Introduction

It was midsummer in Shandong's Donge County as I hiked through the remains of long abandoned Yellow River dikes, in search of a Song dynasty monastery of some local repute. As I was unsure of the precise location, I frequently stopped to ask directions of people working in the area, but the resulting blank stares and sheepish grins only demonstrated that my destination was not common knowledge. For someone proposing to study the cultural history of rural China, the prospect that these people had little awareness of their local historical resources was somewhat disturbing. And yet as the day wore on, practically everyone I met urged me to visit another local site, Cao Zhi Tomb. The significance of the site, however, failed to dawn on me, and ignoring the advice I pressed on to the monastery, where my efforts were rewarded only by a collection of empty buildings, stripped of any religious significance, and perhaps rightfully forgotten by those for whom monastic retreat was a dying concept. Only later did I come to realize that the humble mound identified to me as Cao Zhi Tomb was in fact the burial place of the third son of Cao Cao who figured so prominently in China's pre-eminent historical novel, *Sanguo yanyi* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*).

The lesson learned was that concrete forms of past and present are seldom noteworthy without the cognitive authority of narrative. A few localities, like Donge County, are fortunate enough to have actual physical remnants that reify the narratives of fabled times. But the stories are transcribed well beyond the boundaries of the physical, so that regardless of levels of literacy or exposure to historical artifacts, there is scarcely a resident of China who is not acquainted with them. Zhuge Liang, Jiang Ziya, Cao Cao and Cao Zhi, Song Jiang, and Wu Song venture daily into ordinary culture through *Sanguo yanyi* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), *Shuihu zhuan* (*Outlaws of the Marsh*), *Fengshen yanyi* (*Enfeoffment of the Gods*), and a host of other media and mediators. In addition to acting as the basis for cheap entertainment or pulp fiction, this body of narrative forms the structural background through which history is cognitively organized.

If isolated from the media that re-creates them, people, events, and places tend not to have auspicious origins, dramatic plots, or glorious endings. Like the

1911 Xinhai Revolution thrust awkwardly into its place in history, or like Lu Xun's fictional anti-hero Ah Q stumbling haplessly through the revolution's events, none are the stuff of legend. Through narrative, though, both revolution and anti-hero are endowed with the plot that makes sense of the experience. The revolution and its leaders are glorified by propagandists; Ah Q pathetically sings a heroic aria to himself on the way to his own execution. At the end of the day, it is not the confusion of the event or place that lingers on, but the narrative reconciliation recalled as a mature and singular moment.

This book is about how people made sense of past and present by visualizing the world through block-print representations known as *nianhua* (New Year pictures). *Nianhua* provide unique insight into the cultural and social history of rural China, but we cannot read them without making extensive inquiry into their nature and the role they played in the society in question. As a result, it has been impossible to separate the representation of *nianhua* from their physical and social production in the North China village. What has emerged from study of these prints is not a history of rural society but of how certain forms of understanding of culture and society have been produced in village China through the medium of print.

This book treats production and representation of *nianhua* as complementary, and argues that the single most important aspect of the village-based print industry was that it engaged in prescriptive mass production – a process by which a uniform object was collectively produced using a defined set of tools and techniques and in deference to collectively defined social values. Moreover, the physical factors of environment, economy, and physical geography, and the intellectual factors of entertainment, religion, custom, history, and artistic conventions also imposed limits on the free appropriation of texts, and directed the way in which texts were read. Only when these factors are delimited may it be possible to consider how perceptions of the social and physical world were put into print, and how print, in turn, configured perceptions of the social and ethical world.

Complete details on the nature of *nianhua* will emerge in the course of this book. For the moment it will suffice to explain that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rural centres in North China, like Shandong's Yangjiabu, Hebei's Wuqiang and Yangliuqing, and Henan's Zhuxianzhen, supported extensive cottage industries devoted to the production of *nianhua*. During the winter months of each year, these towns and villages printed millions of copies in a wide variety of subjects ranging from household icons to theatrical illustrations, historical tales and legends, harbingers of good fortune, calendars, and floral decorations. Local agents and outside traders distributed the products virtually nationwide, and by New Year there was scarcely a home in the land that did not have at least a Stove God print.

Like most popular culture texts, however, interpretation requires resolving a long list of interpretive difficulties. The problems of Chinese popular

culture studies, in general, have been stated nowhere more eloquently than in the conference volume *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*.[1] In the introductory comments to the volume, editor Evelyn Rawski asks historians to consider culture in terms that Clifford Geertz identified as "structures of signification," wherein cultural phenomena contain multiple levels of significance and of understanding. Co-editor David Johnson responds from Antonio Gramsci's position that culture is governed by the communication-based structure of dominance that allows "official culture" to impose its values as beliefs to which people willingly defer. But whatever their individual approach may be, Rawski, Johnson, and other contributors to this volume generally agree that structures are the lens through which we may understand consciousness.

Roger Chartier has been critical of this type of methodology, arguing that it is not consciousness, but "classifications, divisions and groupings … [that] serve as the basis for our apprehension of the social world as fundamental categories of the perception and evaluation of reality."[2] Cultural statements are governed by the place (or milieu) in which they were made, the conditions that made them possible, the schemata that lent them order and the principles of regularity that governed them, and the specific forms dictating the separation of "truth" from "fiction."[3] Chartier's critique does not entirely discredit the analytical concepts of signification or communication, but it does insist on a more rigorous appraisal of culture as "a social history of the various interpretations, brought back to their fundamental determinants (which are social, institutional and cultural), and lodged in the specific practices that produce them."[4] If this method of analysis is to be used in the study of *nianhua*, then some caution must be exercised when reading them broadly as expressions of popular culture.

Of course there is little question that *nianhua* currently fit the description of popular culture, but since the category of popular culture is a relatively modern invention, that particular rubric will not be helpful in understanding how *nianhua* functioned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Categories of evaluation are a principal concern for me, and this book is largely devoted to working out which categories were relevant to the makers and users of *nianhua* in their own time and space. But while the categories are many and diverse, the one point that needs to be asserted is that *nianhua* are primarily an expression of print culture.

Print culture, plainly stated, is a means of understanding the world through print. In the physical sense, print culture is the act of producing, disseminating, obtaining, displaying, and reading print. In the social sense, print culture is the abstraction of the world created by the repeated and systematic application of ink to paper, and the penetration and transformation of social relations by print. Take, for example, the practice of worshiping the Stove God through his printed image – this is explained in more detail in Chapter 2, but essentially attention to the Stove God required a ceremony that involved the annual immolation and replacement of his printed image. For the people involved in the cult, this was

primarily a ritual designed to gain the favour of the god, but since print was the medium, that ritual should also be understood as a specific practice of reading within a culture defined by print.

The study of *nianhua* as an academic subject began with the Russian sinologist V.M. Alekseev (1881-1951), who (along with Edouard Chavannes, his academic supervisor) began to collect and research *nianhua* for his doctoral thesis in the early twentieth century. Unfortunately the expense and technical difficulty of reproducing the images limited the breadth of his publication on the subject, and, excepting a small volume published in England in 1927, his collected essays were not published until 1966 with the posthumous volume *Kitaiskaia Narodnaia Kartina* (*Chinese Popular Pictures*).[5] Yet even this volume does not specifically focus on *nianhua,* but rather uses *nianhua* to illustrate discussions of related matters, such as theatre or the "Twin Gods of Harmony."

In China there was little academic interest in *nianhua* until after 1949, when folklore became an imperative field of study, and researchers began to reconstruct the history of the art form. Much of the material that is extant owes its survival to folklore research of the 1950s when Wang Shucun, the most prolific researcher on the subject, accumulated a massive collection of prints and began to write the first of his many discourses on the subject. Bo Songnian (Po Sungnien), too, has been working with the genre since that time, and although Wang has developed more specific historical subjects in a variety of compilations, Bo's *Zhongguo nianhua shi* (*History of Chinese nianhua*) stands as the most comprehensive historical overview on the subject in Chinese.

Outside of China, excepting a number of annotated albums, there has been little research on the topic of *nianhua.*[6] Clarence Day's *Chinese Peasant Cults* (1940) used iconic *nianhua* to analyze Chinese popular religion, but although Day made some useful observations, much of his data was actually drawn from Henri Doré's *Researches into Chinese Superstitions* (1914-38), which took a dim view of the subject and provided little specific information on the print industry. David Holm dealt with *nianhua* at some length in his doctoral dissertation, "Art and Ideology during the Yan'an Period" (1979), as did Tanya McIntyre in her dissertation, *Chinese New Year Pictures: The Process of Modernization* (1997). McIntyre subsequently published a part of her research in Antonia Finane and Anne McLaren's *Dress, Sex, and Text in Chinese Culture* (1999). John Lust's *Chinese Popular Prints* (1996) appeared as the culmination of a long devotion to *nianhua,* but the work is regrettably inconclusive. Political and resistance themes in twentieth-century *nianhua* have also received attention from both Chang-tai Hung, "Repainting China" (2000), and Ellen Johnston Laing's "Reform, Revolutionary, and Resistance Themes in Chinese Popular Prints, 1900-1940" (2000). Laing has also discussed wartime *nianhua* reforms in *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (1988). But while there is a limited secondary literature on the subject, there has been no comprehensive effort in any language to treat *nianhua* as primary historical documents that can illuminate a subject other than *nianhua* themselves.

Notwithstanding earlier works, such as Thomas Carter's *The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward* (1925) and Tsien Tsuen-hsuin's "Paper and Printing" (1985), the study of Chinese print culture in general has only recently begun to emerge as a distinct field of study. There is, of course, extensive discussion of journalism and literature in China, but the idea of a more narrowly defined Chinese print culture only gained explicit attention in 1996, when *Late Imperial China* carried a special issue on Chinese printing and commercial publishing, with introductory remarks by Roger Chartier. Of the widely ranging contributions to that volume, Cynthia Brokaw's discussion of the Ma family publishers bears the most relevance to the present study, owing to her emphasis on the social organization of a local printing industry in Fujian and its regional trading networks in late imperial times.[7]

Robert Hegel has also considered Chartier's argument that the text is inseparable from the material conditions that make it available. In *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (1998), Hegel argues that it is most important to be concerned with "*how* literature signified in Ming and Qing China, and only thereafter with *what* it signified."[8] This also reflects my own strategy in dealing with *nianhua* as historical texts, even though the approach is driven as much by necessity as by theoretical consideration because particular readings of the text are simply not available. In all of China's literate tradition, down to the early twentieth century, there are no more than a dozen works that even mention *nianhua*, Gu Lu's *Qing jia lu* (c. 1835) providing one of the more comprehensive accounts with its 80-word introduction to *nianhua* and some 400 words on door gods. This absence of published opinion thus disqualifies any pretension to extract an authorial or otherwise personal meaning from *nianhua*. As a consequence I have retained focus on production and representation.

Reading *Nianhua*

Nianhua may be understood through two essential sets of considerations. As Robert Hegel suggests, these are first the "how" and then the "what" of signification – the physical and social production of the visual text, followed by the way the images are put together to form a narrative or evoke a certain impression. The importance of considering both is illustrated in the following images. The first (Figure 0.1) is an outline block of an ordinary image of the Stove God and God of Wealth. Even without their faces and coloration, one can already see that in its finished form it would be an effective and sensually gratifying image in all its iconographic complexity and overflowing imagery contained by a systematic oppositional structure. With no further information, one might be able to draw some general conclusions about the culture and aesthetics of the society that produced or consumed the image. Assuming the block would be used in a polychrome printing process, it might be safe to guess that the consumers had a taste for colour and basic contrasts. Assuming that the central figure was a god, one might also guess that they placed a high priority on ritual, as represented by the

0.1 *Stove God Printing Block,* Yangjiabu, 33 x 15 cm, early 20th century; author's collection

Stove God. Following the same reasoning, one might also draw some basic con-
clusions about the training and social orientation of the print maker, guessing
him to be a typical folk artist schooled in techniques passed down through the
generations.[9]

The next outline block (Figure 0.2) is quite different, portraying a folk story
in which a youth pays a visit to the arbiters of birth and death in order to secure
an extension on his foreshortened lifespan. The graphic construction is much
different from that of the Stove God just discussed, and although it is just as com-
plex as the Stove God print, it is organized around an entirely different set of
principles. The elegant rockery at the base of the print balances the finely writ-
ten calligraphy in the upper left, angles are justified, perspective is in order, the
mulberry on the right balances the chess players on the left, and the image is
centred around the staff of the boy, which also functions to frame the text. Once
again, the image appears as a comment on its maker and consumer, suggesting

0.2 *Printing Block,* Yangjiabu, 33 x 15 cm, early 20th century; author's collection

a somewhat discriminating interpretation of the world and a sophisticated appreciation of how space could be manipulated within the two-dimensional image.

Seen separately, it would be difficult to draw any connection between the two blocks, since they appear to be done by people of completely different backgrounds and education. This, however, illustrates the perils of disregarding the more concrete factors of production, because on that basic level the two images are fixed to each other in a way that could not have been known by merely studying the impressions. The simple fact is that these two very different images are found on opposite sides of the same printing block, and thus could not be more closely related, having been produced in the same place, at the same time, and probably by the same hands. The printing block brings disparate texts together in a way that is perhaps unusual, but it cautions us against essentializing the image based on appearance, and suggests a range of issues that need to be brought under consideration when analyzing the printed text.

Print, whether graphic or written, plays an integral role in human relations and must be examined in terms of when, where, and how the printed items were produced and displayed, and how these factors in turn formed and confined the interpretative space in which they could be read. Given the diversity of humans and human relations, the meaning of any piece of print must be considered equally diverse, since its interpretation can potentially change with each individual reader. Consequently, the reading of print must be considered a function of the reader's position in that web of human relations. Realistically, we will never be able to account entirely for the full range of meaning in any particular piece of print. But although it is true that print is individually read, it is also socially produced, and the circumstances of reading restrict the range of possible interpretations for a reader in a certain time and in a certain place. Only by taking these configurations under consideration is it possible to interpret and reconstruct the significance of something apparently so simple, and in fact so complex, as a colourful piece of paper innocuously posted in a North China village household.

The demand for and interpretation of *nianhua* depends on the space and time in which they were displayed, and the ethical regime under which they were produced. For many *nianhua*, this space was the home, and the perception of time corresponds to the ritual and agricultural calendar. By the declining years of the Qing dynasty, a representation of space and time began to develop that was more expansively cosmopolitan and more immediately local in the sense that place, event, and period became related concepts important to the reading of the representation.

Since *nianhua* were socially derived, the prints and their interpretation must be considered in the context of social change. Of particular interest are the processes of infrastructural, technological, and political change in the early twentieth century that not only affected the capacity of the village to sustain print production, but also brought print makers into contact with an expanded print environment and new printing and viewing technologies. Village printers attempted to meet and adapt to this challenge, but the changing technology and shifting aesthetic sensibilities eventually undermined (but did not eliminate) the local industry. Technology and infrastructure also contributed to the increasing capacity of centralized agencies to direct and control the production of print actively.

The emergence of a putatively secular state in the twentieth century created the challenge of establishing secular legitimacy in an environment that was deeply attached to ritual. With few political or ideological resources to promote their program, the Republican-era state could do little more than meddle with village print. As such resources were consolidated under the People's Republic, however, the state was increasingly able to direct, control, and finally monopolize print production, directing it toward the construction of a metanarrative that was more comprehensive than any witnessed under previous regimes.

The Time and Place of *Nianhua*

The chronology of this book proceeds from the late Qing dynasty through to the early 1950s, with concluding perspectives on the significance of *nianhua* in the present. The first chapter reconstructs the *nianhua* industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 do not follow a specific chronology, but deal with themes that were under production between approximately 1890 and 1930. The images themselves, however, are relatively extemporal in that they do not (with the exception of calendars) make specific reference to the time in which they were produced. Chapter 5 deals roughly with this same time period, but chronology becomes more important since the images under discussion were produced in relation to concrete historical events, and not general social and cultural concerns. Chapter 6 temporally overlaps previous sections, but in tracing the politicization of popular print it proceeds from the early twentieth century through to the 1950s. In terms of the texts that are used to illuminate the prints, the research occasionally involves sources that originated in earlier times. This may raise questions of how earlier texts relate to later prints, although it is my contention that these texts, especially the more noteworthy treatises, such as the *Sacred Edict*, had direct or at least residual relevance to later times as documents that were continually reproduced.

Provenance is a critical problem in the study of *nianhua* because these images were never regarded as objects to be preserved, dated, or otherwise organized in such a way as to establish the place and time of their production. Yet I treat *nianhua* as an historical resource that illuminates particular times and particular places. This is not as much of a problem as it may appear, because while there is no single method of dating prints, they can be substantiated by several factors. First, many of the prints can be dated concretely because of the time and place of their collection. This does not rule out the possibility that the same prints may have been produced at other times, but it does at least indicate that the print was relevant to the period for which it is being discussed. This applies especially to the Alekseev collection made in North China during 1906-9, now held in St. Petersburg at the State Hermitage Museum, Museum of Religion, and Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), and the Dubosc collection, made primarily in 1930-32, now in the British Museum.[10] Second, *nianhua* can often be situated through their content and style, as in the print *Military Drills in Hejian* (Figure 5.8, p. 121), which probably originated soon after that particular event occurred in 1905. As for the place of production, many images have printers' marks that associate them with a printing shop known to have existed in a particular place and occasionally at a particular time. Most others can be associated with their place of origin because of their graphic styles and because those localities still retain the original printing blocks; indeed, most of the prints from my own collection are imprints taken from those blocks and acquired during my visits to those centres between 1996

and 1999. This, of course, should raise the question of whether modern reprints are relevant to the late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century period to which they are ascribed, and not the 1990s when they were produced. My response is that even though they are represented by later paper imprints, the actual historical resource is not the print (which I designate here as reprint), but the original printing block.

Printing blocks are much more durable than prints and so have survived into the present in large numbers to give evidence of prints that have otherwise disappeared. Some can be dated by the same method as prints. Others may be roughly dated by the circumstances of their survival. When the industry went into decline in the 1930s the current blocks were put into storage until it began to recover in the early 1950s. At that time many of the surviving blocks were systematically organized by folk-art researchers. I also argue that it is unlikely for many of these blocks to date much earlier than the 1890s because most do not last longer than at most twenty years, depending on use. Any blocks that were too worn for use or that represented obsolete or unpopular themes were either recycled or served their final purpose as firewood.[11] We may therefore be reasonably certain that modern reprints from extant printing blocks represent forms in circulation during the late Qing and Republican eras.

My focus on the late-nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries is in part driven by the nature of the material. However, the temporal choice is also advantageous in that it covers a period during which the cultural manifestations of late traditional China come into conflict with some of the most dynamic events in modern Chinese history. These include several international wars, limited industrialization and urbanization, imperialism, the Boxer Uprising, two revolutions divided by warlordism and civil war, and finally the political and social upheaval associated with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is the confluence of these events that form the subject for the latter part of this book. In terms of print culture, this is a vital period, since it witnesses the problematic transition from a period in which the woodblock print was the standard means of mass producing text, to a time when technology and ideology threatened to eradicate the means and messages of woodblock printing.

Geographically, I concentrate on the provinces of Shandong, Hebei, and Henan. North China was not alone in the production of *nianhua*, and highly developed industries could be found all over China, especially in Sichuan, Guangdong, and Jiangsu. I generally exclude the latter printing centres, however, because my analysis regards North China as a distinct aesthetic region in which graphic styles were traded and became mutually influential. This area is still vast, extending from the Shandong peninsula in the east to Xi'an in the west, from Henan in the south to Liaoning in the north, but within these spatial limits the print market was dominated by a small number of village-based printing centres. In each case, one or two towns or villages served as the centre for a cottage industry dispersed over its immediate region. The *nianhua* printing centres include Yangliuqing and Chaomidian in Tianjin prefecture (formerly of Hebei

province [Zhili prior to 1928]); Zhuxianzhen, Kaifeng prefecture in Henan province; Yangjiabu, Wei County in east-central Shandong province; Zongjiazhuang, Pingdu County in east Shandong; Jiangzhuangzhen, Gaomi County in east Shandong; and Wuqiang County in south-central Hebei.[12] The second part of this book includes the development of commercial and political forces that shifted part of the *nianhua* production away from its original production sites, especially to Shanghai and the revolutionary capital of Yan'an.

With respect to the environment in which *nianhua* pictures were displayed, I bring print back to its most fundamental determinants, beginning with the North China home. Early ethnographers such as Nagao Ryuzo and Henri Doré demonstrated that prints were not distributed at random throughout the home and that the display of prints within domestic architecture depended on a formula set by ritual and convention. The subject is further delimited by placing the home at the centre of a web of human relations that extended from family to village to state. It may then be considered how printed texts, social experience, and natural phenomena informed and conditioned the interpretation of pictures in the home. The intention is not to reduce society to a support system for the home, but to bring social and cultural discourse into manageable proportions by discussing them in terms of a concrete environment.

The placement of the home at the centre of North China social life contrasts with G. William Skinner's classic "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China," which analyzes Chinese village life on the basis of its market activities.[13] The evidence presented here does not disprove Skinner's marketing thesis, but it does decentre the market, showing it to be one of many possible nodes in the so-called web of human relations. That the home appears at the centre of that web is related to the nature of this form of print, which, although it passed through the market and absorbed elements of market relations, was destined for the home.

In the latter part of this book, emphasis shifts from the home as the centre for the interpretation of pictures to the commercial and political theatres. This is because during late Republican China and the early PRC, control over the medium shifted first to urban-commercial interests, and then to academic and political elites. The target of these commercial and political agencies was still primarily the home, but it can be shown that the domestic and ritual interpretation of print began to be supplemented by distinct commercial and political interpretations. Considering the content of these pictures, it becomes increasingly problematic to refer to them as *nianhua* (New Year pictures) since they have little to do with that festival. In consideration of this change, Ellen Johnston Laing identifies them as "popular pictures," but while there is certainly some utility in adopting this term, the fact remains that in China the term *nianhua* has come to refer to all works that can be identified with the traditional *nianhua* industry.[14] The decision to retain that term here is also intended to stress the continuity of the industry as it adjusted to changing circumstances. After all, *nianhua* did adapt and persist, and contemporary time and space continues to be informed by the traditions that *nianhua* so colourfully represent.