

Based on visual thinking analyzing the image of woodblock prints in Foshan

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Abstract: With the rapid socio-economic transformation and modernization in China, the transmission of traditional folk culture faces significant challenges. As an important branch of Chinese New Year woodblock prints, Foshan woodblock prints have gradually lost their cultural and market significance due to declining market demand and the modernization of living environments. Although designated as a national intangible cultural heritage, its preservation is still at risk, particularly with the potential loss of traditional craftsmanship. To deeply explore the visual characteristics and cultural expression of Foshan woodblock prints, this study applies Arnheim's Visual Thinking theory, employing qualitative research and case analysis. The focus is placed on the existing workshop "Feng Junji," examining its common visual symbols and cultural connotations. This research aims to provide theoretical support for the protection of intangible cultural heritage and inspire innovative applications of traditional visual elements in modern design.

Keywords: Cultural connotation, Foshan woodblock prints, Inheritance and development, Visual thinking.

1. Introduction

The international community has encouraged countries to protect intangible cultural heritage. In response, China's State Council also issued a notice emphasizing the protection of intangible resources, such as folk crafts and traditional performing arts [1]. Chinese woodblock New Year prints, a form of folk art unique to China, originated from ancient human reverence for nature and deities [2]. The craft of woodblock New Year prints reached its peak during the Qing Dynasty (1616–1911), with workshops spread throughout regions along the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers [3]. Throughout Chinese history, woodblock prints have played a significant cultural role in promoting and educating the public [4]. The craft is rooted in China's early printing techniques, and its artistic style varies across regions due to differences in aesthetics, customs, and historical developments. The traditional production process generally involves several stages, including drafting, carving, printing, coloring, and mounting Figure 1 [5].



Figure 1.
The woodblock print carving technique.

Foshan woodblock New Year prints, a distinctive folk art form from the Lingnan region of China, have a history that dates back to the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), spanning over 700 years [6]. This ancient and unique painting form is deeply influenced by local customs, characterized by vivid colors and expressive artistry, reflecting rich folk cultural elements and artistic value. It plays a significant role in celebrating the Lunar New Year and praying for blessings during traditional festivals. Its unique artistic style and strong regional characteristics have made it an integral part of Foshan's folk life [7, 8].

Over the past half-century, China's rapid socioeconomic transformation and shifts in public lifestyles have placed intense pressure on traditional culture, gradually eroding traditional folk customs [9]. With the improvement of rural living conditions, households have ceased the practice of displaying New Year prints in their modernized interiors, leading to a shrinking market for such artworks [10]. Woodblock prints have been disappearing not only in urban settings but also in rural areas of more developed regions [10]. Compared to other schools of New Year prints, Foshan woodblock prints have particularly declined; the once-bustling "Foshan New Year Print Street" has all but vanished, with only the "Feng Junji" workshop still preserving this traditional craft. Although Foshan woodblock prints were recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, their preservation remains precarious, placing them in an endangered state among various forms of New Year prints [11].

This research, grounded in Rudolf Arnheim's "Visual Thinking" theory, utilizes interviews and observations to engage deeply with craftsmen and related groups. It focuses on analyzing the image symbols and visual elements in Foshan woodblock prints, aiming to construct a visual thinking framework. By enhancing the aesthetic appeal and cultural resonance of traditional New Year prints, the study seeks to deepen the understanding of the cultural essence of woodblock prints and establish a solid foundation for their preservation and development.

2. Literature Review

As a significant branch of Chinese woodblock prints, Foshan woodblock New Year paintings have undergone centuries of historical evolution, embodying rich cultural connotations and social values. Feng [12] regards them as cultural treasures rooted in agrarian civilization, emphasizing their role as a vital component of Chinese folk art responsible for the preservation and promotion of national culture [13]. Feng's research primarily takes a macro perspective, exploring the cultural value and preservation challenges of woodblock prints, highlighting the unique cultural memory they encapsulate amidst modernization. In contrast, Huang [14] adopts a micro perspective, focusing on the regional characteristics of Foshan woodblock prints and examining the profound impact of the distinctive cultural background of the Lingnan region on the artistic form of these prints [15].

According to Huang, Foshan woodblock prints not only represent folk art but also serve as vivid representations of Lingnan's social culture and history, revealing their multifaceted value within local culture.

Although both Feng Jicai and Huang Huan explore the cultural value and regional characteristics of woodblock prints from macro and micro perspectives, there are evident gaps in the depth and breadth of existing research. Feng's work leans heavily toward historical overview and the protection of traditional art, lacking an in-depth analysis of the visual language and symbolic value inherent in the prints. Meanwhile, although Huang provides a detailed description of regional influences, she does not integrate a modern design perspective to explore the potential for re-creation and application of Foshan woodblock prints in contemporary culture. Overall, existing literature predominantly focuses on the historical background, technical description, and cultural representation of these prints while falling short of sufficiently theorizing their function as a system of visual symbols or examining their innovative transmission in modern contexts.

Currently, research on Foshan woodblock prints remains largely limited to surface descriptions of their artistic features. Scholars such as Xu [16] and Shu and Chen [17] have analyzed the artistic characteristics of woodblock prints in terms of composition, symbolic expression, and thematic craftsmanship [18, 19]. However, these studies tend to concentrate on form and technique, failing to delve deeper into the cultural significance and social symbolism embedded within the prints. While Xu suggests commonalities between Foshan woodblock prints and graphic design from a modern design perspective, his analysis is too broad and lacks specific examination of their potential application and aesthetic value in contemporary design. Shu Huifang and Chen Hong focus on the carving techniques and subject matter of these prints, highlighting connections to stucco art, yet they do not explore their role in cultural transmission or their potential for cross-temporal innovation within a broader cultural context. Similarly, Huang [20] provides a brief overview of the historical background of Foshan woodblock prints, outlining their origins and development, but her work is largely descriptive, lacking theoretical analysis and a systematic framework [21].

A common issue in existing studies is that, while they discuss the external characteristics of woodblock prints, they fail to sufficiently explore their cultural connotations and social significance. There is a notable absence of systematic analysis regarding the symbolic system of woodblock prints, resulting in research that remains superficial and lacking in a robust theoretical framework.

Furthermore, a significant gap in current literature is the neglect of the visual language of woodblock prints. Jin [22] emphasized that the structure and linguistic forms of images can more effectively reveal the cultural value of artworks compared to textual descriptions [22]. Yet, most existing studies overlook this perspective, failing to employ image analysis methods to uncover the visual symbols and cultural meanings of woodblock prints. This oversight not only limits our understanding of woodblock prints as visual art but also diminishes their potential for re-creation in modern cultural contexts.

This study aims to fill the above-mentioned gaps by utilizing image analysis methods and Rudolf Arnheim's "Visual Thinking" theory to explore the pathways and possibilities of cultural transmission and re-creation of Foshan woodblock prints in contemporary contexts. By drawing on Arnheim [23] theory, this research will adopt it as the theoretical framework for analyzing Foshan woodblock prints. Arnheim argues that visual thinking is a cognitive approach to understanding the world through perceiving and analyzing visual information. The rich colors, compositions, and symbols embedded in Foshan woodblock prints are quintessential examples of visual thinking in practice [23]. These prints not only convey aesthetic values through visual elements but also carry profound cultural connotations and emotional expressions.

Arnheim further categorizes images into three functions: pictures, symbols, and signs (Figure 2). Foshan woodblock prints, as pictures, exhibit exquisite visual appeal; as symbols, they embody cultural meanings such as auspiciousness and protection against evil; and as signs, they convey specific social functions—for instance, images of door guardians symbolize the wish for safety and peace. Through the process of perception and structured interpretation, viewers can automatically recognize shapes, symmetry, and colors within the artworks and extract the cultural messages behind them, such as the pursuit of family harmony and societal prosperity.

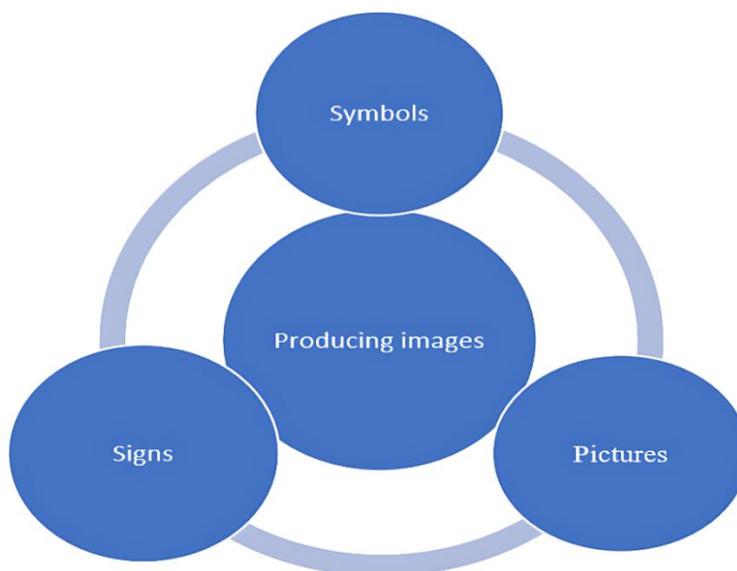


Figure 2.
Adaptation in Rudolf Arnheim Theory 1969.

This study employs image analysis combined with interviews to conduct an in-depth exploration of the creative process, visual language, and modern innovation potential of Foshan woodblock prints. By integrating the theory of visual thinking with semiotic analysis, this research aims to address gaps in the existing literature and establish a more systematic strategy for cultural heritage transmission. Furthermore, it seeks to provide theoretical support for the re-creation of Foshan woodblock prints within a contemporary context.

The primary objective of this research is to utilize Rudolf Arnheim's "Visual Thinking" theory to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the image symbols and visual elements within Foshan woodblock prints, examining their innovative transmission pathways within the current cultural landscape. This study not only offers a theoretical foundation for the preservation and re-creation of woodblock print art but also introduces new approaches for the application and promotion of intangible cultural heritage in modern society.

3. Methodology

This study employs a case study approach as its primary qualitative research method. According to Stake [24] the essence of case studies lies in the in-depth analysis of specific issues to uncover underlying truths [24]. Yin [25] emphasizes that the purpose of case studies is to understand complex phenomena within real-world contexts, revealing intricate relationships through thorough case analysis [25]. Furthermore, Merriam and Baumgartner [26] highlights the unique value of case studies in providing rich and detailed descriptions, enabling researchers to grasp the deeper causes of complex problems [26]. Patton [27] underscores their strength in revealing the multifaceted nature and complexity of research subjects [27]. Creswell [28] further asserts that case studies facilitate the understanding of the essence of phenomena within authentic social settings [28].

In this study, the research focuses on the handcraft workshop of the Feng family, renowned practitioners of Foshan woodblock prints, as the primary case. A combination of data collection methods is utilized to ensure diversity and depth in the data, covering interviews, observations, and text analysis. These methods aim to capture comprehensive insights into the Feng family's practices in the creation

and transmission of traditional woodblock prints. Specifically, the study collected six woodblock prints from the Feng family's collection and conducted semi-structured interviews with the workshop's inheritors, apprentices, and designers to gain a deeper understanding of the symbolism employed in their prints and the associated cultural context.

The interview questions were designed to explore the following aspects:

1. What are the commonly used visual elements in traditional woodblock prints?
2. What spiritual or cultural meanings do these symbols convey?
3. How are visual elements constructed in visual perception, according to the principles of visual thinking?

This study combines interviews and observations with Rudolf Arnheim's "Visual Thinking" theory to analyze the visual elements in Foshan woodblock prints, particularly focusing on the cognitive processes of symbols, signs, and images, and explores the role these elements play in cultural communication. Additionally, through communication with contemporary artists and craftsmen, the study examines how woodblock prints balance traditional craftsmanship with modern design needs in the context of contemporary culture, promoting innovation and heritage. Arnheim suggests that symbols convey cultural meanings through abstraction, signs transmit specific information, and images directly express emotions and aesthetic values.

This research integrates visual analysis with cultural context analysis to reveal the cultural value of Foshan woodblock prints and their significance in contemporary society. By combining visual symbols in the prints with related textual materials, the study interprets their cultural beliefs and social customs [29]. Through case study, visual analysis, and thematic analysis, the research systematically clarifies the artistic characteristics and transmission challenges of Foshan woodblock prints at the intersection of tradition and modern design, providing theoretical support and practical references for the contemporary development of the prints.

4 Results

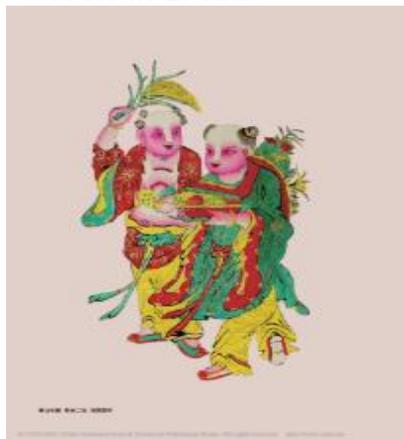
4.1. Overall Sample

The study conducted content analysis on six selected woodblock print samples (Table 4.1). By examining the systems of symbols, signs, and pictures within these samples, the analysis explores their relationships with visual elements to reveal the underlying cultural values conveyed through these images.

Table 1.

Thematic for each theme across all respondents (Cases).

Case1 He-he Er Xian



Visual1	Images of the Children of Hanshan and Shide
Pictures	The images of Hanshan and Shide are presented as children, conveying a state of innocence, spontaneity, and uninhibited spirituality. The image of children in the paintings visually expresses their "transcendental" attitude towards life, implying the wisdom and open-mindedness of Zen Buddhism.
Symbols	The image of the child symbolises the purity of mind and the awakening of wisdom, and the childlike heart is a metaphor for the Buddhist practitioner's return to the spirit of the "original mind".
Signs	In woodblock print artworks, the image of the child is often used as a sign of good fortune and happiness. In the depictions of Hanshan and Shide, they are presented in the form of children, symbolizing a sense of Zen-like transcendence and carefree spirit. This imagery conveys a reflection on and awakening from secular life, suggesting a philosophical detachment and a higher understanding of the world.
Visual2	Ears of rice
Pictures	The ears of rice, used as a background decoration in the artwork, present an image of a bountiful harvest, symbolizing the ideal of harmony between nature and humanity.
Symbols	The word "he" (禾, rice) is a homophone for "he" (荷, lotus), which represents harmony and peace. In the artwork, it conveys the desire for harmony between humans, nature, and society.
Signs	Ears of rice are often used as sign of abundance and good fortune, hinting at family harmony and a prosperous life. When combined with the image of Hanshan and Shide, this element expresses the pursuit of inner tranquility and external harmony.
Visual3	Treasure box
Pictures	宝The treasure box, beautifully crafted and placed in Shide's hands, conveys the symbolic meaning of a precious item.
Symbols	The word "box" (盒, he) is a homophone for "he" (合), which symbolizes unity and harmony, as well as friendship and the completion of relationships. This suggests the

	harmonious relationship between Hanshan and Shide, while also symbolizing the spiritual harmony in Buddhist practice.
Signs	The treasure box represents rarity, wisdom, and fortune, often used as a sign of blessings and wishes. It reflects people's hopes for a better life, conveying aspirations for prosperity and spiritual well-being.
Visual4	Lotus seed pod
Pictures	The lotus seed pod appears as a corner decoration in the artwork, symbolizing Buddhist elements and enhancing the religious atmosphere of the piece.
Symbols	As a symbol of Buddhism, the lotus seed pod represents purity and wisdom. It resonates with the Buddhist teaching of "the lotus blooms in muddy waters yet remains unsullied," symbolizing the detachment and purification of Buddhist practitioners.
Signs	As a sign of Buddhist culture, the lotus seed pod reminds people to pursue spiritual purification and transcendence, suggesting the noble spiritual state of Hanshan and Shide in their Buddhist practice.
Visual5	Lotus flower
Pictures	The lotus flower gracefully appears on Shide's back basket, creating an elegant and serene atmosphere.
Symbols	The lotus symbolizes the noble qualities and transcendent spirit of Hanshan and Shide, implying that they remain unaffected by the distractions of the mundane world.
Signs	As a Buddhist sign, the lotus conveys wisdom, purity, and enlightenment, serving as a metaphor for the high spiritual attainment of Buddhist practitioners.

Case2 Yin Fu Gui Tang



Visual1	Zhong Kui
Pictures	Zhong Kui appears in the artwork with a majestic posture, fierce facial expression, and sword in hand, creating a powerful visual impact. This image directly conveys Zhong Kui's mission to drive away evil and exorcise spirits.
Symbols	Zhong Kui's image symbolizes uprightness, selflessness, and courage. As a symbol of ghost-dispelling and evil-repelling, his appearance not only displays power and authority visually but also conveys a reverence for justice and bravery.
Signs	In traditional New Year prints, the image of Zhong Kui serves as a sign for protecting against evil and ensuring peace. It is commonly used as a protective talisman to safeguard homes from malevolent forces, symbolizing the wish for family happiness and well-being.
Visual2	Sword
Pictures	The sword in Zhong Kui's hand is depicted as sharp and powerful, emphasizing his

	formidable presence.
Symbols	he sword symbolizes home protection and the warding off of evil, serving as Zhong Kui's tool for exorcising demons and evil spirits. It represents strength and justice.
Signs	In New Year prints, the sword functions as a sign for repelling evil and ensuring peace, expressing the people's wish for the safety of their homes and the health of their family members.
Visual3	Fan
Pictures	The fan is typically depicted as elegant and delicate, held in Zhong Kui's hand, creating a contrast between strength and grace.
Symbols	The fan symbolizes the refined character of scholars and literati, and when combined with Zhong Kui's strong image, it represents the ideal of a well-rounded personality, balancing both strength and gentleness.
Signs	In traditional culture, the fan is a sign of status and taste, expressing a longing for cultural refinement and an elegant lifestyle.
Visual4	Bats
Pictures	Bats are depicted flying in groups in the artwork, creating a lively and dynamic atmosphere that enhances the overall sense of good fortune.
Symbols	The word "bat" (蝠) is a homophone for "fortune" (福), symbolizing blessings and conveying the idea of bringing happiness into the home.
Signs	As a sign of good luck, bats are often used in New Year prints to express wishes for prosperity and well-being, representing the arrival of good fortune.
Visual5	Text: "Bringing Fortune Home" ("Yin Fu Gui Tang")
Pictures	The text appears in calligraphy on the artwork, with bold and forceful brushstrokes that enhance the visual impact of the piece.
Symbols	The text directly conveys the wish for fortune to return to the home, complementing the image of Zhong Kui and strengthening the auspicious function of the New Year print.
Signs	The phrase "Bringing Fortune Home" serves as a direct sign of blessings, expressing people's aspirations and pursuit of a happy and prosperous life.

Case3/4 Wu Gu Feng Deng ; Tai Ping Sheng Shi



Visual 1	Red Carp Lantern
Pictures	The image of the red carp lantern is vivid and lively, often depicted with dynamic details,

	symbolizing the festive atmosphere and capturing strong visual appeal.
Symbols	The carp ("li") is homophonous with the word for "abundance" ("yu"), symbolizing the wish for prosperity year after year. The red color represents the feminine (female carp), embodying the gentle beauty within the family.
Signs	As a sign of abundance, the carp lantern frequently appears in New Year prints, symbolizing a wish for a prosperous and flourishing life.
Visual2	Green Carp Lantern
Pictures	The green carp lantern appears in pairs with the red carp lantern, creating visual balance within the composition.
Symbols	The green color symbolizes the masculine (male carp), signifying strength and vitality. This contrasts with the red lantern, representing a balance between yin (feminine) and yang (masculine) energies. The legend of the carp leaping over the dragon gate also symbolizes success and advancement.
Signs	As a sign of masculinity, the green carp lantern conveys wishes for prosperity and family flourishing, often used to symbolize the hope for a thriving lineage.
Visual3	Couplets
Pictures	As decorative elements, couplets appear on both sides of the artwork in elegant calligraphy, creating a symmetrical and harmonious visual effect.
Symbols	The content of these couplets often includes auspicious phrases and blessings, symbolizing well-wishing in traditional New Year culture.
Signs	As signs of good fortune in New Year prints, couplets convey hopes for prosperity and happiness, embodying the anticipation of a joyful and prosperous new year.
Visual4	Text: "Abundant Harvest" ("Wu Gu Feng Deng")
Pictures	The text often appears in bold, prominent fonts, emphasizing the theme of a bountiful harvest and enhancing visual impact.
Symbols	"Abundant Harvest" symbolizes plentiful crops and material abundance, conveying aspirations for a prosperous life.
Signs	In New Year prints, such textual signs express wishes for wealth, well-being, and a prosperous future, reflecting hopes for a thriving and healthy life.
Visual5	Text: "Peaceful and Prosperous Era" ("Tai Ping Sheng Shi")
Pictures	The text is rendered in elegant calligraphy, adding a refined and cultured aura to the artwork.
Symbols	"Peaceful and Prosperous Era" symbolizes social stability and national prosperity, embodying aspirations for a golden age.
Signs	In New Year prints, this textual sign represents wishes for national peace and the well-being of the people, reflecting a collective hope for a harmonious and prosperous society.
Visual6	Women and Children Group
Pictures	The depiction of a woman accompanied by two children exudes warmth, illustrating a harmonious family atmosphere.
Symbols	This grouping symbolizes good fortune and family prosperity, embodying the cherished ideals of offspring continuity and the flourishing of family lineage.
Signs	In New Year prints, this combination serves as a sign of familial happiness and thriving descendants, conveying blessings for the prosperity and well-being of the household.
Visual7	Gold Ingots
Pictures	Gold ingots are typically depicted in golden hues, emphasizing their brilliance as a symbol of wealth.

Symbols	They represent prosperity and affluence, reflecting a desire for material abundance.
Signs	As signs of fortune in New Year prints, gold ingots convey wishes for prosperity and good luck, symbolizing aspirations for wealth and success.

Case5/6 Chi Dao Jiang Jun1; Chi Dao Jiang Jun2



Visual1	Image of Guan Gong
Pictures	The portrayal of Guan Gong is rendered with meticulous detail, including facial features like thick eyebrows, large eyes, and a long beard, along with his armor and attire. These visual details enable viewers to instantly recognize him as the legendary figure, Guan Yu, depicted in a heroic and imposing stance.
Symbols	Guan Gong symbolizes loyalty, righteousness, and courage. In Chinese culture, he is venerated as the "God of War" and "Door Guardian," serving as a protector of homes. His presence signifies the power to ward off evil and uphold justice.
Signs	The image of Guan Gong functions as a sign of guardianship and defense. These depictions are often placed at entrances, serving as a public signal to convey the protective strength safeguarding the premises.
Visual2	Broadsword
Pictures	The broadsword is Guan Gong's iconic weapon, often depicted in paintings with exaggerated size and detail to emphasize its formidable power. The blade's size, shape, and texture are typically accentuated to symbolize combat prowess and immense strength.
Symbols	The broadsword stands as a symbol of military might, justice, and authority. In Chinese tradition, it is closely associated with virtues like loyalty, courage, and heroism, representing the defense of one's home and the fight against malevolent forces.
Signs	As an integral part of Guan Gong's portrayal, the broadsword also serves as a sign of protection and exorcism. In the depiction of door guardians, the sword functions as a clear signifier, indicating that the household is safeguarded by powerful forces, capable of warding off evil and defending the home.
Visual3	Opposing Slant Layout
Pictures	The opposing slant layout features two Guan Gong figures positioned symmetrically within the artwork, creating a sense of visual balance and harmony. This design not only carries aesthetic significance but also enhances the commanding presence of the Guan Gong figures.
Symbols	The opposing slant layout symbolizes dual protection and collaboration, where the two Guan Gong figures face each other in a complementary stance, working together to guard the space. This arrangement represents the concept of combined strength, symbolizing cooperation, protection, and unity.
Signs	This layout functions as a visual sign, indicating that the two Guan Gong figures, though opposing, are mutually supportive. As door guardians, this configuration serves as a sign of comprehensive defense, clearly conveying the message of "protecting the household and warding off evil."

4.2. Content Expression of Each Cardinal Theme

Through observation of the samples, further organization and classification were carried out. This section organizes the samples into four main contents: figures, animals, birds and flowers, and secular

life, with further subdivisions within each content. In this section, I will provide a detailed explanation of each content.

Table 2.

Content for figure themes (Drawn by the author).

Content	Pictures	Works
figure	Female and Child, Zhong Kui, Hanshan, Shide, Child figure, Guan Yu	“He-He Er Xian”、 “Wu Gu Feng Deng”、 “Tai Ping Sheng Shi”、 “Yin Fu Gui Tang”、 “Chi Dao Jiang Jun1”、 “Chi Dao Jiang Jun2”

The figure theme is the most common in woodblock prints, serving not only a decorative function but also an educational one. All six selected woodblock print samples feature human figures, with a 100% coverage rate. These prints depict historical heroes such as the legendary Guan Yu, the Tang dynasty poet-monks Han Shan and Shi De, as well as auspicious deities like the Hehe Immortals, with the figure of Wan Hui being the precursor to the Hehe Immortals in legend. These images reflect people's pursuit of justice, courage, and morality. Tang Jialu, in his work 《Cultural Ecology of Folk Art》, points out that figure-based woodblock prints reflect the traditional Chinese values of loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness, often using historical figures or mythical heroes as subjects to convey moral and educational functions through artistic expressions [30]. According to Zhao Bingxiang in 《The Heroic Beginnings in New Year Paintings》, figure-themed prints often use the images of heroes to express the people's longing for justice and reverence for morality. These heroes in the prints are not only part of folk culture but also reflect the emotional aspirations of the public [31].

4.2.1. Animal

Table 3.

Content for animal themes (Drawn by the author).

Content	Pictures	Works
Animals	Bat	“Yin Fu Gui Tang”

Liu Yi, in 《The Creative Themes and Iconography of Traditional Chinese Folk New Year Paintings》, mentions that animal-themed New Year prints not only reflect the legacy of nature worship and totemic beliefs but also embody the reverence and fear of nature in agrarian societies [32]. In the samples, the bat, as an animal theme, is commonly used in New Year prints to convey auspicious wishes, symbolizing good luck and fortune.

4.2.2. Birds and Flowers

Table 4.

Content for the theme of birds and flowers (Drawn by the author).

Content	Pictures	Works
birds and flowers	Lotus flower, lotus leaf, Ears of rice, lotus seedling, carp	“He-He Er Xian”、 “Wu Gu Feng Deng”、 “Tai Ping Sheng Shi”

The flower-and-bird-themed New Year prints in the samples primarily feature flowers such as lotus, lotus leaves, rice ears, and lotus pods, as well as birds like carp, portraying natural beauty and the aspiration for a better life. Yang Feng, in 《The Symbolism of Auspicious Flower-and-Bird Patterns in New Year Prints》, explains that flower-and-bird New Year prints, through the depiction of flower and bird images such as the resilience of plum blossoms and the wealth and prosperity symbolized by

peonies, represent a fusion of cultural symbols and artistic forms. These prints reflect the natural views and aesthetic ideals of ancient Chinese scholars, with their artistic value lying in their profound symbolism and decorative appeal [33].

4.2.3. Secular Life

Table 5.

Content of secular life themes (Drawn by the author).

Content	Pictures	Works
secular life	Treasure box, Lamp, Gold Ingots, Fan, Couplet	"He-He Er Xian", "Wu Gu Feng Deng", "Tai Ping Sheng Shi", "Yin Fu Gui Tang"

The secular life-themed New Year prints depict everyday scenes from the lives of ordinary people, capturing a strong sense of the times and a lively atmosphere. Sharulnizam Ramli mentions that all created patterns, including human figures, are closely related to the creator's reflections on interactions with nature and the various forms of life that thrive and evolve within it [34].

Research indicates that the thematic content of woodblock New Year prints is rich and diverse. Each theme is deeply rooted in cultural backgrounds and social psychology, making New Year prints not only artistic expressions but also carriers of cultural heritage.

4.3. Imagery Themes of Each Cardinal Number

Imagery in visual perception exists prior to perception itself, and perception forms the basis of artistic thought. Imagery is both subjective and objective [35]. The "Cihai" dictionary defines imagery as the fusion of an object's sensory image with an individual's inner state, creating a concrete image embedded in the mind. It can be said that imagery is an objective manifestation used to convey subjective emotions. In New Year prints, various content elements, such as figures, animals, flowers, birds, mythology, and secular life, as well as visual expressions through colors and composition, convey and embody people's emotional demands, carrying profound meaning. Based on the content elements reflected in the six sample works, the selected samples can be categorized into three major thematic motifs: exorcism and disaster prevention, blessing and auspiciousness, and the wish for offspring and continuity.

4.3.1. Exorcism and Disaster Prevention

During the agricultural period, due to the limited understanding of nature and the backwardness of productivity, people struggled to cope with frequent natural disasters. As a result, people who suffered from natural calamities and serious diseases had no choice but to place their hopes in deities to pray for favorable weather conditions and personal health. In the samples, works like "Yin Fu Gui Tang" and "Chi Dao Jiang Jun" belong to the category of exorcising evil and averting disasters. These prints were created by ordinary people based on legendary or mythical characters, infused with their own emotions and subjective intentions, resulting in powerful symbolic imagery.

Table 6.
Symbols under the category of gods and goddesses (Produced by the author).

Categories	Samples	Symbols	Works
Exorcism and disaster prevention	“Yin Fu Gui Tang”	Zhong Kui, sword, fan, bat, texts	
	“Chi Dao Jiang Jun”	Guan Yu, Broadsword, Opposing Slant Layout	

The work 《Yin Fu Gui Tang》 depicts the figure of Zhong Kui wielding a sword to slay demons, with bats returning to the hall, symbolizing the exorcism of evil spirits. Zhong Kui is a widely recognized figure in Chinese folklore, known as the god who captures ghosts and drives away evil. He is portrayed as righteous, selfless, fearless, and dedicated to protecting the people. People would hang images of Zhong Kui, holding a sword in one hand and a fan inscribed with the words "Yin Fu Gui Tang" (Bring Fortune Home) in the other, to ward off misfortune, eliminate disasters, and welcome blessings. This custom continues to be widespread today, especially in the Foshan region, where people hang Zhong Kui images not only on New Year's Eve but also during the Dragon Boat Festival to drive away evil spirits. Over time, Zhong Kui's powers were expanded to encompass the ability to both exorcise demons and bestow blessings and wealth. His image became a symbol of protection against harm and evil.

Similarly, 《Chi Dao Jiang Jun》 features the heroic figure of Guan Yu, a renowned general from the Three Kingdoms period (220–280). Guan Yu was celebrated for his unwavering loyalty and righteousness, contributing greatly to the restoration of the Han dynasty. In the minds of the common people, Guan Yu became a symbol of both loyalty and martial prowess. His posthumous deification as a god who could protect people from evil spirits was rooted in the belief that he had the power to defeat demons and safeguard the household. Every year during the festivals, people would display images of Guan Yu as the "door god" to invoke his protection. Originally a loyal patriot, Guan Yu's image was elevated to that of a protective deity, embodying the community's desire for safety and the triumph over evil forces. This transformation from a human hero to a divine protector reflects the folk worship of heroes, attributing god-like powers to them as a means of addressing the psychological need for divine assistance in battling evil.

4.3.2. Blessing and Auspiciousness

In Foshan woodblock prints, those themed around “prayers for blessings and auspiciousness” include works such as 《Tai Ping Sheng Shi》, 《Wu Gu Feng Deng》, and 《He-he Er Xian》. These three prints, through their depictions of natural and life scenes, reflect people's pursuit of

happiness and a beautiful life, as well as their prayers for good fortune and peace. They are not only artistic works but also symbols of folk culture and collective wishes.

Table 7.

Symbols under the category of blessings and welcome auspiciousness (produced by the author).

Categories	Samples	Symbols	Works
Blessing and auspiciousness	“Tai Ping Sheng Shi”	Adult and children, Changxin palace lamp, cyan carp lamp, ingot, couplet, texts	
	“Wu Gu Feng Deng”	Adult and children, Changxin palace lamp, red carp lamp, ingot, couplet, texts	

《Tai Ping Sheng Shi》(太平盛世), meaning "Era of Peace and Prosperity," depicts a harmonious and prosperous scene. The artwork typically includes elements symbolizing abundance and tranquility, such as dancing koi fish, which are used to celebrate the New Year, mark the Lantern Festival, and express hope for the future. This image embodies the people's wishes for a peaceful country, safety for the people, and national prosperity. Such prints are commonly hung in homes to pray for favorable weather, social stability, and peace in the coming year.

《Wu Gu Feng Deng》(五谷丰登), with a theme of harvest, features the fish lantern symbol, which conveys the wishes of "surplus every year" and "the carp jumping over the dragon gate." The fish, which sounds like the word for "surplus" in Chinese, symbolizes abundance and prosperity. It represents a wish for a bountiful harvest and a prosperous life, especially in agricultural societies where people long for good harvests and health. This type of print was particularly popular in agrarian communities.

The 《He-he Er Xian》(和合二仙) print, a classic theme in traditional Chinese New Year prints, varies in style and artistic features depending on the production base, such as Foshan, Zhuxian Town in Henan, Yangliuqing in Tianjin, and Wuqiao in Hebei (as shown in Table 4). These regional variations reflect different artistic styles while maintaining the core theme.

Table 8.
 “He-He Er Xian” prints of Different Origins (produced by the author).

Foshan, Guangdong Province	Zhuxian Town, Henan Province	Yang Liuqing, Tianjin City	Wuqiang, Hebei Province
“He-He Er Xian”	“He-He Er Xian”	“He-He Er Xian”	“He-He Er Xian”
			

From the chart, it can be seen that the element of lotus leaves in Foshan woodblock prints is replaced by rice ear elements. This change reflects the influence of each region’s cultural background, craft traditions, and aesthetic preferences, resulting in distinctive local styles and features in the prints. From the perspective of dialectology, the northern dialect pronounces "荷" (he) while the southern dialect pronounces "禾" (wo), both of which phonetically resemble the word "和" (harmony). In Cantonese, "禾" (rice) and "和" (harmony) are homophones, and this phonetic relationship combines the abstract concept of harmony with the concrete image of rice. On one hand, the rice ear symbolizes harmony, the value of peace, and prosperity; on the other hand, it reflects the regional characteristic of the Lingnan area, where rice is a primary crop. Whether it is "荷" or "禾," both symbolize auspiciousness and joy, with the phonetic symbolism conveying the people’s hopes for wealth and good fortune.

4.3.3. Offspring and Continuity

In wedding feasts, the image of the Hehe Erxian (the "Two Immortals of Harmony") as monks is considered inappropriate. Therefore, the Hehe Erxian is reimagined as two young boys, one holding a lotus flower and the other holding a treasure box. The purity and elegance of the lotus, along with the fertility symbolized by the lotus root’s many seeds, closely align with traditional Chinese cultural expectations for women—both beauty and fertility. The "lotus" and "treasure box" symbolize a harmonious and blissful marriage, while the "lotus" and "young boys" represent the wish for many children and grandchildren. This transformation reflects traditional Chinese beliefs, where young boys are also symbols of the blessings of having children and grandchildren, embodying the ancient Chinese concept of fertility worship.

4.3.4. Use of Color

In the selection and application of colors, Foshan woodblock prints not only reflect local characteristics but also showcase the profound influence of traditional Chinese culture. Red symbolizes good fortune and celebration in Chinese tradition, closely associated with life itself. It is considered the primary color for festive celebrations and exorcism [21]. Yellow, with its warm and stabilizing feel, forms a strong contrast to red, creating visual impact, and in religious contexts, it represents the sacred and the noble [36]. For example, in "He-He Er Xian," yellow garments are used to highlight their sanctity and nobility, closely related to the traditions of Buddhism and Taoism.

Foshan woodblock prints not only consider aesthetics in their color combinations but also pay close attention to the symbolic meaning and cultural connotations of colors. For instance, in "Wu Gu Feng Deng" and "Tai Ping Sheng Shi," the red carp and green carp are used as symbolic representations of femininity and masculinity, respectively. In the door god painting "Chi Dao Jiang Jun," red, yellow, and green are primarily used for multi-layer printing, with a vermilion-orange background that is both striking and in line with the auspicious symbolism in folk culture. This use of color reflects the artist's deep understanding of Cantonese folk customs and their sensitive grasp and creative use of color symbolism.

4.3.5. Composition Techniques

Yin Fu Gui Tang》, the figures are enlarged, creating a sense of visual richness. This compositional approach is influenced by traditional notions of "beauty" and "completeness," reflecting the people's aspirations for a better life [37]. Drawing from the ancient Five Elements philosophy, the composition of Foshan woodblock prints places importance on the completeness of the characters. In the six samples works, the figures' facial features and limbs are all clearly presented, symbolizing completeness and auspiciousness, and embodying the people's hope for a perfect life. Through these compositional techniques, the artists express the people's psychological pursuit of "wholeness" [38].

The rich imagery in Foshan woodblock prints, shaped by their thematic symbols, use of color, and composition, vividly expresses the simple thoughts and desires of the local people for a better life. It also reveals the deep symbolic meanings and cultural connotations underlying the artwork.

5. Discussion

The study focuses on the following questions: What are the common visual elements in Foshan woodblock prints? What spiritual demands do these elements carry? How do these elements shape the viewer's perception through visual thinking? To address these questions, this study selects six woodblock print samples for in-depth analysis, with the specific research results presented below.

5.1. Common Visual Elements in Traditional New Year Prints

Through an analysis of six Foshan woodblock New Year prints, a total of 20 common symbols were identified, with "figures" and "children" being the most frequently depicted. Female figures in family-themed prints highlights their significant role within folk traditions, while male figures are predominantly portrayed in the role of generals. Symbols associated with children serve as representations of new life and continuity, primarily expressing desires for a flourishing lineage, healthy growth, and future success.

In addition, plant and animal symbols reflect natural elements and aspects of everyday life. For instance, symbols like "rice ears" and "carp lanterns" convey the distinct characteristics of Lingnan culture, while the depiction of Zhong Kui embodies the unique martial arts traditions of Foshan. The inclusion of inscriptions and titles further enriches the philosophical and artistic depth of the prints. Moreover, scenes featuring mothers and children are prevalent, while the presence of father figures is

relatively rare, reflecting the traditional division of parental responsibilities in Chinese society. This study elucidates the cultural significance of symbolic elements in Foshan woodblock prints, thereby laying a foundation for a deeper understanding of their visual narratives and social functions.

5.1. *What Spiritual Demands Do These Symbols Express?*

This study divides the symbolic system of six Foshan woodblock print samples into three major categories: exorcism and disaster prevention, blessing and auspiciousness, and the wish for offspring and continuity. These themes reflect people's pursuit of an ideal life, such as family harmony, career success, and the spiritual values in traditional culture, including diligence, progress, and optimism.

The primary function of exorcism and disaster prevention-themed prints is to protect family safety. For example, the symbol of Guan Yu represents the power to exorcise evil and protect the home, expressing the desire to avoid disasters and maintain peace. It embodies the traditional concept of "the opposition of good and evil." Blessing and auspiciousness-themed prints convey a longing for happiness and abundance. Symbols such as the carp leaping over the dragon gate and "nian nian you yu" (may you have surplus year after year) symbolize wishes for happiness, longevity, wealth, and career success. These prints are also used in commercial settings to pray for prosperous business, reflecting the role of woodblock prints in economic life [39]. The wish for offspring and continuity-themed prints express the ancient Chinese concept of fertility worship.

5.2. *How Do Visual Elements Construct Visual Perception in Visual Thinking?*

Arnheim argues that visual thinking is an active constructive process, relying on the orderly arrangement and symbolization of visual elements [40]. In the context of woodblock prints, images, symbols, and signs each play distinct roles. Images, such as children, lotus flowers, and carp, are not only intuitively recognized but also carry cultural meanings, such as fertility and family prosperity, reflecting the integration of visual perception with cultural significance. Symbols and signs often have multiple meanings. For example, the combination of "lotus" and "fish," through homophony, conveys the blessing of "abundance year after year," illustrating the cognitive transformation from image to symbol to metaphor. The interpretation of symbols in woodblock prints is subjective, influenced by cultural background and individual knowledge, and the boundaries between images and symbols are often blurred, reflecting the subjective construction characteristic of visual thinking. The visual elements in woodblock prints are often combinations of multiple symbols, demonstrating the changes and expansions of symbolic construction within cultural and social contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study aims to explore the cultural significance and value of Foshan woodblock prints, with a focus on the visual elements within these prints, including symbols, patterns, signs, and texts. Using the visual thinking theory as a framework, the research examines the relationship between folk events and symbolic meanings in these prints, viewing them as a visual language that can be interpreted through Arnheim's three functions of images—pictures, symbols, and signs.

Through qualitative analysis, this paper categorizes the symbols in traditional woodblock prints and explains their meanings and relationships, addressing three core questions: 1) What are the common visual symbols used in traditional prints? 2) What spiritual meanings do these symbols convey? 3) How are these symbols constructed within visual thinking? The study found that Foshan woodblock prints extensively used a variety of symbols, including deities, human figures, natural elements, and everyday life, displaying diversity, poetic expression, stability, and a lifelike quality. The use of symbols representing children and women was frequent, whereas symbols representing men typically depicted other social roles, with the father's role being less prominent in domestic scenes.

Although a wide range of symbols and signs were used in the prints, the selected sample in this study primarily conveyed themes of warding off evil, fertility, abundant harvest, prosperity, longevity, and good fortune, reflecting people's aspirations for an ideal life and the utilitarian nature of folk beliefs. Thus, the woodblock prints are not only artistic expressions but also embodiments of folk beliefs and values that promote positive and upward social attitudes. The construction of symbolic meaning in the prints relies on Arnheim's three-function theory, emphasizing that visual perception is not merely passive reception of visual information, but an active process of meaning construction through intellectual, emotional, and experiential interactions. The prints convey aspirations for safety, happiness, prosperity, and family harmony through their symbolic systems and also serve educational and cultural transmission roles, reflecting the deep-rooted traditional cultural values.

While the six woodblock print samples selected for this study are representative, they still have certain limitations, and future research will continue to gather more data to enhance the persuasiveness and representativeness of the findings. This study validates the effectiveness of the visual thinking theory in analyzing Foshan woodblock prints and reveals how these visual elements reflect the spiritual and emotional aspirations of the people of Foshan. It provides a new perspective on the preservation and development of woodblock prints in modern society, ensuring the continued vitality of this traditional craft in the modern context and contributing to its protection and transmission.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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