkworm-raising labor scenes. Figure 48 portrays the ancient silkworm goddess. Since loud noise could have a significant negative impact on silkworm-raising, this New Year picture was generally posted at the door of the silkworm room to remind people to keep quiet. These New Year pictures not only praised women's labor but also served as a moral education for women, requiring them to remain hardworking under any circumstances.

5. Conclusion

The protection and inheritance of traditional culture is a cultural trend in the contemporary world, and this article is conducted in the context of this trend. The main research object of this article is the Peach Blossom Village New Year Prints from the Ming and Qing dynasties in China. During the prosperous Ming and Qing dynasties, with the development of social economy and culture, New Year Prints also entered its heyday, thus leaving a large number of exquisite works for later scholars, providing valuable historical image materials. New Year Prints are generally not signed by authors, and most of them are created to meet the spiritual and belief needs of the lower-class people, so they do not carry strong personal characteristics like literati paintings. Compared with the fantasy world in literati paintings, the content and themes of New Year Prints are closer to the real life of ancient folk, and the images have high authenticity and research value. This study sorted out the female-themed New Year Prints from the Ming and Qing dynasties and summarized and analyzed their contents, aiming to provide a humanized perspective on contemporary Chinese traditional New Year Prints creation and to open up new ideas for the study of female-themed traditional New Year Prints, enabling researchers to be more rational in the research process, rather than just blindly praising and boasting.

Through research, it has been found that the subject matter of women in New Year paintings is extremely rich and varied. The women depicted in the paintings are reserved, subtle, and oppressed, with their soft and delicate qualities constantly emphasized, outlining the perfect female image in the minds of ancient people. However, from another perspective, these women are always in a position of being observed and consumed, making them a group that is objectified and weakened. Therefore, the beauty of women in New Year paintings is behind their objectification and weakening of them, which has become a consensus in the appreciation of New Year paintings regarding women's aesthetics and is reflected in all cases.

From the content of New Year paintings, it can be seen that women were strictly limited in their family life and social activities, just like birds locked in a cage with limited freedom. Even outstanding women had no right to participate in political activities under the Ming and Qing dynastic rule. The skills and knowledge they learned could only be used to express their emotions and educate the next generation. In New Year paintings, one can also feel women's anxiety about fertility, which is expressed differently in different stages of marriage. Some women even need to post New Year paintings with different contents at home to provide spiritual comfort, which is a harm to women in authoritarian societies. Although women in story-themed New Year paintings have gained some liberation, the content is unlikely to happen in real life, and the powerful female roles in New Year paintings seem to be temporary psychological anesthesia for female viewers. Moreover, in the god and ghost-themed New Year paintings, there is also serious inequality between male and female characters. Despite this, New Year paintings on labor themes still encourage women to remain diligent and continuously contribute to society and their families, no matter how cruel the reality may be.

This article takes a fresh look at Ming and Qing dynasty New Year paintings from a perspective of human nature, examining their artistic value while also revealing the limitations of ancient aesthetics towards women. These limitations are reflected in the oppressive and restrictive cultural norms of the time. Therefore, when creating New Year paintings with female themes in a modern cultural context, artists must possess a more humanistic painting consciousness. While retaining and learning from the creative techniques of ancient New Year paintings, it is necessary to abandon the negative aesthetic tastes and outdated artistic concepts of the past.

The innovation and inheritance of female-themed New Year paintings can only be achieved by fully respecting the individuality and spiritual independence of women. Only then can artists create New Year paintings that meet modern aesthetic standards. In evaluating Ming and Qing dynasty New Year paintings, it is important to have a more critical discussion, distinguishing between what to keep and what to discard. Only by addressing the problems in New Year painting research can we better inherit and develop the artistic treasures accumulated throughout history.

During the research process of this article, it was found that there is relatively little research on women in Chinese New Year paintings, with limited literature and material available for a comprehensive analysis of female images in this genre. As a result, the depth and breadth of the research are limited. Additionally, due to the limited number of female figures in Chinese New Year

paintings, the research subject is inherently restricted, making it difficult for the research findings to accurately represent the characteristics of female images as a whole in this art form.

To better understand the meaning and role of women in Chinese New Year paintings, the author suggests that researchers should analyze the characteristics, clothing, and movements of female figures in this genre. It would also be helpful to compare female images in Chinese New Year paintings with those in other regions and time periods to gain a better understanding of the unique features of female images in Chinese New Year paintings.

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