



## DECORATIVE BORDERS IN CHINESE FOLK PRINTS. INSIGHT INTO THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** The article examines the printed borders which adorn a moderate number of Yangliuqing prints from the collections of the Náprstek Museum. They are made up of auspicious elements common in the symbolism of Chinese folk art. Their design differs and falls at least into two groups. The reason behind placing the border on a picture is yet unclear.

**KEY WORDS:** China – the 19<sup>th</sup> century – folk art – woodblock prints – graphic design

Folk prints (*minjian banhua* 民間版畫), which are more commonly referred to as New Year prints (*nianhua* 年畫), are pictures carved on woodblocks by anonymous artisans, to be printed on paper. During the New Year festival, these prints are pasted up in households for ritual and decorative purposes. The prints fall into two thematic categories; one representing *domestic deities*, the other representing various *narrative and genre scenes*. These genre scenes can be further divided into several subcategories, such as theatrical scenes (including historical topics), auspicious motifs (including beauties and children), agricultural motifs, panoramas, and actual events.

Amongst these motifs theatrical scenes were considered the most numerous; in the north, with the inclusion of criminal tales, as a popular theme within the theatre as well as in storytelling (Wang 1989: 472). Woodblock prints were produced all over China in regional workshops, each region having its own distinct style and conventions of representation. The manufacturing progress was as follows: once the woodblock was carved, the black and white image was printed from it, and then colours were applied using the same block repeatedly (this was the full-print technique, *taoban* 套版). Alternatively, colours could be applied by hand with a brush (hand-tinted prints, *banyin banhui* 半印半繪). Each step would have been carried out by a different worker, depending on the size of the workshop.

Identifying the topic of a print is the main concern of most studies and catalogues in this area. Recently there have also been a number of reports from field research on how these prints are still being produced. This article, however, addresses formal aspects of folk prints. The intention is to take a close look at the printed borders that adorn

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decorative prints with figural motifs produced in the Yangliuqing 楊柳青 region in northern China. The present research is based on some 130 decorative prints from the Chinese collection of the National Museum – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of their general composition, a large group of folk prints depicts figures within an architectural or landscape setting which fills the whole image. In such cases the dimensions of the image are established by the edges of the setting and no border of any kind is required. However, another large group of prints place figures and objects in an empty space, without a fully rendered background.

The limits of the image correspond to the size of the paper, or are indicated by the means of composition; this is up to the viewer to decide. Among the images set in an empty background, there is a small group with decorative borders, the shapes of which follow the oblong format of the paper, as in [Pl. 1]. There are also inverted U-shaped borders, which appear only across the top and down the two sides. Prints with decorative borders are not very common. Among the 130 examined prints there are only sixteen that are designed with the border. This makes up a little over a tenth of the studied material with this particular design.

The decorative borders on the Yangliuqing prints to be considered here are set apart from the depicted scene. As a rule, they are relatively wide, built up of small decorative elements, and marked by thin straight outlines. Like the scene enclosed by them, they are printed and then hand-tinted.

The narrative scene reproduced in [Pl. 1] has a fine, oblong border, which alternates between characters (script) with auspicious meanings and auspicious creatures or symbols. Each side of the border is slightly different. Above the image, it alternates between the character *fu* 福 (happiness) and a peacock, the symbol of officialdom; below, there is *xi* 喜 (nuptial “double-happiness”) alternating with a butterfly, the symbol of love (See Eberhard 1986: 229 [peacock], 52 [butterfly]).<sup>3</sup> It ought to be noted that there are five characters and six peacocks above, but six characters and five butterflies below; their positions interchanging. The side borders are alike, built up of the character *xi* 喜 (joy) in two variants, alternating with stylized flower-and-foliage, two and three of each respectively. The depth of the colour and its tinting on each symbol is always different; creating the sensation of richness.

The image captures a scene from the *Da ba yi* 大八義 (Eight Great Heroes) cycle of stories.<sup>4</sup> It is a popular tale of chivalry: what the heroes gain, they then give to people in need. After three attempts, one of the heroes, Zhao Huayang 趙華陽, manages to get a hold of the pearls from the Mandarin Ducks Treasury. He is depicted standing between Miao Qing 苗慶 and his breast-feeding wife. Miao Qing is a member of the Treasury, but he sides with the chivalrous robber and helps him. There is no obvious link between the symbolism of the border and the narrative content of the main image.

The individual figures wear clothes in sharp shades of red and blue, whereas the colours of the furniture and the border are a little more restrained: green and yellow

<sup>2</sup> The whole collection of Chinese folk prints at the Náprstek Museum numbers about 400 pieces, both decorative and ritual.

<sup>3</sup> Butterflies have other meanings, too, however on this border, they alternate with the character *xi*, and therefore are interpreted accordingly.

<sup>4</sup> The cycle was recently written down by the storyteller Liu Linxian 劉林仙 (Liu 1987). The episode is told in Chapters XXIII to XXVII.

with black outlines. Interestingly, the background (i.e. the furniture) and the border are matching, decorated with the same colours. We may note in passing that those who produced the prints seem to have used colours at random, they were apparently not bound by any rules concerning them. This hypothesis is supported by the comparison of the print reproduced in [Pl. 1] with a reprint of the same image kept in the Waseda 早稻田 University Library (cf. Miyama 2013: 173, Fig. 112; also reproduced in Feng 2011: 275) which uses quite different colours.

For example, Zhao's coat and the border are painted over in deep purple, Miao Qing wears a blue coat, the lady's robe is not pink, but bright red, and the flower in the vase next to her is yellow. The border is covered with a patch of pronounced purple, and catches the eye. A patch painted across a border in this way has not been seen in the Czech collections. Both versions of the print tie the border with the image by means of applying the same colours, or colour.

The print reproduced as [Pl. 2] illustrates an episode from the Three Kingdoms cycle, and has a border. The border was executed in a bold style similar to the border in [Pl. 1], but its elements are different symbols and there are no characters (script) among them. The colouring is more or less the same, too, tinted in yellow and green, with the addition of light pink washes. The pink wash serves to link the border with the image, as the curtain above the bed is also pink. However, the overall impression is that the cold colours of the figural scene and the warm colours of the border clash. Looking closely at the details now, it is possible to see that the two horizontal segments of the border are designed with fruits and the "endless knot". Whereas the vertical segments are decorated with flowers and butterflies. The two parallel segments are complimentary, matching in design; however, they are not quite identical. One eye-catching feature of this printed border is its corners, which have been very effectively highlighted by a square geometric "cloud" motif. Borders of the same design can also be found on two other prints that have been examined, namely the Náprstek Museum, Inv. Nos. 35740 (*Hongni guan* 紅泥關) and 35741 (*Lin Tongshan* 臨潼山). This print can be compared with another version of it kept in the Kazan University Folk Museum (reproduced in Takimoto 2011: 57), which has different colouring, notably on individuals' garments, as well as other slight artistic liberties.

[Pl. 3] shows a distinct border, dissimilar in style to the examples considered above. It is outlined by two thin parallel lines, creating a band which flows uninterrupted along the four sides. The outer corners are rounded, further emphasizing the intended fluidity and harmony of the borders design. The band is made of diagonally set prunus flowers and foliage. The flowers are coloured yellow with light blue pistils, the branches and leaves are light blue. An almost identical border decorates another Yangliuqing print from the collection of the Náprstek Museum, namely Inv. No. 35729.<sup>5</sup> Both prints depict two separate theatrical scenes. Again, there is nothing either in the symbolism of the design or in the colouring that would visually link the border and the figure scenes.

The print in [Pl. 4] also depicts two independent scenes: this is not uncommon in the prints. The subject is borrowed from the cycle of criminal cases resolved by Judge Shi (*Shigong an* 施公案). The border on this print is made of the conventional auspicious flowers, fruits and characters like the examples described above, but it has been executed in a strikingly refined style. More precisely, only the vertical and the upper

<sup>5</sup> Another border of this kind decorates a print reproduced in Tianjin Museum of Arts 1984: Pl. 94. The woodblock dates to the Guangxu 光緒 period (1875–1908).

segments are distinct. The geometric design across the bottom corresponds to folk taste and is of no importance here. In each upper corner, there is a relatively large stylized character; the strokes are light blue with very thin outlines. The border across the top is decorated with three fruits (pomegranate, Buddha's Hand, and peach) in the centre, flanked by peonies. They are emphasized by size and sophisticated bright colouring, set on curving stems with leaves. The vertical sides are matching, they show flowering plants of undulated and twisting forms. Their natural rendering is obviously inspired by the painting style. The colouring is naturalistic, but with some degree of licence (the leaves are not green but bluish). The black outlining is quite fine, even more so on the five figures in the picture, as the line work appears very delicate, varying from defined to hardly visible outlines. This print appears to be the only example of this design aesthetic in the collection of the Náprstek Museum. However, this does not imply that these types of prints are rare – several examples can be seen in various publications dealing with Yangliuqing prints (see, for example, Feng 2011: 317 [two images], 321 [the upper image])<sup>6</sup>.

[Pls. 5.1, 5.2] show two prints of boy riders, which form a symmetrical pair. The technique used in colouring them is *taoban*, as only the boys' pinkish faces were hand-tinted. The execution is very fine, well above average. Although damaged, these two paired images are exquisite pieces of the Náprstek Museum's collection in terms of their aesthetic and technical quality, as well as their age. The print on the right, inscribed "May year after year bring happiness" (*nian nian zengfu* 年年贈福) shows a boy holding a plate with fruits and a sceptre (*ruyi* 如意); the print on the left, inscribed "May month after month bring peace" (*yue yue ping'an* 月月平安) shows a boy holding a plate with different fruits and a coral branch.

Little boys carrying various treasures are frequently depicted in Chinese popular art; they symbolize progeny and success. Both prints are encircled by a generously wide border without outlines, formed by rich flowers and foliage, a butterfly on the top, and a lantern – the symbol of fertility – on each side. The border occupies a large part of the whole composition, and is set quite close to the image of the riders. Since there are no borderlines, it is not clearly separated from the central image, and the colours of the border also blend in well with those of the central images. Taken as a whole, this print looks like a unit, created as a single piece.

Yangliuqing prints with borders reveal two contrasting stylistic modes; the rustic one [Pls. 1–3, 6] and the finer one [Pls. 4–5], which is in appearance older. It is tempting to interpret them as the two major types of borders, with many variants for each. The first mode appears hard and bold; the border is divided into angular sections, and is reminiscent of carvings in wood. The other mode is soft and yielding the fluent and uninterrupted designs on the border, more reminiscent of paintings and embroidered textiles.

Finally, this article will briefly address figural prints which also have a border, but of a significantly different kind from those discussed above. The differences are exemplified in [Pl. 6]. It shows a figural procession set against a fully delineated background. The tightly knit composition creates a peculiar shape, rimmed by a border built of eight repetitive motifs, namely pairs of lions playing with a ball. The border adheres to the whole image, creating the octagonal shape, but not the quadrangle shape of the paper.

<sup>6</sup> Here, too, the border along the bottom is geometric, while the three remaining sides depict natural forms of flowers, interpolated with occasional characters.

Rather than a frame, it looks like the edging of a piece of embroidery. It also bears some similarity to the relatively common representation of “Nine phoenixes looking at the sun” (*Jiu feng chaoyang* 九鳳朝陽), not reproduced here,<sup>7</sup> where the circular central composition is surrounded by a border of the same shape, which is in turn enclosed within another border that is square, like the paper on which the image is printed. The round border is delineated with the zodiacal beasts, the vertical sides of the outer border depict the immortals, four and four.<sup>8</sup> This kind of print often has a conventional topic and a schematized composition. Their borders cannot be separated from the design, and cannot be considered as loose frames for the figural scene. Therefore, interesting as they are, they were not considered in this review.

## Conclusion

Returning to the prints with oblong, loose borders, some concluding remarks can be made. The borders reproduced in [Pls. 1–3] were stylized according to the folk representational conventions. All the decorative motifs and characters were heavily outlined, and their geometric orderly arrangement within the border was emphasized. [Pls. 4–5], on the other hand, show examples of borders which do not follow the bold rustic style. It is most likely that the difference is due to the period in which the woodblock was produced. It is apparent that [Pls. 4–5] are older due to the condition of the objects, and also by the dates of acquisition. Each period had its fashion, and the difference between the style of the older and newer prints indicates, perhaps surprisingly, that at one time the refined literary style was replaced by a geometric, rustic style.

The various graphic elements that are used to make up borders carry a wide range of symbolic meanings. However, there seems to be no connection between the depicted scene and the symbolic meaning of the surrounding border (the prints relating to [Pl. 6] excluded). Contrary to expectations, no relation between the symbols depicted on the border and the meaning of the narrative scene has been detected in any of the prints studied for this article.

For reasons of economy, the decorative border may have been produced and kept separately from the central figural scene, and printed at a different stage in the manufacturing process. After all, the same border is seen repeated on prints representing quite different scenes (e.g. Inv. No. 35743 and Inv. No. 35740 – both produced by the Jijianlong 齊建隆 workshop).

If one decorative border had been used interchangeably for various pictures, it is not surprising that the symbolic motifs depicted bear no direct relation to the scene which they would finally enclose.

Furthermore, a majority of the borders that have been examined seem to clash visually with the figural scenes that they surround, both in mode of execution and in colours, especially when seen together – as they usually intended.

The borders are reminiscent of the wooden frames used for paintings in the West: one should nonetheless keep in mind the fact that in China, prints were simply pasted

<sup>7</sup> For *Jiu feng chaoyang*, see the Náprstek Museum, Chinese collection Inv. No. A 9605, and also the National Gallery in Prague, Asian Art Collection, Inv. No. Vm 4570. The same complicated border decorates the print Inv. No. A 9604 (*Ba xian qingshou* 八仙慶壽) from the Náprstek Museum.

<sup>8</sup> Figures on borders are rare, and come in fixed folkloric sets. For an example of The Eight Steeds, see the print in Tianjin Museum of Arts 1984: Pl. 99.

on the wall, without any frame. Similarly, scrolls were hung on the wall, but did not have a frame. Book illustrations sometimes have borders made of a thin straight line, but do not have decorative borders.<sup>9</sup> It is nevertheless possible that borders in prints were influenced by Western designs. Newspaper illustrations, published in major towns, do have similar decorative borders (see [Pl. 7]). If there actually was a Western influence, then (in the case of prints with borders) we are dealing with a cultural hybrid: a deeply traditional picture is enclosed within a border of imported provenance, but transformed into a Chinese design. This design in turn, shows some similarity to the borders found on textiles, especially on sleeves and collars (Heroldová 2015).

There is much more to be said about the decorative borders in woodblock prints. The topic could be greatly expanded by looking at more materials, not only in terms of number, but also in terms of variety. Materials produced in regions other than Yangliuqing, might be examined, in particular those from Suzhou 蘇州 or Shanghai 上海. Special attention ought to be given to the serialized tales (*lianhuān huà* 連環畫) where borders are indispensable. This article should be understood as a preliminary investigation, a first step into an area that has not previously been studied.

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<sup>9</sup> The exceptions to this rule are hard to come by, eg. the title page of *Wanqu changchun* 萬曲長春, published in the Wanli 萬曆 era by Shulin, Jin Gongtang 書林, 金拱塘. See Zhou 1984: 26.

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Pl. 1 *Zhao Huayang sandao yuanyangku* 趙華陽三盜鴛鴦庫, print on paper, size 34.5 x 59 cm,  
Yangliuqing. Inv. No 29764.



Pl. 2 *Cuihua gong* 翠華宮, print on paper, size 31.2 x 56 cm, Yangliuqing, Jijianlong 齊健隆  
workshop. Inv. No 35743.



Pl. 3 *Yuejia zhuang, Zhaojia lou* 岳家庄，趙家樓, print on paper, size 31,8 x 56,5 cm, Yangliuqing.  
Inv. No 35746.



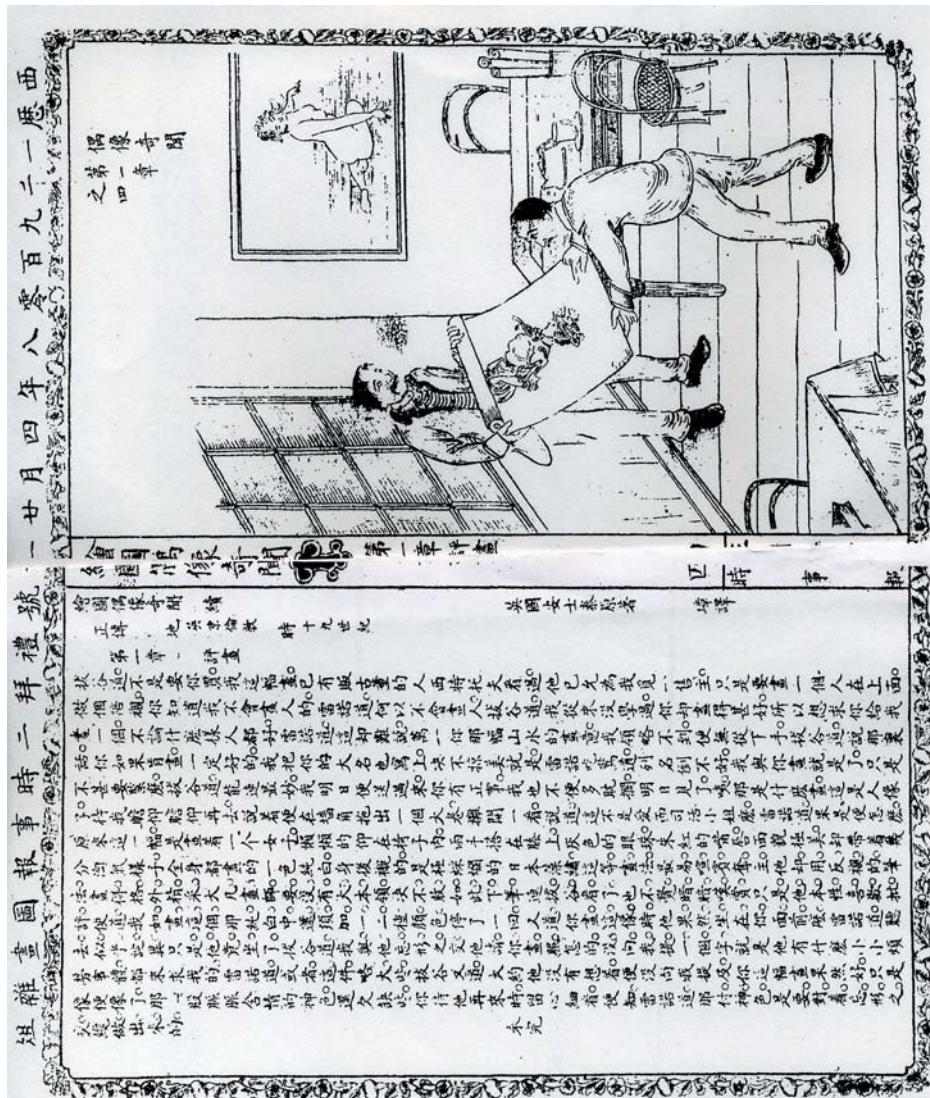
Pl. 4 *Guilan dao jinpai, Nafei degong* 桂蘭盜金牌，拿費德功, print on paper, size 32 x 56.5 cm,  
Yangliuqing. Inv. No. 35739.



Pl. 5.1, 5.2 A pair of boys riding *qilin* 麒麟, prints, size of the paper 49.5 x 28 cm, size of the image ca. 35 x 22 cm, Yangliuqing. Inv. Nos. A 2585 and A 9586.



Pl. 6 *Bai zi quan tu* 百子全圖, print on paper, diameter 49.5 cm, Yangliuqing. Inv. No 19 247.



PPI. 7 Newspaper text and illustration with a border. *Xinwen huabao* 新聞畫報, late Qing. Source: *Qingdai bokan tushu jicheng* 清代報刊圖書集成, P. 475.