

# An Ethnographic Analysis of Folk Art: Interviews and Observations of Longwang Temple Murals in Yu County

Lei Chen<sup>1&2</sup>, Wan Samiati Andriana Bt W.Mohamad Daud<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi Mara, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia,

<sup>2</sup>Hebei Academy of Fine Arts Fuxi Ave, Xin Le Shi, Shi Jia Zhuang Shi, He Bei Sheng, China, 050700

Corresponding Authors Email: chenlei1987\_2005@163.com

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the cultural, artistic and social value of the Longwang Temple murals in Yu County, and to analyze their importance in folk culture, artistic innovation and cultural heritage protection. Through in-depth research on the historical background, artistic style and community activities of the murals, it is found that the murals are not only artistic works of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, but also important carriers of local folk beliefs and cultural inheritance. The study shows that mural paintings face challenges of protection and inheritance in the process of modernization, and at the same time provide opportunities for the development of local economy and cultural tourism. Through interviews with local cultural relic protectors, art students and community residents, this paper aims to put forward practical suggestions for the protection and inheritance of murals in Yu County, so as to promote the revival and development of local culture.

**Keywords:** Mural of Yu County, Protection of cultural heritage, Inheritance of Folk Art

## Introduction

Yu County, located in Zhangjiakou City, Hebei Province, China, historically known as Wei Zhou, is one of the "Yanyun 16 States." Due to its rich historical heritage and unique cultural legacy, Yu County was designated as a National Historical and Cultural City by the State Council in 2018 and named the "Hometown of Chinese Folk Culture and Art" by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism from 2021 to 2023 (Su, 2021).

Yu County is renowned for its numerous ancient structures, historically referred to as the "Eight Hundred Villages and Eight Hundred Castles." These ancient buildings not only bear witness to historical changes but also house a wealth of precious mural remnants, particularly from the Ming and Qing dynasties (Zhang, 2014). These murals, with their distinctive artistic expression and exceptional techniques, transcend the traditional perception of

"secularization" in Ming and Qing murals, showcasing the pinnacle of folk mural art(Wang,2022).

### Literature Review

In terms of archaeological and cultural relic studies, the mural remains in Yu County have long attracted considerable scholarly attention. For instance, Zhao Shiyu's Collection of Inscriptions in Yu County (2009), comprehensively documented the cultural heritage of Yu County, offering an objective account of the historical evolution of local social beliefs. The Frontier Fortress Historic Sites: Zhangjiakou Cultural Relic Protection Units Overview, compiled by the Zhangjiakou Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology in 2012, systematically presented key cultural heritages in the Zhangjiakou area, providing valuable academic references for the research and preservation of Yu County murals. Although the Selected Murals of Weizhou Temple, published by the Yu County Museum in 2013, included comprehensive photographic images of the murals, some image data suffered from distortion due to technical limitations.

The study of Yu County murals extends beyond their artistic value, encompassing the historical characteristics and socio-economic environment they reflect. Luo Deyin's Ancient Castle of Yu County (2007), meticulously recorded the architectural remains of Yu County, offering critical data for studying the structural context of the murals. In 2017, Chen Xuxia's A Survey of Hebei Folk Customs provided a comprehensive reflection of Hebei's folk culture by organizing records from past dynasties, laying a solid foundation for the preservation and study of mural paintings.

With the growing emphasis on cultural heritage preservation, the protection and inheritance of Yu County murals have become research focal points. Zhou Mingquan's Digital Protection Technology of Cultural Heritage (2012), introduced relevant technologies and methodologies for the digital preservation of cultural heritage. In 2014, Peng Dongmei's Digital Protection and Communication Research of Intangible Cultural Heritage explored strategies for heritage protection from both theoretical and technical perspectives, offering new insights for the digital preservation and living inheritance of Yu County murals.

The interdisciplinary study of Yu County murals has also gained traction. Edmund Burke Feldman's Philosophy of Art Education (2016), and Peter Burke's History of Image Evidence\* (2018) provide theoretical frameworks for integrating art into education and analyzing images as historical evidence. In 2018, Vera Zolberg's Constructing Art Sociology explored the social foundations and cultural impact of art forms from a sociological perspective, providing new methodological guidance for in-depth mural studies in Yu County.

The protection and restoration of murals in Yu County offer valuable experiences for similar efforts elsewhere. For instance, Protection and Restoration of Traditional Murals(2015) by Mebina and the Proceedings of the China-Italy Cooperation Symposium on the Protection and Research of Ancient Murals (2016), compiled by Shaanxi History Museum, showcase the latest international advancements in mural preservation, proposing feasible protection and restoration methods tailored to the specific conditions of Yu County.

Through a comprehensive review and study of this literature, we gain a deeper understanding of the historical, cultural, and artistic value of Yu County murals. These studies not only enhance our knowledge but also lay a solid theoretical and practical foundation for future preservation, restoration, and inheritance efforts.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs qualitative research methods to explore the representation of the Longwang in the murals of various Longwang Temples in Yu County, focusing on the similarities in themes and imagery across different temples (Chen&Shao2023). The research purposefully selected interviewees, including mural art students, university professors, local villagers, and personnel from the Yu County Cultural Heritage Protection Institute. In-depth interviews were also conducted with art research experts specializing in murals to collect relevant data. These interviews aim to examine the thematic content of the murals, with data analyzed through thematic analysis to identify similarities in mythological narratives and imagery (Cheng, 2014). The collected murals were coded and categorized to summarize their features (Zhxi, 2017). The study also integrates art technique analysis and restoration technology to explore the influence of Longwang mythology and folk culture (Liu,2024).

Throughout the research, ethical considerations were carefully addressed. All participants provided informed consent, and the confidentiality and authenticity of the research were safeguarded. To avoid misinterpretation of the imagery and narratives, the researchers fully respected the cultural understanding and expressive standards of local residents, as well as their religious beliefs, with a commitment to cultural heritage preservation.

This qualitative research was conducted by a research team formed in June 2023 by the researchers' affiliated institution. The team members had clearly defined roles, and the mural data collection and interview design underwent multiple iterations and discussions to ensure data accuracy. During interviews with staff from the Yu County Cultural Heritage Protection Bureau and local villagers, the researchers gathered additional details regarding the Longwang imagery and narratives (Deng,2024). The interview results revealed subtle connections between the respondents' personal beliefs, cultural background, and artistic perception, and the local folk customs and art (Zhai & Liu, 2023).

This study combines artistic analysis with mural data collection and is expected to be a 5-to-10-year project. As data accumulates, the research team will gain a more robust quantitative foundation and reliable evidence. Meanwhile, the findings from the interview analysis will present new challenges for cultural heritage protection and the awareness of cultural transmission. The researchers aim to integrate artistic expression, folk culture, and heritage preservation, driving deeper inquiry into this field (Liu, 2024).



Figure 1. Mural digital collection site  
(Source: Taken by the author in 19/6/2024)

## Thematic Analysis And Research Findings

### *Theme 1: Cultural Value*

Through interviews with staff from the Yu County Cultural Heritage Bureau, it is evident that the murals in Yu County's temples, particularly from the Ming and Qing dynasties, are highly valued for their historical and artistic significance. A staff member noted, "The murals in Yu County's Longwang Temples depict folk stories from China's past, making them invaluable cultural artifacts." This highlights the importance placed on these murals by local heritage professionals, who view them as crucial elements of cultural preservation. Another interviewee mentioned, "Each Longwang in these murals serves a distinct role," indicating that these depictions are not only artistically unique but also rich in cultural meaning. Studying the artistic representations of these Longwang figures provides deeper insights into the transmission of folk culture.

### *Theme 2: Definition of the Longwang Image*

The collected temple murals reveal a variety of Longwang figures, each with distinct identities. Interviewees explained, "There are five Longwangs in the temple, each depicted in different colors and forms to symbolize their unique identities." Another participant noted, "The central figure is the Dragon Mother, flanked by her five sons, along with other mythical figures like Thunder God, Lightning Mother, and others." These vivid mythological figures, brought to life through the villagers' narratives, are imbued with sacred functions and meanings, showcasing the unique charm of folk culture.

### *Theme 3: Similarities in Folk Art*

The research team found that most murals within the Longwang Temples display strikingly similar characteristics. Interviewees pointed out, "These murals mainly depict scenes such as 'The Longwang Bringing Rain' and 'The Longwang Returning to His Palace,' illustrating the rainmaking process." The use of the same "cartoon" for multiple characters across these murals contributes to a sense of artistic unity, making these figures more memorable to viewers. The narrative similarities in these murals further reflect the cultural identity of the local residents.

### *Theme 4: Artistic Variation and Innovation*

Among the nine Longwang Temples studied, while the overall artistic style is largely uniform, three temples exhibit notable stylistic differences. An interviewee observed, "While the

Longwangs in other temples are depicted riding dragons or horses, in the murals of the Xigaozhuang Village Longwang Temple, they are shown riding qilins and phoenixes." This variation and innovation in artistic expression within the same folkloric theme demonstrate the unique creative awareness and expression of the mural craftsmen.



Figure 2. Mural of Long wang Temple in Xigaozhuang  
(Source: Taken by the author in 22/6/2024)

#### *Theme 5: Exploring Qing Dynasty Mural Art*

The artistic expressions in Yu County's murals clearly reflect the stylistic characteristics of the Ming and Qing dynasties. A mural researcher noted, "The figures, color schemes, and inscriptions within the temple courtyards clearly indicate that these murals date back to the Ming and Qing periods." The depictions of figures, costumes, and background elements in the murals are highly consistent with the artistic styles of these dynasties, offering valuable visual documentation for understanding the culture of the time.

#### *Theme 6: Art and the Natural World*

The murals in Yu County's Longwang Temples represent an artistic recreation of ancient agricultural society's rain rituals, expressing reverence for nature and a longing for a bountiful harvest. Multiple interviewees noted, "The theme of the Longwang bringing rain is repeatedly depicted in these murals." This underscores the deep emotional connection between the local residents and the Longwang deity, as well as their recognition of the importance of rain. The artistic portrayal of the Longwang in these murals serves as an important cultural symbol that links folk beliefs with natural phenomena, becoming an indispensable classic theme in Yu County's mural art.

#### *Theme 7: Religious Rituals and Art*

One interviewee stated, "We come here to worship on the first and fifteenth of every month." In most temples, religious rituals typically involve worshiping statues. However, due to historical reasons, many statues in Yu County's temples have been severely damaged, leading residents to instead worship the murals. These murals thus hold not only artistic value but also significant religious functions.

#### *Theme 8: Transmission of Folk Art*

The Longwang Temple murals in Yu County have become an integral part of the local culture, deeply influenced by folk art traditions. An interviewee remarked, "During our ritual activities and traditional festivals, the murals always capture the interest of the younger generation, allowing them to naturally learn about these folk stories." The murals not only depict scenes

of the Longwang bringing rain but also contain rich folklore, inspiring villagers' love for traditional culture. Today, through intergenerational transmission and community activities, the art form of these murals continues to thrive, ensuring the revival and development of folk culture among new generations.

#### *Theme 9: Dissemination of Folk Activities*

The murals in Yu County's Longwang Temples have been propagated through folk activities, particularly those depicting the rain-bringing scenes of the Longwang. A villager shared, "During droughts, we hold rituals to ask the Longwang for rain, and the murals in the temple are symbols of our faith." These murals not only document the villagers' traditional beliefs but also perpetuate them through ritual activities. By reliving the mural stories during these events, villagers reinforce their connection to the murals, making them an important cultural link between the past and the present.

#### *Theme 10: Transformation of Folk Culture into Artistic form*

The murals in Yu County's Longwang Temples illustrate the transformation of folk culture into artistic form, particularly in scenes of the Longwang bringing rain and the subsequent harvest. An interviewee noted, "These murals depict the process of the Longwang bringing rain, with harvest scenes below the murals." Through vivid depictions of folk stories, the murals not only convey the farmers' longing for a bountiful harvest but also combine folk beliefs with artistic creation, revitalizing these traditional stories in visual art and making them vital carriers of cultural transmission.

#### *Theme 11: Cultural Heritage Loss Due to Urban Development*

In the course of urban development, some temple murals have unfortunately been erased. An interviewee lamented, "While the temples have been renovated, some murals have been covered up, losing their original appearance and artistic value." Modernization efforts, though improving the appearance of the temples, have inadvertently destroyed murals rich in cultural and historical significance, leading to the loss of their artistic value—a deeply regrettable outcome.



Figure 3. The interview scene  
(Source: Taken by the author in 9/6/2024)

#### *Theme 12: Intergenerational and Artistic Transmission*

Some murals in Yu County face challenges in intergenerational and artistic transmission. An interviewee admitted, "Some craftsmen do not understand the artistic value of the murals when restoring the temples, and young people also lack understanding of the murals' specific meanings." Due to ineffective transmission, the specific connotations of these murals are

gradually being forgotten, leading to a break in the folk art traditions of Yu County, with continuity becoming difficult to maintain. Even mural specialists are hesitant to attempt restoration, leaving the future of Yu County's temple murals in a precarious state.

#### *Theme 13: Government and Cultural Protection*

In recent years, the murals in Yu County have benefited from effective protection and restoration under government cultural preservation policies. A staff member from the Cultural Heritage Bureau mentioned, "The government has recently increased efforts to protect these murals, restoring several that were severely damaged and conducting regular maintenance." These protective measures not only ensure the preservation of these valuable cultural heritages but also allow them to continue to play their historical and artistic roles in contemporary times. Local residents have also expressed satisfaction with the government's cultural protection efforts and hope that these murals can be passed down through generations.

#### *Theme 14: Tourism and Cultural Dissemination*

Despite the rich historical and cultural value embedded in the murals of Yu County, they have yet to be widely developed as a tourism resource. A villager mentioned, "No one comes here for tourism; the young people have left for work elsewhere, leaving only a few elderly and children living here." These murals are not just works of art; they are important mediums for cultural dissemination, waiting to be further explored and promoted so that more people can appreciate their unique cultural charm.

#### *Theme 15: Education and Cultural Dissemination*

The murals of Yu County play a significant role in education and cultural dissemination. An interviewee noted, "Our art schools offer courses on murals, where students replicate Yu County murals to deepen their understanding of their artistic style and cultural significance." This practice not only helps students improve their artistic skills but also allows them to better inherit and disseminate local folk culture. The process of replicating murals enables students to appreciate the charm of traditional art while also injecting new vitality into the protection and transmission of Yu County murals, nurturing a generation of young artists who are passionate about and understand this cultural heritage.

#### *Theme 16: Restoration and Preservation*

The restoration and preservation of Yu County murals have received support from professional institutions. An interviewee mentioned, "Our professional team conducts digital restoration of damaged murals through artistic analysis, preserving both the murals themselves and allowing people to appreciate their original appearance." This approach not only avoids further damage to the murals but also effectively preserves the value of this cultural heritage. Digital restoration technology offers an innovative solution for mural restoration, allowing these artworks to be reborn in modern society.

#### *Theme 17: Digital Art Exhibitions*

Yu County murals have been showcased in digital art exhibitions at Hebei Fine Arts Institute, aiming to combine traditional folk culture with modern technology. An interviewee mentioned, "Our institute organized an exhibition on Yu County murals, using digital technology to bring these precious cultural heritages to a wider audience." Through high-

resolution photography and mural replication, viewers can gain a deeper appreciation of the artistic value and historical background of the murals. This innovative exhibition method not only enhances the visibility of Yu County murals but also opens new avenues for the dissemination and protection of traditional folk art.

#### *Theme 18: Globalization and Cross-Cultural Exchange*

The murals of Yu County have also gained international attention, serving as important vehicles for cross-cultural exchange. An interviewee noted, "Our institute has collaborated with international museums and cultural institutions to host exhibitions on Yu County murals, attracting many foreign visitors interested in this unique folk culture." These collaborations allow the artistic value and cultural significance of Yu County murals to be appreciated by a global audience, facilitating cross-cultural exchange and dialogue.



Figure 4. A broken mural  
(Source: Taken by the author in 16/6/2024)

#### *Theme 19: Industrialization and Environmental Impact*

The murals of Yu County have suffered damage due to environmental pollution and industrialization. An interviewee mentioned, "Some murals have been eroded due to industrial pollution and acid rain, leading to severe damage." This problem highlights the challenges that environmental factors pose to cultural heritage preservation, requiring further attention and action from both local government and residents. The protection of these murals is not only an artistic and cultural issue but also an environmental one.

#### *Theme 20: Social Media and Cultural Dissemination*

Yu County murals have gained attention on social media platforms, raising public awareness of their cultural value. An interviewee noted, "Some young people have posted photos of the murals on social media, attracting many likes and comments." Social media provides an effective way to disseminate cultural heritage, allowing more people to learn about and appreciate the unique cultural charm of Yu County murals. These online platforms also serve as a bridge for cultural exchange, enabling the spread of traditional folk art in the digital age.

### **Discussion on Thematic Analysis**

This study employs qualitative research methods to explore the murals of Longwang Temple in Yu County. The qualitative approach is particularly reflected in interviews with respondents and on-site observations of the murals. Through these interviews, researchers can gain in-depth insights into the cultural value, artistic style, and folk traditions associated with the

murals. The direct statements of the respondents provide vivid examples and multi-dimensional perspectives, allowing the research to move beyond mere surface descriptions to a deeper understanding of cultural connotations and historical contexts.

### *Challenges Identified*

- 1. Insufficient Recognition of Cultural Value:* Although the murals of Yu County possess significant historical and artistic value, many residents and tourists lack sufficient knowledge, leading to a failure to fully acknowledge their cultural importance.
- 2. Challenges in Intergenerational Transmission:* Due to the lack of effective educational and communication mechanisms, younger generations have a limited understanding of the traditional culture and artistic value of the murals, which hampers the transmission of folk culture.
- 3. Inadequate Systematic Protection and Restoration:* Despite governmental policy support for the protection and restoration of murals, practical challenges remain, particularly in instances where murals in some temples have suffered damage.
- 4. Underdeveloped Tourism:* The murals of Yu County, as cultural resources, have not been fully developed, resulting in a lack of tourists and related economic benefits, thereby limiting the further dissemination of local culture.

### *Proposed Solutions*

- 1. Enhancing Cultural Promotion and Education:* Organize cultural lectures, exhibitions, and community activities to raise awareness among residents and tourists about the Yu County murals. Collaborate with schools to introduce mural courses, allowing young people to gain a deeper understanding of this cultural heritage.
- 2. Establishing Mechanisms for Intergenerational Transmission:* Encourage older artists and craftsmen to engage with younger generations, conducting mural copying and creation activities to enhance the sense of participation and belonging among the youth.
- 3. Promoting the Development of Professional Restoration Teams:* Establish professional mural restoration teams and formulate detailed protection and restoration plans to ensure systematic maintenance and digital documentation of the murals.
- 4. Developing Cultural Tourism Projects:* Design unique tourism routes that highlight the cultural value of the murals to attract tourists and engage them with Yu County's folk culture, thereby promoting local economic development.

### *Significance of the Study*

The study of the Longwang Temple murals in Yu County holds not only academic value but also profound social and economic significance, injecting new vitality into the preservation and development of local culture.

- 1. Value of Cultural Heritage:* The research on the Longwang Temple murals in Yu County provides a deep understanding of their important role in folk culture. This contributes to the preservation of local cultural heritage and offers significant empirical material for the study of Chinese folk culture, thereby promoting the continuation and development of cultural traditions.
- 2. Promotion of Artistic Innovation:* Analyzing and discussing the murals can inspire artistic creation, encouraging modern artists to innovate based on traditional art forms. The integration of tradition and modernity can enrich contemporary artistic expression, enhancing the diversity and depth of the arts.

*3. Enhancement of Public Awareness:* By studying the cultural value and artistic characteristics of the murals, this research can increase public awareness of the importance of traditional cultural heritage. Effective cultural dissemination and education can strengthen community residents' sense of participation and responsibility in cultural preservation, fostering a consensus on heritage protection.

*4. Boosting Local Economic Development:* Integrating the Yu County murals with the tourism industry can attract more tourists and stimulate local economic growth. The development of cultural tourism not only increases the region's visibility but also creates employment opportunities for local residents, promoting comprehensive social and economic development.

*5. Providing Policy Recommendations:* The findings of this research can inform government policy-making and implementation regarding cultural heritage protection. This can aid in the effective allocation of resources and the planning of cultural projects, ensuring the long-term preservation and sustainable use of cultural heritage.

The study of the Longwang Temple murals in Yu County holds not only academic value but also profound social and economic significance, injecting new vitality into the preservation and development of local culture.

## Conclusion

The murals of Yu County are significant cultural heritage, rich in history and culture, yet they face numerous challenges in preservation and transmission. Through qualitative research methods, this study has revealed the multi-dimensional characteristics of the murals, including their cultural value, artistic expression, and folk traditions, while also identifying gaps in cultural preservation and dissemination. To address these issues, we recommend enhancing cultural promotion and education, fostering intergenerational transmission, establishing professional restoration teams, and developing cultural tourism projects. These steps are essential to genuinely protect and transmit this precious cultural heritage, enabling it to thrive in modern society.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study reveals the visual language and artistic style contained in the murals through the analysis of the case of Yu County murals, especially the study of the image and theme of the Longwang Temple murals, and expounds their important significance in the history and culture, religious belief and artistic value of Yu County. The paper also puts forward the appeal for the protection of the murals in Yu County, which provides a theoretical basis for the challenge of environmental degradation of cultural relics, and also sounds the alarm for the protection of other cultural heritage. The research results have been fully reflected in art education courses, inspiring and helping students to expand their professional art practice. At the same time, on the academic side, this study provides a different research perspective, integrates digital technology and cultural heritage conservation, and adds new research dimensions to the existing body of knowledge. Through the case study of the Longwang Temple in Yu County, the potential of mural art in historical culture and folk culture research is further confirmed. The inclusion of digital technology has given a boost to heritage conservation programs. This multifaceted contribution makes this study important both in theory and practice. This study provides data and theoretical contributions to the project of "Research on the Cultural Value of the folk image language in the Ming and Qing Murals of Yu County, Hebei Province" supported by the Science Planning of Culture and Art and Tourism Research Project of Hebei Province, China.

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