

Visual Images under the Dual Structure of “Squire-Townsmen” - Cultural Metaphors from Yangliuqing New Year’s Paintings to Ukiyo-e

Fuqiang Lv^{1*}, Lina Xu¹

¹ School of Art, Qilu Institute of Technology, Jinan, China

Email Address

1330685762@qq.com (Fuqiang Lv)

*Correspondence: 1330685762@qq.com

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Abstract:

With the assistance of the image research methodology, this paper systematically examines the similarities and differences between Qing Dynasty Yangliuqing New Year Pictures and Edo-period Japanese Ukiyo-e in three dimensions: visual representation, cultural metaphor, and technical communication. The study reveals that the Yangliuqing New Year Picture, characterized by its “half-printed, half-painted” technique, upholds the Confucian ethical system through stylized combinations of auspicious symbols. In contrast, Ukiyo-e, employing a “plate-separated, color-differentiated” approach, constructs the optimism of the common people through the capture of instantaneous imagery. This paper seeks to elucidate the cultural interaction mechanisms of these two printmaking forms, ranging from “the unity of nature and humanity” to “the fading of light,” under the influence of agricultural civilization’s production logic and commercial societal dynamics.

Keywords:

Iconography, Prints, Visual Representation, Cultural Metaphor

1. Introduction

Focusing on Yang Liuqing New Year Paintings of the Qing Dynasty and Japanese Ukiyo-e of the Edo period, the differences and similarities between Yang Liuqing New Year Paintings of the Qing Dynasty and Japanese Ukiyo-e of the Edo period are systematically examined at three levels, namely, visual representations, cultural metaphors, and technological dissemination. Citing Panofsky’s three-level analysis, the iconographic study presents the abstract visual cultural symbols of a particular civilization [1].

2. Mirroring the Twin Cities in Historical Context

2.1. The Cultural Field of Yang Liuqing New Year Paintings

The town of Yangliuqing in Tianjin, as the gateway to the capital, was also known as Guliukou before the Qianlong era. Immigrants from Zhejiang contributed to the development of Yangliuqing New Year Painting culture. As an important art of the Qing Dynasty, Yangliuqing New Year Painting ranked first among the Four Great Chinese New Year Paintings, which upholds the legacy of the Han and Tang dynasties, undertakes the bones of the Northern Song Dynasty, and was created in the Wanli Calendar of the Ming Dynasty, and is a gradual art [2]. According to Wang Shucun's statistics, among the subjects of New Year paintings, 62.7% are auspicious motifs, 21.3% are operatic stories, and 15.1% are customary scenes, which is in line with the Confucian concept of "to educate and to help people". This proportion distribution is in line with the Confucian concept of art "to educate and help people's morality", which reflects the visual discipline and value concept of the customary society. The production technology and dissemination system of Yang Liuqing New Year paintings, "painter-engraver-painter", essentially responds to the aesthetic needs of the social circles of "scholar-peasant, farmer-industrialist", and is the visual carrier of the "ritual interaction" mode of the agrarian civilization. It is the visual carrier of the "ritual and customary interaction" model of the farming civilization. As a transportation hub of Zhili, Yangliuqing reached its peak during the Qianlong Dynasty, and according to the "Jinmen Baojia Tu", "the painting stores were numerous, with more than ten million prints made every year, reaching Heilongjiang in the north, and exporting to Suzhou and Hangzhou in the south". This geographic advantage in geographic space laid the foundation for its dissemination and cultural status in the Qing Dynasty.

The study found that the production of New Year's Paintings was mostly made by literati who had failed in the imperial examinations, and their creations needed to follow the admonition of "painting tips" that "there should be a play in the painting, so that you will not get tired of watching it", to maintain a delicate balance between elegance and vulgarity. This "semi-literary" quality made Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings a product of the exchange between the culture of the gentry and the folk culture, and a fixed workshop in the 16th century formed the basis for the development of Yangliuqing, which grew gradually in the 17th century, and the basic printing was realized from 1600 to 1644. In the early period, the typical Yangliuqing painting stores were Dai Lianzeng and Qi Jianlong; in the middle period, they were expanded into five shops, including Dai Lianzeng, Dong Lianzeng, Lianzengli, etc. In the late period, they added several other shops, such as Huilong, Shengxing, and Wanshenghengheng. Take Dai Lianzeng's workshop painting "Busy Farming" (currently housed in the National Art Museum of China) from the Jiaqing era as an example. Though depicting agricultural scenes from the Daoguang period, it bears the seal script inscription "Diligently Cultivate One's Own Trade" in the upper right corner. This artistry skillfully integrates labor-infused scenes into the urban ethos of "farming and scholarship passed down through generations," embodying what Fei Xiaotong termed "the ruralization of written culture in traditional China." It reflects the artistic evolution and unconscious internalization of ritual governance during that specific era. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. *Harvest Rush.*



Figure 2. *Abundance Year After Year.*



Figure 3. *The Great Wave off Kanagawa.*

2.2. The urban gene of ukiyo-e

Ukiyo-e was born during the Genroku period of Edo (1615-1867), and is also known as Edo-e. In 1860, Hishikawa Shishio's "Screen of Beauty" marked the establishment of the form of independent printmaking. Unlike the agrarian nature of New Year's paintings, Edo (present-day Tokyo) developed rapidly after the 17th century and once became a political and economic center, and the economic background of the "townspeople's" industry and commerce made ukiyo-e closely related to urban consumption from the very beginning: Yoshiwara Yukou, Kabukicho, and Ryokokobashi fireworks constituted the three major sources of its themes. According to the Edo Machi Fangshu (Edo Town Square Book), there were 87 print stores in Edo in 1790, forming a complete industrial chain from painters, engravers to folders.

In the process of civilization transformation from the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century, Tianjin Yangliuqing and Edo (today's Tokyo) have great cultural relevance in terms of historical origins, production techniques, and expression of themes, with the differences being reflected in the fact that the former was deeply embedded in the feudal social network of the Qing Dynasty, while the latter was nurtured by the wave of urban consumption under the Shogunate system of Japan. As typical representatives of folk culture in the East Asian region, the two share the basic form of woodblock printing technology, but project very different civilization textures in the image production mechanism.

3. Formal Comparison at the Level of Pictorialism

3.1. Philosophical Differences in Spatial Construction

The deconstruction of the two "cities of images" in the dualistic social structure of the "gentry-townspeople" will further break through the framework of geographical comparison in traditional art history and reveal the multiple values of traditional crafts under the influence of the social environment. It will further break through the comparative regional framework of traditional art history and reveal the multiple values of traditional crafts under the influence of the social environment. Both Yangliuqing Nianhua and ukiyo-e, which share the same origin and different paths, inherited the production techniques of bookplate painting from the Ming Dynasty, and developed under the nourishment of their respective cultures. Yangliuqing New Year Paintings are deeply loved by the public for their delightful forms and folklore. Typical compositions, such as Liannian Yuyu (Figure 2), use symmetrical compositions: two lotus children, one on the left (male) and the other on the right (female), are holding a carp; in the middle of the pot of treasure, there are two mice that guard the wealth, symbolizing the fullness of good fortune; and Liannian Yuyu

(Liannian Yuyu), with the font in the middle, is supplemented by the red color symbolizing the warmth and joyfulness of the occasion. This symmetrical layout is intriguing and carries a serious sense of orderly beauty." Compared to Katsushika Hokusai's "Kanagawa Surf" (Figure 3), created in 1831, the diagonal composition has a very clever design aesthetic, and its foreground for the instantaneous capture of the high winds and waves, making the distant Mount Fuji slightly tiny and empty, the arc-shaped space alludes to the Japanese "object of sadness" aesthetics of the impermanence of the realization. According to many scholars, Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings and ukiyo-e had an impact on European decorative arts (court art, castles) and oil painting (Impressionism) in the 18th and 19th centuries. At the end of the 19th century, ukiyo-e and other decorative arts triggered the revolution of Western modern art through the Paris World Expo of 1867, and its principle of plane composition and color separation directly influenced the development of Impressionism. Van Gogh's "Almond Tree in Blossom" imitated the "Osho-e" composition of Hiroshige Kagawa, applying oriental aesthetics to modern art. The treatment of the sky in Van Gogh's "Night of the Stars and Moon" is also similar to the curved design and arrangement of "Kanagawa Surf". This boomerang effect of cross-cultural technological diffusion culminated in Picasso's experiments with Cubism: the stylistic principles of African masks, mediated through Japanese prints, eventually fed into the European Art Nouveau movement.

The deep-seated differences between the two "cities of images" reflect the two paths of social transformation of East Asian civilization. The ethical narrative of Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings carries on the governance wisdom of the Ming and Qing Dynasties that "courtesy is not inferior to the common people", and the folk beliefs, clan system and traditional culture under the influence of "gentry flow to business" and "business to gentry" constitute the basic appearance of Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings. Traditional culture constitutes the basic face of Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings. The rise of ukiyo-e, on the other hand, symbolized the breakthrough of the Japanese townspeople from the shackles of "Shishu, agriculture, industry, and commerce," the negation of the traditional hierarchical system of status, and the construction of cultural sovereignty in the visual field against the aesthetics of the martial arts. This distinction is particularly significant in the technical and philosophical level: the warmth of hand-painted colors in the Yangliuqing "half-printed, half-painted" process implies the Chinese philosophy of "unity of heaven and mankind" of the farming civilization; the mechanical beauty of the ukiyo-e's "split-plate and folded-printing" process is the same as the "mechanical beauty" of the "split-plate and folded-printing" process. "The mechanical aesthetics of ukiyo-e, on the other hand, signifies the "fading of the light" advocated by Benjamin in modernity.

3.2. Conveyance of the Spirit of Painting in Different Places

Compared with Yangliuqing woodblock prints, ukiyo-e started a century later. Both places had the advantage of being near the sea, which provided conditions for the import of technology and the exchange of civilization between the two places. Exotic with the painting is reflected in: First, the Ming and Qing dynasties from the Changqi port trade exchange to promote the dissemination of the Ming dynasty engraving; Second, the Kangxi and Qianlong period imitation of the "Tassie penmanship" of the Gusu version of the imported into Japan through the Changqi; Third, the Qing dynasty painters in Japan to Shen Quan, Song Ziyang as a representative of the teaching of painting skills, contributing to the development of the "South Apple School". South

Apple School" development [3]. Although the same widely circulated popular art, but the Yang Liuqing economy is more oriented to the clan as the representative of the Han Chinese society, reflecting Zhou Hong advocated the "business domain clan" theory [4], the ukiyo-e from the beginning of the birth of the formation of a symbiotic relationship with the urban consumerism. The former was not only "scholar-peasant-industry", but further derived from the "two halves of the family" of merchant-peasant and merchant-industry that were integrated into the street and village, and the latter saw the rise of the civic class. The difference in economics between the two created the "circle pattern" of printmaking art. Chromatographic analysis shows that Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings mainly use mineral pigments such as acacia yellow, Buddha's green, and silver vermilion, which is in line with the theory of "five elements and five colors". As Laozi said, "Five colors make the eyes blind", but in the layout composition of the paintings, which is mixed with beautiful visions and hopes, it is visually coordinated and appropriate. The ukiyo-e was influenced by the prints of the Ming Dynasty, which developed the technique of "nishiki-e", and in the series of works of Kadokawa Gomaro's "Women's Aphrodisiacs in Ten Styles", the subtle and gradual technique of "blue folding" embodies the hazy sense of beauty in the Japanese aesthetic of "sheerness".

The Tokugawa Shogunate's system of "attendance accounting" gave rise to the "lodging town economy," which led to the population of Edo exceeding one million by the middle of the 18th century. The rapid popularity of "Ichi-e," pioneered by Hishikawa Shisen, was due to the fact that it fit in with the townspeople's aesthetic appeal of "Iki"- an aesthetic sense that combines the pleasure of the moment with the realization of impermanence, focusing on the experience of sensuality. This aesthetic sense, which combines instantaneous pleasure with the realization of impermanence and focuses on the core of sensual experience and hedonism, reached its peak in the works of Harunobu Suzuki's "nishiki-e" technique.

The mechanism of production and distribution of ukiyo-e was essentially a fusion of cultural ideas, and the rapid development of the economy catered to the aesthetic needs of the public class. The exaggerated facial expressions in Tochusai's paintings of musical servants and the perspective distortions in the landscapes of Kagawa Hiroshige can be regarded as typical examples of the "commercialization" of visual symbols. According to the Ukiyo-e Classical Examination, the first edition of Katsushika Hokusai's Thirty-six Views of Fugaku was printed in a run of 8,000 sets, and in just six months it was distributed nationwide through the "Ask the House" system. This efficient dissemination not only relied on the industrialized division of labor of "painter-carver-folding artist-printmaker", but also benefited from the unique "Mitate" thinking of the townspeople's culture - the secular translation of classical imagery. The secular translation of classical imagery, as in the case of Komaro Kitagawa's series of works, accomplished an aesthetic expression that catered to the needs of the spirit in the collision of sacred and secular culture.

4. Cultural Translation in the Deeper Levels of Pictorialism

The formal difference between Yangliuqing New Year paintings and ukiyo-e is only superficial, and the deeper difference is the consideration and pursuit of "present meaning" between the two civilizations - the former focuses on ethical narrative and is deeply regulated and guided by rituals and customs, while the latter favors sensory aesthetics and feeds the needs and aesthetics of the citizens. The former focuses on ethical narratives, which are highly regulated and guided by rituals and customs,

while the latter favors sensory aesthetics, which feeds the needs and aesthetics of citizens.

4.1. Metaphorical Mechanism of Symbol System

The combination of bats (fu), deer (lu), and peaches (shou) in Yangliuqing New Year Paintings follows the auspicious system of “Erya-Shitian”. The symbols of ukiyo-e are more secular: for example, the recurring shamisen, tobacco pipes, and hairpins in the works of Eizumi Kesai, which are symbols of Machiya culture that convey a unique visual semantics.

The symbolic system of Yangliuqing New Year paintings is essentially deeply influenced by Confucian ethics. Take Liannian yuyue as an example, the layout of the picture consisting of a lotus flower, a child, and a carp is in fact a secular translation of the trigram system of the Zhouyi: the lotus flower symbolizes the “Lei Gua” (the civilization of the virtue of fire), the child corresponds to the “Zhen Gua” (the eldest man is in charge of the affairs), and the carp alludes to the “Kan Gua” (the civilization of the kan), which is a symbol of the “Liannian yuyue”. The lotus flower symbolizes “Lei Gua” (the civilization of fire), the child corresponds to “Zhen Gua” (the eldest man is in charge of affairs), and the carp alludes to “Kan Gua” (the virtue of water to moisten the bottom). This configuration of symbols is by no means a random combination, the Mustard Seed Garden Records of Painting clearly recorded that “the fish must be painted with the lotus, to take the meaning of yin and yang and harmony”, which can be seen to follow a strict symbolic syntax. What is more meaningful is the visual pun in “Zaojun’s Divine Position”: the posture of Mrs. Zaojun holding a guidepost is exactly the same as that of “Da Zongbo holding the Zhengui” as described in the “Zhou Rites - Chun Guan,” which completes the relationship between “family sacrifice” and “national sacrifice” through the descending dimensionalization of the use of sacred symbols. The use of sacred symbols downgrades the value of “family rituals” and “national rituals” to the same level.

The symbolic elements used in ukiyo-e, on the other hand, show a strong deconstructive quality. In Katsushika Hokusai’s Hyakunin series, the absurd juxtaposition of ghosts and everyday objects is in fact a visual experiment in the aesthetics of Japanese “ukiyo-e” - lanterns are transformed into skeletons, umbrellas are transformed into demonic foxes, and this kind of “monstrous objects” technique subverts traditional object-oriented aesthetics. This kind of “object monstrosity” subverts the traditional relationship between object’s energy and reference. Even in seemingly realistic landscapes, such as Hiromasa Gochuan’s “Meisho Edo Hyakkei - Kameido Umeyakubo,” the surreal juxtaposition of blossoming ume (plum) branches and twisted human bodies suggests the townspeople’s transgression of the boundaries of “elegance and vulgarity”.

4.2. Conceptual Remodeling of Viewing Methods

Images convey a certain social culture in the process of viewing and conveying. The layout of the posting of the Yang Liuqing New Year paintings visually presents: the layout of the “civil and military combat” of the portraits of the door gods (the left Yuchigong holding a mace, the right Qin Qiong holding a whip) can be found in the Forbidden City’s Hall of Supreme Harmony, and the height of the hanging of the “Three Stars of Fortune, Luck and Longevity” in the nave is strictly in accordance with the ritual requirement of “looking up to the sky” (the height of the “three stars of fortune, fortune and longevity”). “The height of the hanging of the three stars of

fortune and longevity in the center hall should strictly follow the ritual requirement of "looking up to the sky" (one zhang and one foot from the ground, which is the extreme of the Yang number of the "Zhou Thigh Calculating Classic"). This spatial discipline is particularly significant in the "Zhenzhai Shenhu": the tiger's line of sight is at a 45-degree angle, forming an unequal gaze with the viewer, reproducing the Confucian cultural tradition and conceptual cognition of "a gentleman who is not heavy is not powerful".

The ukiyo-e style of viewing subverts the traditional power structure. The "Oshoue" of Toshousai Shoraku dissolves the programmed expressions of Noh masks through close-ups, and the eyes of the servant Ichikawa Ezo glaring at the viewer are enlarged into the provocative "machinist's gaze" in Sandaime Otani Kinji no Nuno Edo Hyoue. In Eizumi Kesai's Three Beauties in Competition, the politics of the gaze evolves into a more complex power game: the beauty on the right side of the picture looks askance with her pipe in her hand, the woman on the left side peeks at the viewer with her fan half-covered, and the figure in the center smiles as she looks directly at the viewer, constituting a triple network of interlocking stares that completely dismantles the hierarchical order of the traditional "painter-viewer-viewer-people-in-painting". The hierarchical order of "painter-viewer-artist" in traditional painting is completely dismantled. As Foucault said, this "democratization of the gaze" is essentially a symbolic revolt of the civil society against the aesthetics of martial arts.

4.3. Logical thinking of technical philosophy

The differences in woodblock techniques reflect the unique aesthetic character and aesthetic choices of the two civilizations. Yang Liuqing "half-printed, half-painted, halo powder hook gold" process, engraved only complete the outline of the production, more than 60% of the area relies on artificial coloring [5]. This "hand against the machine" technology choice, in fact, to resist the mechanical reproduction of cultural strategies - painters in the point of coloring the face to follow the "dyeing low, not dyeing high" ancestral teachings, through the dark and light halo simulation. The "chiaroscuro" of literati paintings is simulated through the shading, so that the mass-produced yearly paintings still retain the aura of "uniqueness". Dai Lianzeng painting store account book, recorded in the Guangxu period, the senior colorist's pen fee is 7.3 times that of the engraver, this value distribution system confirms the Confucian "emphasis on the road, not the tool" view of technology.

Ukiyo-e's complicated "split-plate folding and printing" technology is moving towards the logic of complete industrialization. According to the "Ukiyo-e Plate Compact", Katsushika Hokusai's "Thirty-six Views of Fugaku" had a set of 23 plates, with a margin of error of no more than 0.2 millimeters per plate. This kind of mechanical precision reaches its peak in Kokoyoshi Kagawa's Soma Goneri: the skeleton monster's 368 bones are accurately reproduced through 62 overlay plates, and its aesthetics of technological violence is just like what Heidegger said, "the deconstruction of the forced". Even more revolutionary is the folding master's "mica folding" technique - mica powder sprinkled in the background to create starlight effects, this mechanical imitation of natural phenomena, heralding the "age of technical reproduction" referred to by Benjamin. This mechanical imitation of natural phenomena heralded what Benjamin called "the age of technical reproduction".

5. Reflections on Civilization between Technological Communication

Within the scope of the study, the two-way nature of cross-cultural influence is extremely obvious between Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings and Ukiyo-e. Technological breakthroughs have created a breeding ground for cultural dissemination and exchange.

The trajectory of the woodblock printing technology covers cities such as Tianjin, Suzhou, Nagasaki, and Edo. The civilization dialogue between Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings and Ukiyo-e is not a simple borrowing of techniques, but a deep collision and fusion of the two civilizations on the level of "technology and culture". The dialogue between the two is not just a one-way narrative of the history of traditional technology, but a two-way spread of civilization behind the spread of technology.

The process of ukiyo-e was deeply inspired and influenced by the Ming engravings, Suzhou prints, and Yang Liuqing New Year's Paintings in the history of Chinese printmaking, but this influence was not a passive acceptance; in the 1740s, Shen Nan-an's style of painting was introduced to Japan, and in the Gusu Wannianqiao painting, his realistic technique was transformed by Yuanshan Yingjue into the "eyeglass painting," but the transformation had already been incorporated into the Japanese "see-rites" and the "see-saws". But this transformation has been integrated into the Japanese aesthetics of "see standing" (simulation). For example, although Sima Jianghan's "Western Woman Figure" borrowed the chapping technique from the "Mustard Seed Garden Record of Painting", it was aesthetically transformed into "Japanese" aesthetics through exaggerated contrasts of light and dark. The path of reverse propagation is also full of cultural tension. 1853 Perry's fleet brought the "Japan Picture", Kagawa Hiroshige's "Fifty-three times in the Tokaido" triggered the amazement of American printmakers. This influence flowed back to China through the ports of commerce, giving birth to the "Eastern style" of Shanghai's month-plate paintings. Zhou Muqiao's "Shanghai Scenery of Open Colors" obviously borrowed the figure modeling and color treatment from the "Beauty Painting" of Xizai Yingquan, but this borrowing was absorbed and transformed by the "Haikai Culture": the functional beauty of ukiyo-e was transformed into the visual symbols of the urban modernity, which served the aesthetic needs of the emerging civic class. The official beauty of ukiyo-e was transformed into the visual symbols of urban modernity, serving the aesthetic needs of the emerging public class.

6. Conclusions

Research shows that the reason why Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings and Ukiyo-e blossomed into different aesthetics in similar historical periods is because of the differences in the social environment and traditional culture, which implies the remodeling of cultural subjectivity in the technological dissemination of the former is a cultural product of the ritual civilization, while the latter is the Japanese aesthetics of the economic attributes. It is urgent and necessary to pay attention to the "deep institutions" and philosophical thoughts of printmaking works. In the context of globalization, the former, through the ethicalization of symbols, the hierarchization of gaze, and the normativity of technology, maintains the discipline and law unique to a secular society; the latter, through the playfulness of symbols, the affirmative action of gaze, and the modernity of technology, opens up a space of cultural autonomy for civil society. The history of technological diffusion is in fact a micro-epic of

civilizational dialogue. This difference in translation led to a very different historical fate in the 19th century when it met with the impact of the West - while the flat compositionism of ukiyo-e gave birth to the Impressionist revolution, the Yangliuqing New Year's Paintings were still repeating themselves in the symbolic cocoon of the "Ten Perfect Luck".

Today, with the deep development of globalization, this historical experience is of great revelation: the modern transformation of traditional art should neither fall into the myth of technological determinism nor stick to the rut of cultural essentialism, but rather find possible paths of innovative transformation in the dialectical interaction between technological dissemination and cultural subjectivity. Images should develop a visual grammar adapted to the new era as well as a mechanism for cultural translation. The vitality of the image system depends on whether its translation mechanism can maintain a dynamic balance between cultural conformity and paradigm innovation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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