
PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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CHINESE ZHIMA PRINTS HELD IN RUSSIAN COLLECTIONS. PART I

The Chinese term *nianhua* refers to the woodblock prints used on festive occasions to decorate home or serve as ritual icons or exorcism talismans. They are designed and carved by craftsmen in woodblock print shops, with rustic, sometimes crude paintings and vibrant colours. From these prints, one can piece together almost all the important festivities of the calendar cycle, as well as a complete pantheon of folk religion. When Russian travellers to China first saw *nianhua*, the affinity to Russian *lubok* drew their attention. Those prints were colourful, of curious design, cheap, and light in weight. Over time, Russian travellers and scholars brought a considerable quantity of *nianhua* back to Russia. No doubt few would have anticipated that they would help preserve a precious element of Chinese folk religion.

Due to the writings of the late Professor Boris Riftin (1932—2012) [1], the world came to realize the impressive quantity and quality of the *nianhua* collection in Russia. A portion of the *nianhua* from the State Hermitage Museum came to Taiwan for an exhibition at the Museum of National History in 1994 [2]. There are also a handful of catalogues published in China in recent years. Many of these selected to be exhibited or published are of the finest, most sophisticated style and craftsmanship. Some are difficult to find even in China [3].

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit St. Petersburg in 2010 and browse through the Chinese *nianhua* collections. Thanks to the staff at the Hermitage Museum, *Kunstkamera*, and the Museum of History of Religion, I was able to study the prints I was most interested in. Due to my own research background, I paid more attention to the types of prints used for festive and ritual purposes. Termed *zhima*, *shenma*, or *jiama* (meaning “paper horse”, “deity horse”, and “armour horse”, respectively), these prints feature a horse, the beast that transports deities back to heaven after the conclusion of an offering. In time, the simple design of *zhima* evolved and diversified. Horses lost their position as the domi-

nant theme. Instead, a portrait of the deity in question occupies a large portion of the print, while the horse, shrunk to miniature, perches on the offering table at the very bottom of the picture. In the series of articles, I intend to introduce a few prints at a time, drawing examples from the collections of the *Kunstkamera* and the Museum of History of Religion.

The first image is called the “White-horsed Vanguard” (白馬先鋒) (*fig. 1*) [4]. The picture shows a man in Manchurian officer attire astride a white horse galloping. In old Beijing, when someone is journeying afar, the traveller would burn a piece of the White-horsed Vanguard to pray for a safe trip. Sometimes, when a child is ill, it is believed that the child's soul is missing. The parents would then purchase a piece of the “White-horsed Vanguard” and place it on the child's bedside table, along with a plate of buns, a plate of forage grass, and a bowl of water. The bun was a refreshment offered to the Vanguard, while the water and grass were meant for his horse. At midnight, the *zhima* is burned on the floor next to the child's bedside and the Vanguard thus sent off to search for the child's soul. The next morning, if the child's condition improves, it means the White-horsed Vanguard found and restored the child's soul.

The *Shuicao Ma Mingwang*, literally “Bright King of Water, Grass, and Horse” (*fig. 2*), is a deity in charge of livestock farming. Allegedly an exemplary official of the Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (156—ca. 87 BC), the Bright King was appointed the position of Chief of the Imperial Stable. Because of his expertise in horse grooming, after his death he underwent deification and became the God of Horses. However, the current image of the Bright King of Water, Grass, and Horse is an integration of both the Horse King and Cattle King. He is largely worshipped among horse grooms, horse carters, and donkey merchants. His birthday is the 23rd day of the sixth lunar month. On this day, people who rely on such livestock for a living must prepare a piece of this *zhima*, along with offerings of food and sacrifices to the Bright King. In this picture, the Bright