

MEDIA RELEASE

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EXHIBITION ON CENTURIES-OLD CHINESE TRADITION OF *NIAN HUA* SHEDS LIGHT ON POPULAR BELIEFS AND FOLK CUSTOMS

Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall presents a journey into the centuries-old craft of woodblock printing and examines the tradition of new year prints in a special exhibition



Military door deities Qin Qiong and Yuchi Gong (circa 1980s).

The Nian Hua depicts two military door deities, Qin Qiong and Yuchi Gong dressed in similar green outfits, with the influence of Chinese opera seen in the design of their facial features, cloaks and banners.

Collection of Mr. Jimm Wong Pui Fatt

Singapore, 21 January 2022 – To herald this Lunar New Year season, Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH) presents a special exhibition, ***Nian Hua: Of Deities, Guardians and Auspicious Art***, which showcases the centuries-old Chinese tradition of Nian Hua and its significance. Taking place from 21 January to 25 September 2022, it features close to 70 artefacts which originate from different provinces of China and is presented in collaboration with one of the largest museums in China, the Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum.

Nian Hua (年画), which translates to “new year prints”, are colourful woodblock-printed images that adorned homes in Chinese villages and cities during the Lunar New Year. They were used by families to seek protection and blessings for their households for the year ahead. Through the exhibition, the Memorial Hall seeks to shed light on Chinese traditions, popular beliefs and folk customs, and how these have evolved, particularly in Singapore, over the



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years. It also spotlights our intangible cultural heritage, which includes woodblock printing as a traditional craft, and the celebration of Lunar New Year.

The collection on display covers artefacts produced during the Qing dynasty (1636 - 1912) to the 1980s. It also includes curated prints from the collections of the National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum and Singapore Art Museum, and modern-day interpretations of Nian Hua by local and international artists. Woodblock moulds sourced from a private lender in Singapore will also be showcased for the first time.

Mr Loo Say Chong, the private collector and researcher who loaned the woodblock moulds, said, “Woodblock printing has an important place in Chinese history and culture. It is a craft that requires precision, both during carving and during alignment for printing. It also helped to facilitate the transmission of knowledge and information. I am glad that my collection of woodblock moulds can help to raise awareness about this intangible cultural heritage as part of the *Nian Hua* exhibition.”

Ms Jermaine Chua, curator at SYSNMH, said, “While new year prints are no longer commonly found in Singapore and Southeast Asia, it remains an important art form in Chinese culture, as the characters, motifs and stories depicted reflect the values, beliefs and traditions practised by generations of families, and their hopes and wishes for the future, which have been rarely documented. By taking a closer look at *Nian Hua*, we also gain a better understanding and appreciation of our intangible cultural heritage.”

The exhibition at SYSNMH will be open from 10am to 5pm from Tuesdays to Sundays. For more information on *Nian Hua: Of Deities, Guardians and Auspicious Art*, please visit: www.sysnmh.org.sg. Exhibition highlights can be found in the Annex.

About the exhibition

The exhibition will be presented across four main sections – *Door Deities and Guardians; Kitchen God, Earth God and other Deities; Blessings for the Bedchambers; and Happiness, Prosperity and Longevity.*

Protecting households from evil spirits

Door deities and guardians are painted or pasted on the doors of households to protect families by barring evil spirits from entering. Nian Hua depicting door gods usually come in a pair, one for each side of the door, and are the earliest form of new year prints. The sale of such prints for the Lunar New Year was believed to have started during the Song dynasty (960-1297), especially the 12th and 13th centuries.

These door deities and guardians were often originally demon slayers such as Shenshu (神荼) and Yulu (郁垒), and Zhong Kui (钟馗). From the 16th century, the Chinese also began to depict figures such as celestial officials, who are believed to bestow blessings of wealth and longevity upon the family. Subsequently, door prints came to include a repertoire of auspicious decorations ranging from immortals from folk religions to deified persons to Chinese opera characters.



Military door deities Qin Qiong and Yuchi Gong against a “double happiness” background (early – mid 20th century)

Yangliuqing, Tianjin

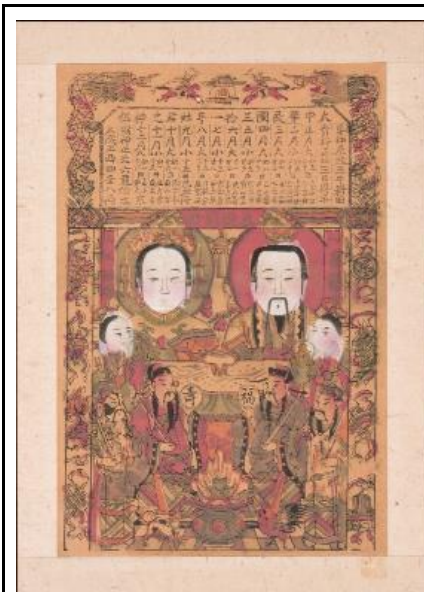
This print depicts the two favoured generals of the Tang dynasty Taizong Emperor, Qin Qiong (秦琼) (left) and Yuchi Gong (尉迟恭) (right). According to Chinese folklore, the emperor was plagued by nightmares of evil spirits screaming outside the palace. The emperor assigned two of his best generals to stand guard outside the palace gates while he slept and the nightmares stopped. As it was difficult for the generals to stand guard every night, the emperor ordered their likenesses to be painted on the palace gates. From then on,

likenesses of the two generals have been used on new year prints as a form of protection for the household.

Collection of National Museum of Singapore

Prayers to the Kitchen God, Earth God and other deities for blessings and protection

The Chinese were traditionally polytheists who believed in many deities, including figures from Chinese mythology, Taoism and Buddhism. They believed that there were numerous deities, immortals and deified heroes who ruled over the three realms of heaven, earth and hell. Consequently, images of these deities were printed on paper for the common people to pray to in their homes for both blessings and protection.



Kitchen God and wife (1942)

Yangliuqing, Tianjin

This print features the Kitchen God and his wife in front of an offering table with an incense burner, candles and flowers. A *ju bao pen* (聚宝盆, "treasure basin") is also placed on the ground before them. The *ju bao pen* is usually filled with money and precious materials such as coral and pearls and is believed to bring wealth to the household.

In front of them are two attendants carrying the characters for longevity (*shou*, 寿) and blessings (*fu*, 福). A lunisolar calendar, which is based on the phases of the moon and indicates months of the solar year, can be found on the upper portion of the print.

Collection of National Museum of Singapore



Tua Pek Kong (“Granduncle”) (date unknown)
Singapore

Da bo gong (大伯公), commonly known in Hokkien as Tua Pek Kong, is a deity unique to Southeast Asia and is worshipped by the Chinese communities of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia as the God of Prosperity and Wealth. The earliest mention of the deity was found on a stele dating back to 1793 in Pek Kong Beo (*bo gong miao*, 伯公庙, “*Bogong* temple”) in Pahang. However, the origins and identity of *Da bo gong* are still disputed. The Chinese in Penang believe that he was Zhang Li (张理), a Hakka political refugee and the first known Chinese settler in Penang. He was also the founder of Tua Pek Kong Society, a mutual aid organisation based on sworn brotherhood. Hence, *Da bo gong* became a symbol of sworn brotherhood among the overseas Chinese community. Many also believe that Tua Pek Kong embodies the spirits of overseas Chinese pioneers who helped and protected the Chinese community.

Collection of National Museum of Singapore

Nian Hua for blessings for the bedchambers

In the past, children, especially boys, held a very special place in Chinese society for the role they play in the perpetuation of the family line. As such, married Chinese couples are traditionally expected to bear sons soon after marriage as having no heirs was considered the most serious of unfilial deeds (*bu xiao you san wu hou wei da*, 不孝有三, 无后为大). The importance of having male heirs was of such significance to the Chinese that it was common for new year prints to depict symbols and auspicious sayings of fertility. These prints were often pasted inside or on the bedroom doors of married couples.



Door deities with five children (mid 1940s – mid 1960s)

Taohuawu, Suzhou

This pair of prints depicts the door deities Qin Qiong and Yuchi Gong with five children each. The five children represent the five sons of Dou Yujun (竇禹鈞), who lived during the Five Dynasties period (907 – 979). All of Dou's sons were extremely gifted and all of them passed the civil service examinations. As such, the Chinese idiom "*wu zi deng ke*" (五子登科) is used to express one's wish for their children to enjoy success in life.

One of the children in the print is shown in the print as riding a *qi lin*. The *qi lin* is a symbol of fertility and, in this print, it is depicted with a child wearing official robes on its back, hence alluding to the blessing of a son who will bring glory to the family in the future.

Collection of National Museum of Singapore



Progressive civilisation, harmonious society (early Republican period)

Yangliuqing, Tianjin

The 1911 Revolution, sparked off by the Wuchang Uprising, ended dynastic rule in China and established a modern republic. In keeping with the spirit of the times, print shops in China produced new year prints to celebrate and commemorate this momentous event in Chinese history.

These two prints feature young mothers with their sons in modern, military-style uniforms with one holding the 18-Star Flag (the banner of the Wuchang Uprising) and the other holding the Five-Coloured Flag (the first national flag of the Republic of China). The slogans "towards a progressive civilisation" (*wen ming jin bu*, 文明进步) and "a harmonious and equal society" (*shi jie da tong*, 世界大同) are representative of Dr. Sun Yat Sen's political vision for the new republic.

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Wishes for a happy, prosperous and long life

By surrounding themselves with auspicious prints and decorations, the Chinese believe that these items will make their wishes come true and bring them good fortune. Hence, the prints that the common people hang in their homes and paste on their doors provide useful insights into what was important to them. While the symbols used in these prints vary, the common wishes of the people include the desire for a long life, prosperity, and a happy family preferably with successful sons.



Man on large rooster (Qing dynasty)
Jiangzhou, Shanxi province

This print features a man astride a large rooster, holding the wish-granting *ru yi* (如意, “as you wish”) sceptre and an osmanthus branch, which symbolise the fulfilment of all of one’s wishes and career advancement. On four corners of the print are auspicious symbols related to good fortune or success in the imperial examinations. For example, the three citrons (*san yuan*, 三纒) at the bottom left are a reference to the phrase “may you achieve the three successive firsts” (*lian zhong san yuan*, 连中三元) in the provincial, metropolitan and imperial examinations.

The rooster is believed to be able to chase away darkness and evil spirits as it crows in the morning together with the rising sun. A large rooster (*da ji*, 大鸡) is also homophonous with the term for good fortune (*da ji*, 大吉). The rooster’s comb (*ji guan*, 鸡冠) is likewise a wordplay on “official” (*guan*, 官), hence reinforcing the wish to have good fortune and a successful career in the year ahead.

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Liu Hai teasing the golden toad (circa 1980s)
Zhuxianzhen, Henan province

This print features another popular Chinese God of Wealth, Liu Hai, who is depicted with his three-legged mythical toad (*san zu chan chu*, 三足蟾蜍). The three-legged toad is a popular mythical creature associated with wealth and good fortune, and is depicted with two strings of coins in its mouth. Apart from having only three legs, the toad is also depicted with the Yin-Yang symbol on its head, and seven diamond spots on its back representing the Big Dipper constellation (*bei dou qi xing*, 北斗七星).

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About the National Heritage Board

The National Heritage Board (NHB) was formed on 1 August 1993. As the custodian of Singapore's heritage, NHB is responsible for telling the Singapore story, sharing the Singaporean experience and imparting our Singapore spirit.

NHB's mission is to preserve and celebrate the shared heritage of our diverse communities, for the purpose of education, nation-building and cultural understanding. It manages the national museums and heritage institutions, and sets policies relating to heritage sites, monuments and the national collection. Through the national collection, NHB curates heritage programmes and presents exhibitions to connect the past, present and future generations of Singaporeans. NHB is a statutory board under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Please visit www.nhb.gov.sg for more information.

About the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (SYSNMH), a heritage institution owned by Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry and managed by the National Heritage Board, traces Dr Sun's revolutionary activities in the Southeast Asian region and highlights the impact of the 1911 Chinese Revolution on Singapore as well as Singapore's contributions to the Revolution.

The SYSNMH was re-opened to the public on 9 October 2011. The revamped Memorial Hall features a new storyline that introduces key community leaders in the early 20th century; highlights Nanyang as a base for Revolution; and explores the impact and influences of the 1911 Chinese Revolution on the Singapore Chinese community. It will also continue to promote the understanding of our history through research and publication; work with the community in outreach and education programmes as well as organise Chinese cultural events for all Singaporeans and visitors.

Please visit www.sysnmh.org.sg for more information.