



Analysis of the Image Language of Tantou Woodblock New Year Painting Based on Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Tantou woodblock New Year paintings, as an intangible cultural heritage of Shaoyang, China, encapsulate a rich blend of agricultural civilization, Chu witch culture, Meishan traditions, and classical Chinese philosophy. Under the challenge of modernization and cultural loss, this study aims to reveal the deeper symbolic logic and cultural mythologies embedded in Tantou paintings through Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, breaking through the limitations of traditional folk-art analysis.

Methodology: This study adopts a semiotic framework, combining literature review, formal image analysis, and Barthes' dual-layer symbol system—extension (language level) and connotation (myth level). By analyzing key motifs such as "Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong" and "The Mouse's Wedding", the research decodes their image structures, symbolic composition, and ideological significance.

Results: Findings demonstrate that Tantou paintings operate on multiple symbolic levels. At the extension layer, figures, animals, colors, and patterns form a coherent visual language system. At the connotation level, these elements metaphorically convey cultural values such as prosperity, fertility, humility, and divine authority. At the mythological level, they construct a worldview shaped by folk beliefs, survival ethics, and historical moral narratives, naturalizing ideologies within visual culture.

Conclusion: Tantou New Year paintings are not only expressions of folk aesthetics but also symbolic carriers of regional belief systems and ethical values. Through semiotic deconstruction, this study establishes a new interpretive paradigm for folk art and demonstrates how image language bridges tradition and modernity, art and ideology, through layered meaning systems.

Keywords: Tantou Woodblock New Year Paintings; Image Language; Semiotics; Roland Barthes; Cultural Symbolism





Introduction

Image language is a communication method that employs visual components like pictures and symbols, along with colors and spatial layouts, to convey meaning either as a substitute for textual language or alongside it. The development of image language has progressed notably from its semiotic origins due to advancements in media technologies and digital platforms. Roland Barthes, along with fellow semioticians, established foundational research into how images operate as cultural signs (Barthes, 1977). Image language now operates as a standalone form of communication in distinct fields like advertising and film, as well as digital communication and education. The contemporary digital landscape, marked by visual abundance, now requires image language to deliver intricate messages with both efficiency and emotional impact. Visual content, such as memes, emojis, and infographics, drives the success of social media platforms by depending on mutual cultural knowledge among users for meaning. Visual communication methods surpass language barriers to serve as effective tools for worldwide communication, as indicated by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006). Studies in visual literacy reveal that proficiency in image language improves both cognitive engagement and memory retention, especially within educational environments (Metros, 2008).

Image language attracts growing attention from multiple fields, including media studies, design, linguistics, and education, because it effectively communicates meaning through explicit and subtle methods. The development of intelligent systems that communicate with humans effectively relies on understanding the grammar and semantics of image language as artificial intelligence and machine learning systems start to interpret and generate visual content (Arnheim, 1969). Image language functions as an essential element of modern literacy that demands thorough examination in scholarly research and practical application domains.

As a national intangible cultural heritage of China, Tantou woodblock New Year paintings have a history of more than 300 years. They carry the unique folk beliefs, aesthetic tastes, and social values of the southwestern Hunan region. Famous for its bright colors, simple shapes, and auspicious themes, it is not only an important carrier of traditional New Year culture but also a symbol of folk art and regional identity. However, under the impact of modern social transformation and globalization, the survival context of Tantou New Year paintings has undergone drastic changes and is facing the situation of being lost. Existing studies mostly explore its skill inheritance and aesthetic characteristics from the perspective of art and folklore, lacking a systematic deconstruction of the deep-level expressive mechanism and ideological coding of image symbols. Roland Barthes's semiotic theory provides methodological support for breaking through this research bottleneck. His theory is based on the binary structure of "signifier and signified" and the "myth" theory, revealing the logic of symbols concealing cultural power relations





through the "naturalization" strategy. Based on this theory, this study analyzes the deep cultural connotation of the image language of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings from the perspective of the double-layer symbol system of "extension (language layer)-connotation (myth layer)", breaks through the descriptive framework of traditional art history, provides an interdisciplinary perspective for the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, and re-examines the symbolic value and narrative tension of traditional images in the contemporary cultural field. Narrative tension here refers to the cultural and emotional dynamics embedded in traditional imagery when reinterpreted in contemporary contexts—an essential factor in their continued relevance and public engagement. Understanding the symbolic logic embedded in these images provides critical insight for preserving and revitalizing intangible cultural heritage in ways that maintain both cultural authenticity and contemporary relevance.

Research Objectives

1. Analyze the extensional meaning of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings based on Roland Barthes' primary symbol system.
2. Analyze the connotational meaning of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings based on Roland Barthes' secondary symbol system.
3. Analyze the worldview logic of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings based on Roland Barthes's theory.

Literature Review

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Semiotics provides fundamental insights into the construction and interpretation of meaning through the analysis of signs and symbols within cultural behavior patterns. The French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes significantly contributed to the evolution of contemporary semiotic theory. Barthes expanded Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory by applying semiotic analysis to cultural items, including photographs, advertisements, fashion, and media texts (Barthes, 1972). Through his studies, Barthes redirected scholarly attention from language structure analysis to understanding how meaning is shaped by social and cultural factors.

The Denotation and Connotation Distinction

Barthes made a major contribution by defining the difference between denotation and connotation. The denotation of a sign represents its direct dictionary meaning, whereas its connotation encompasses the cultural and emotional meanings attached to it. A rose picture directly represents a flower but symbolically suggests love or passion and sometimes secrecy,





depending on its context (Barthes, 1977). The presence of dual meanings allows for cultural texts to receive distinct interpretations from audiences who hold varying social and ideological perspectives.

Myth and Second-Order Semiotics

Barthes developed "myth" as a secondary semiotic system in his theoretical framework. Within this model, first-order system signs, which combine the signifier and the signified, transform into simple signifiers of broader ideological constructs. Barthes classified myths as cultural stories that present specific values and beliefs as self-evident truths that stand beyond questioning (Barthes, 1972). The depiction of a soldier saluting a flag serves to convey patriotic sentiments while positioning nationalistic ideology as inherent and righteous.

Semiotics and Media Critique

Through semiotic analysis, Barthes investigated how mass media serve to uphold and reinforce established ideological systems. Through works such as *Mythologies*, Barthes analyzed common cultural elements, including magazine covers and advertisements, to demonstrate their role in supporting ideological power structures. Through his critique, Barthes established the basis for future work in cultural studies and media theory, which inspired readers to examine meaning creation processes and investigate which groups benefit from them.

Application in Visual and Cultural Studies

The semiotic theory developed by Barthes has found extensive application within the disciplines of visual and cultural studies. Through his 1977 essay "Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes investigates how images transmit complex meanings by using linguistic and symbolic codes. Barthes explains that photographs do not offer objective depictions of reality but function as constructed texts that transmit ideological messages. His fundamental insights have become essential tools in advertising analysis, film studies, and art criticism because decoding visual representation requires understanding its hidden messages.

Conclusion and Enduring Impact

The semiotic theory developed by Roland Barthes continues to shape humanities and social science research by elucidating how language interacts with cultural practices to produce systems of power. Through his study of myth and sign ideologies, Barthes gave scholars tools to critically analyze how cultures build meaning. Barthes' theoretical framework continues to be an effective instrument for analyzing how images and symbols shape our understanding of reality as media and visual culture develop.

Research Methods

This study uses three methods, namely, literature research, formal analysis, and semiotic





interpretation, to systematically analyze the image language system of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings. The literature research method systematically combs through the historical documents, image genealogy, and semiotic theory texts of Tantou New Year paintings to establish a framework for the association between the visual expression and ideology of Tantou New Year paintings. The formal analysis method deconstructs the visual grammar in the images of New Year paintings and deconstructs the constitutive logic of its symbol system from the perspective of composition, modeling, color, and other elements. The semiotic interpretation uses Roland Barthes's double-layer symbol system as a framework to decode the generation mechanism of image symbols, analyze the signifier (such as the visual form of Qin Shubao's white face and Yuchi Gong's red face) and the direct signified (the function of exorcising evil spirits and protecting the house) at the "extension layer", and explore the cultural metaphor of symbols at the "connotation layer" (such as the red metaphor for festivity and deterrence); and explain how symbols are naturalized into ideological carriers through the "myth system" (such as "Kirin Bestowing a Child" sublimates fertility worship into Confucian filial piety). These images were selected based on their high frequency of use, symbolic richness, and cultural resonance within the Tantou tradition, making them exemplary cases for decoding symbolic mechanisms. Applying Barthes' system enables a deeper understanding of how traditional symbols can be contextually reinterpreted, offering a theoretical foundation for strategies in heritage preservation and symbolic revitalization. This transformation exemplifies Barthes' myth function—naturalizing cultural ideals like prosperity and reproduction into unquestioned symbols of folk belief.

Research Scope

The research focuses on Hunan Tantou woodblock New Year paintings, taking typical images such as "Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong", "Guan Gong and Ma Chao", "The Mouse's Wedding", "Harmony Brings Auspiciousness", "The Peach Garden Oath of Brotherhood", and "Ushering in Prosperity and Fortune" as the objects, and using Roland Barthes's semiotic layering theory to analyze the composition mechanism and cultural meaning of its visual symbols. The focus is on the material form of symbols at the extension level, cultural metaphors at the connotation level, and ideological construction at the myth level. Through symbol decoding, it reveals how traditional images sublimate regional culture into a universal meaning system, providing a semiotic methodological reference for folk art research.

Research Results

1. The extended meaning of the image language of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings





Roland Barthes's primary symbol system emphasizes the extensional meaning of symbols and explores the signifier and signified of symbols, which is highly compatible with the exploration of the symbolic properties of the image language of Tantou New Year paintings (Barthes, 1965/1999). Its extensional level is manifested as an intuitive visual symbol system. According to the interpretation of the subject matter, the symbolic elements that constitute Tantou woodblock New Year paintings are rich, including character symbols (such as Qin Shubao, Yuchi Gong, Guan Yu, Ma Chao, Hero of the Miao Nationality and other historical and mythological figures); animal symbols (such as mouse, cats, fish, chickens, etc.); plant symbols (such as peaches, Buddha's hands, plum blossoms, lotus flowers, willow branches, etc.); utensil symbols (such as whips, maces, command flags, longevity locks, Ruyi, etc.), and decorative pattern symbols (such as fishing net patterns, tortoise shells, tiger patterns, dragon patterns, etc.). These symbols are the most basic elements of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings. They are independent and interrelated. Various elements form the symbol system of the image language of Tantou New Year paintings through clever combinations and arrangements, forming a unique artistic style and visual effect.

First, the composition pursues balanced symmetry and unified changes; for example, the "Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong" posted on the left and right of the door are like door god New Year pictures, showing a traditional symmetrical structure, reflecting the Taoist philosophy of yin and yang balance. Artists will also make some different treatments on the two seemingly identical door god symbols, clothing lines, and colors. For example, Qin Shubao's face is white, with weapons axe and whip; Yuchi Gong's face is red, with weapons axe and mace; both characters are equipped with command flags and are combined with "Five Sons Passing the Imperial Examination" and Kirin; the clothing is equipped with dragon patterns, linked beads, cloud patterns, and other patterns. The combination of these symbolic elements constructs the symbol system of door god New Year pictures. And achieve a high degree of coordination in simplicity and complexity, size, density, rhythm, movement, and stillness, so that the whole picture has both changes and unity in symmetry. At the same time, it also makes its symbols have rich symbolic meanings. The same symmetry law is also reflected in other themes of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings, such as "Gifting Pearls in the Garden", "Borrowing an Umbrella by West Lake", and "Kirin Bestowing a Child". This symmetrical composition rule conforms to the practical principles of posting double doors in traditional buildings and also conforms to the aesthetic laws of art forms.

Secondly, the modeling pursues roughness, exaggeration, simplicity, and simplicity, presenting the primitive temperament and mysterious meaning of Chu witch culture and Meishan culture, which is very freehand and vivid. For example, in the New Year painting "Qin Shubao and





Yuchi Gong", the proportion of the figure is intentionally shortened, only four heads long, and expanded horizontally. This exaggerated and deformed treatment fully expresses the sense that the door god is thick, strong, and thick as a mountain. The square face, mighty big knife eyebrows, big ears hanging down to the shoulders, lion-like nose, round eyes, Qin Shubao's goatee, and Yuchi Gong's beard all show the simplicity and majesty of the door god image, achieving the effect of exorcising demons and evil spirits. The New Year painting "The Mouse's Wedding" is composed of animal symbols. The mouse has a pointed mouth and monkey cheeks, walks upright, and the anthropomorphic treatment adds a bit of humor and cuteness; while the cat has a fat head and big ears, a strong body, an exaggerated expression, and is arrogant and majestic, forming a sharp contrast with the mouse. The picture is festive and lively, reflecting the simple and warm folk customs. Tantou New Year paintings use abstract modeling to refine representative elements and form a unique symbol system, which not only retains the original roughness and simplicity but also conveys auspicious meanings and profound cultural connotations.

Furthermore, the colors are bright, moist, thick, and hot. Tantou woodblock New Year paintings are also called "five-color paper". Influenced by the ancients' "five colors" color concept, blue, red, yellow, white, and black run through the picture. Longhui County, the origin of New Year paintings, is known as the "hometown of three spicy peppers" because of its abundant pepper production. The unique regional culture and living customs give New Year paintings a strong "spicy" flavor and Jingchu characteristics. The color matching is unique, and the contrast is strong. Large areas of warm colors such as orange and red contrast with cold colors such as ultramarine and royal blue, which has a dazzling visual effect and makes people excited and happy. The black ink line outlines the shape, making the picture both bright and harmonious. For example, the costumes of the New Year painting "Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong" use a large area of royal blue and red to form a strong contrast, and at the same time use small pieces of emerald, green, light yellow, rose red, coal black, and white to enhance the richness and interest of the picture. But the overall tone is red, which not only highlights the festive decoration but also achieves the effect of warding off evil spirits and stabilizing the house. The colors used in Tantou woodblock New Year paintings not only have extremely high aesthetic value but also carry profound philosophical concepts and rich symbolic meanings. The symbolization of colors makes the New Year paintings more visually attractive and conveys deep cultural information.

2. The connotation and significance of the image language of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings

Roland Barthes's secondary symbol system emphasizes the connotation and meaning of symbols, and the openness of symbol interpretation (such as door gods may symbolize the power of warding off evil spirits or the folk customs of New Year festivals), involving the relationship





between symbols and regional culture and folk psychology (Barthes, 1957/2019). Barthes believes that symbols in visual art are often metaphorical, that is, they express certain abstract concepts or emotions through some form of similarity. This metaphor makes visual art a powerful means of expression that can transcend the boundaries of language and culture and convey profound meanings (Roland Barthes, 1957/2019). As a type of folk art, Tantou woodblock New Year paintings express a world of symbolic symbols. Its images symbolize folk beliefs and New Year customs. The themes often have multiple meanings. The meanings between the works are close or intertwined, which concentrate on specific and rich ideological concepts and collective cultural memories.

First, Tantou New Year paintings usually show a concept of happiness concept of "praying for blessings and good luck". For example, the door god New Year painting "Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong" is combined with "Five Sons Passing the Imperial Examination" and decorated with the words "congratulations on making a fortune and everything goes well"; the banners of "Guan Gong and Ma Chao" are written with the word "Bliss", and the battle robes are written with the words "Love" and "Happiness" respectively; in "Ushering in Prosperity and Fortune", Marshal Zhao Gong holds a spoke with the words "Big Profits from a Single Venture", and behind him is a couplet "bringing in thousands of treasures every day, and attracting thousands of miles of wealth every day"; the theme of "Harmony Brings Auspiciousness" represents happiness, good luck, and everything goes well, and the braided eyebrows of the characters symbolize health and longevity; "The Mouse's Wedding" transforms folk narratives into metaphors of "happy marriage" and "eliminating disasters", dispelling real anxiety in a humorous form, etc. These New Year paintings directly reflect the people's ideal pursuit of a better life and their good wishes for blessings and good luck through the superposition of text symbols and image metaphors, and construct a symbolic system of folk beliefs and life aesthetics.

Secondly, Tantou New Year paintings reflect the life concept of "many children and good fortune". For example, in the New Year painting "Kirin Bestowing a Child", the pattern of a boy riding a Kirin represents the legitimacy of "a son given by heaven", and reflects the concept of "many children and good fortune" through the "benevolent beast" attribute of the Qilin, and strengthens the penetration of Confucian ethics into folk beliefs. The gourds in the New Year painting "Generations of Prosperity" have many seeds, symbolizing the mother's gestation, and are homophonic with "Fortune", reflecting the transliteration of the concept of many children and good fortune and reproduction. The gourd vines are continuous and have a vitality that continues to develop, symbolizing growth and longevity, metaphorically implying the continuity of family bloodlines, and reflecting the worship of life reproduction in agricultural society. In the New Year painting "The Mouse's Wedding", rats symbolize strong reproductive ability in folk customs,





metaphorically implying people's concept of reproductive worship, and the wedding scene of the wedding conveys the wish for the prosperity of the family in a playful form. And so on.

In addition, Tantou New Year paintings also reflect the moral values of "humility and respect". For example, in the New Year painting "The Peach Garden Oath of Brotherhood", Liu Bei is in the middle, and the highest position, while Guan Yu and Zhang Fei are on the left and right, and Guan Yu's position is slightly lower than Liu Bei's and slightly higher than Zhang Fei's. The artists printed the theme of "heroic chivalry with trust and promise" on the picture, reflecting people's promotion, education, and strengthening of ancient values such as humility and respect, "benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, and trustworthiness", so that it has its cultural connotation. In the god paintings, many images of gods are also adaptations and creations of some heroic and loyal figures, such as Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong. In the local area, people regard gods as supreme supervisors, examining everything in the world, so people worship gods with humility and respect, and dare not offend them in the slightest. The characters in these New Year paintings deeply reflect the Tantou people's love and worship for ancient heroic and loyal figures, and reflect the Tantou people's "humility and respect" moral qualities.

3. The worldview of the image language of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings: A semiotic interpretation

Roland Barthes' myth theory further reveals how popular culture "naturalizes" specific ideologies through the secondary signification system of symbols through semiotics, exposing the ideological manipulation of symbols in popular culture, disguising the values constructed by culture as unquestionable universal truths, and thus building social consensus and cultural identity (Barthes, 1957/2019). As a traditional folk art belonging to the masses, the image language system and folk practice of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings convey a worldview rooted in an agricultural society and popular beliefs through the process of reconstruction and "mythologization" of this cultural context. The formation of its worldview embodies three philosophies.

First, the symbolic system of Tantou New Year paintings reflects the unique philosophy of "fantasy of the coexistence of man and god" in Chinese folk beliefs. The gods in New Year paintings, such as the God of Wealth, the door gods, and the Buddha statues, are not omnipotent saviors, but limited interveners. For example, the theme of the New Year painting "Ushering in Prosperity and Fortune" expresses people's hope to be blessed by worshipping the God of Wealth. The bestowal of his blessings follows a set of hidden laws of morality and luck balance. The lucky ones regard wealth as the result of sincerity, which strengthens the rationality of faith; the unfortunate ones reflect on their sincerity and virtue and internalize their awe of the gods. This mechanism transforms the uncertainty of reality into a moral narrative, allowing people to





maintain hope when they are unable to control their destiny. Secondly, the images and functions of the gods in New Year paintings are close to the secular world, showing the pragmatism of folk beliefs. The randomness of the gods' grace is endowed with the mysterious color of "the way of heaven is unpredictable", which not only maintains the supremacy of theocracy but also maintains the stability of faith through unverifiability. People try to communicate with gods rationally (such as posting New Year pictures, burning incense, and offering sacrifices), but they must face the uncontrollability of gods. This interweaving of rationality and irrationality constitutes the complex core of faith. In addition, the "moral supervision" function of theocracy, such as the record of good and evil of Guanyin of the South China Sea, is a supernatural manifestation of Taoist ethics, which prompts social norms to be internalized into individual self-examination. The "selective granting" of blessings stimulates competition among believers, disintegrates the potential for collective resistance, and makes myths a cultural tool for maintaining social stability. This fantasy is not only a product of cognitive limitations, but also a cultural strategy of agricultural civilization to cope with survival challenges with symbolic wisdom. On the stage where gods and people dance together, despair and hope coexist, showing the resilience of life and the wisdom of compromise.

Secondly, the core theme of Tantou New Year paintings always revolves around "survival", which deeply reflects the philosophy of "utilitarianism of natural survival" in Chinese rural society. This philosophy is rooted in the historical environment of many disasters, with "practical rationality" as the core, and transforms the real needs of survival, reproduction, family continuation, material security, etc., into symbolic artistic expression. For example, the images of gods in New Year pictures such as "Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong" and "Ushering in Prosperity and Fortune" convey the practical function of exorcising evil and bringing good fortune through sacred postures and bright colors, meeting the people's psychological needs for safety, wealth and happiness; works such as "Kirin Bestowing a Child", "Generations of Prosperity" and "The Mouse's Wedding" use homophones and metaphors (such as "Cassia twig" is homophonic to "Takako") to strengthen the patriarchal society's emphasis on the continuation of blood ties, respond to the survival pressure of labor shortage in the farming era, and solidify the continuation of blood ties as an unquestionable collective mission; New Year pictures such as "A House Full of Gold and Jade, Makes Fortune Every Year" and "Auspicious Official Prominence" symbolize "salary" and "wealth", which not only reflect the small peasant economy's desire for wealth accumulation, but also imply the utilitarian demand to change the fate of the class through imperial examinations; the theme of "big reunion" expressed in "Gifting Pearls in the Garden" and the theme of "harmony" expressed in "Harmony Brings Auspiciousness" further embody the survival rules of "harmony is the most precious" and "reunion and harmony" in the way of doing things. The choice of these





themes in New Year paintings is not accidental, but rather a transformation of the rigid needs of natural survival (such as avoiding disasters, having enough food and clothing, and passing on the family line) into perceptible visual symbols. This makes Tantou New Year paintings the "glue" that maintains the rural order. The widespread dissemination of auspicious symbols (such as the word "Bliss") sublimates personal utilitarian demands into social consensus, conceals class contradictions, and promotes stability. This utilitarianism is both an adaptive response to the harsh living environment and a cultural strategy for maintaining order in the patriarchal society.

Furthermore, the historical themes or historical figures of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings embody a philosophy of "historical ethical moralism". For example, the New Year paintings "The Peach Garden Oath of Brotherhood", "Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong", "Guan Gong and Ma Chao", and so on are not only artistic creations, but also cultural reflections of the ethics and power relations of rural society. Through artistic historical narratives, these New Year paintings not only reflect the emphasis on loyalty and righteousness in the patriarchal society but also imply the subtle resistance and psychological compensation of the people to the alienation of power. In Tantou New Year paintings, "The Peach Garden Oath of Brotherhood" conveys Confucian loyalty and righteousness in a fixed scene mode. In essence, it is a visual reinforcement of the patriarchal "Three Bonds and Five Constant Virtues", sublimating the brotherhood of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei into a symbol of the righteousness between the monarch and his subjects, and emphasizing the obedience of individuals to the collective ethical order. The image of the door god in "Qin Shubao and Yuchi Gong", with its majestic posture and weapon configuration, not only embodies the traditional function of exorcising evil and avoiding evil, but also metaphorically implies the moral responsibility of loyalty to the monarch and the master, which is consistent with the tradition of Tantou New Year paintings of "theme first" and art serving ethical education. However, the dissemination of such historical themes by the public often carries a rebellious interpretation. Although "The Peach Garden Oath of Brotherhood" originated from "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms", in the New Year pictures, the exaggerated body language weakened the boundaries between the monarch and the ministers and strengthened the folk sentiment of brotherly equality. "Guan Gong and Ma Chao" transformed the historical war into a symbol of heroes fighting against injustice through dramatic modeling, implicitly criticizing the abuse of power. This adaptation shows the "selective acceptance" of official ethics by the public; that is, while maintaining the framework of loyalty and righteousness, it cleverly integrates the consciousness of equality and resistance. The heroic images in Tantou New Year paintings, such as Guan Yu and Qin Shubao, are often endowed with supernatural attributes of justice. Guan Yu's red face, long beard, and Qinglong Yanyue Sword are not only sacred symbols for exorcising evil spirits but also embody the people's yearning for honest law enforcers. As a door god, Qin





Shubao's image of wearing armor reflects the people's hope that heroes can eliminate social injustice by violent means. This creation is rooted in the contradiction between officials and the people in an agricultural society. It is a way for people to seek psychological comfort through artistic imagination when they are unable to directly confront power. Therefore, the historical themes and characters of Tantou New Year paintings are not only visual expressions of ethical conflicts, but also the product of the interaction between the power structure and folk wisdom. They not only consolidate the power structure but also inject the spirit of equality and resistance through artistic adaptation, showing the profound connotation of the dual attributes of "ethical moralism" in traditional society as a ruling tool and the survival wisdom of the people.

Discussion

This study uses Roland Barthes's semiotic theory as a framework to systematically deconstruct the multi-layered meaning structure of the image language of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings. This study breaks through the research paradigm of traditional art studies that focuses on formal description and folklore records, and for the first time, fully introduces Barthes's "extension (language layer)-connotation (myth layer)" double-layer symbol system into folk art analysis. Through the decoding of the extension layer and the connotation layer, it reveals how the New Year painting symbol system encodes Chuwu culture, Meishan culture, traditional philosophical concepts, etc., into visual narratives. In particular, the "myth layer" reveals the process of symbols being naturalized into ideology, such as "Kirin Bestowing a Child" sublimates reproductive worship into Confucian filial piety, concealing the disciplinary nature of the patriarchal system on individual life. In addition, compared with the one-way affirmation of cultural value in most intangible cultural heritage studies, this study reveals the implicit power of the narrative of image language through "myth disenchantment". This critical analysis provides a theoretical basis for the protection of intangible cultural heritage with "context reconstruction rather than symbol replication". Therefore, this study, through the perspective of semiotics, connects the artistic form and cultural texture, which not only constructs a new paradigm for folk art analysis but also provides methodological inspiration for the contemporary transformation of traditional culture. It has significant academic originality and practical value. This new interpretive paradigm offers a replicable framework for analyzing other forms of folk art, particularly for decoding the ideological work of visual symbols in contemporary cultural expressions.

Conclusion

The image language system of Tantou woodblock New Year paintings has a dual structure of extension and connotation. The extension layer constructs a symbol system with symbolic





elements such as characters, animals, plants, utensils, and decorative patterns to form an image narrative. The connotation layer is rooted in the cultural soil and theme expressions of Chuwu culture, Meishan culture, and traditional philosophical concepts, reflecting rich symbolic meanings and ideological connotations, including the concept of happiness of praying for blessings and good fortune, the concept of life of having many children and good fortune, and the moral concept of humility and respect. Its worldview is reflected in three logics, namely, the fantasy of the coexistence of man and god, the utilitarianism of natural survival, and the moralism of historical ethics. As an intangible cultural heritage, its image language system is not only a carrier of artistic expression but also a condensation of regional culture, collective memory, and philosophical concepts. Through the stratification and interpretation of symbols, it constructs a multi-dimensional network of meanings that includes the secular and the sacred, the natural and the ethical, and becomes a medium for the dialogue between tradition and modernity in the contemporary context. Reconstructing context is essential because it preserves the symbolic integrity and ideological resonance of heritage symbols; replication without context risks turning potent cultural signs into superficial decorations.

Recommendations

Theoretical suggestions: Deepen the study of the dynamic generation mechanism of symbols, combine anthropological field surveys, and reveal the flow and reconstruction of symbolic meanings within the Meishan cultural circle; at the policy level, establish a "gene bank of intangible cultural heritage symbols" to systematically archive the craftsmanship, context and cultural logic of Tantou New Year paintings, and promote inheritors to participate in innovative symbol design.

Application expansion: Build a digital narrative platform, use AR technology to restore the symbol production process and ritual scenes, and enhance public participation; explore the path of symbol IPization, integrate core symbols such as door gods and auspicious beasts into urban public art, and activate their cultural identity function in contemporary urban and rural spaces.

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