

History of the Modern Chinese Woodblock Print

By Yan Shancun www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00_01/chinesewoodblock/history.html

Woodblock printing has a long history in China and was already well developed more than a thousand years ago, in the Tang Dynasty (630-930). A surviving scroll of a Buddhist text, the Diamond Sutra, which was found in 1900 in the Dunhuang caves, is dated 868 C.E. and is probably the earliest extant woodblock printed "book" in the world with an exact date. It is skillfully engraved and finely printed, not only a medium for transmitting a message but also a charming object in itself. The skills required to produce it indicate that a substantial period of development took place before it was created. [It is currently housed at the British Museum.]

By the time of the Song (960-1278) and Yuan (1278-1367) Dynasties, woodblock art was thriving. Techniques quickly developed for printing in a number of styles, and both literary and utilitarian books with illustrations were produced in large quantities, soon becoming commodities. In the Ming Period (1368-1644) some famous painters began to draw designs for printing, and the collaboration between such painters and engravers raised the artistic level still more. With the introduction of the multiblock colored woodblock print in the 17th century, the qualities of an original painting could be reproduced, and many books became important collectors' items among scholars and connoisseurs. (In contemporary Europe, woodblock printing was still in its infancy.)

In the production of the traditional Chinese print, drawing, engraving and printing were separate processes performed by different people and the creators of traditional prints were viewed as artisans, not artists.

But although all the modern prints are multiples, or duplicates, in the sense that more than one image has been printed from the blocks, most of them differ from traditional Chinese prints both in style and method of production. They belong to the Creative Print Movement: the artist himself draws the design, cuts the blocks, and prints the images. The artist's ideas and attitudes find expression not only when he produces the original design but also in the different types of marks he makes with his knife and chisel when he carves the block. Lu Xun (1881-1936) said of them, "they are European in method and have nothing to do with ancient Chinese woodblock printing."

In the 1930s, Lu Xun, brought about this revolution in Chinese woodblock printing by his unceasing efforts. In the 1920s, artists had absorbed some of the ideas of European woodblock creation from contemporary Japanese artists, who were intermediaries for transferring "things European" to China. But it was only in the 1930s, when Lu Xun decided that European printmaking techniques must be widely introduced into China and promoted the Creative Print Movement in a planned and determined way, that the European approach to the art came to have an important role in China's New Culture Movement. Lu Xun imported prints by Western printmakers, organized classes in creative woodblock techniques, acquired the necessary tools, and organized exhibitions of both Western and new Chinese prints. The style that emerged is called the Creative, or New, Chinese woodblock, to differentiate it from the duplicating woodblock of traditional production.

The differences between the creative and duplicating woodblock are found also in their artistic ideals and conception. The artists practicing this new approach to woodblock were intensely concerned with social problems. Before this, modern theorists such as Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) and Kang Youwei (1858- 1927) had argued that art could have ameliorative

effects on society and had called for a revolution in fine art, but the result had been only formal change: some Chinese artists began practicing realistic European painting techniques instead of the freehand brushwork of traditional Chinese painting.

The Creative Print was meant by Lu Xun to be a tool of revolution, a corollary to his own political standpoint and artistic interests. (Many of the foreign woodblock artists whom Lu Xun introduced to China, such as the German Kaethe Kollwitz (1867- 1945) and the Belgian Frans Masareel (1889 - 1971), and for whom he had special esteem, were occupied with strong social criticisms in their own worlds.) [Lu Xun saw merit in examples of both their artwork and politics.]

Lu Xun recognized woodblock printing as a substantial and feasible tool for delivering new revolutionary perspectives to many people. It can make multiple copies inexpensively, using knife, paper, ink and a piece of wood, materials that could be found anywhere, and did not require the expensive mechanical presses available only in large cities-which in any case were not available to revolutionaries hiding from the authorities. In an essay, Lu wrote: "In revolutionary times woodblock is used most extensively-it can be done hurriedly and in a short time."

Lu Xun's intention to use art as a tool for enlightenment had many precedents in earlier Chinese tradition. [] The customary educational practice had been to praise virtue by presenting idealized examples; and, in some forms of art, such as traditional *nianhua* (New Year's pictures), the main themes were people and events that were paradigms of happiness and peace. But these paradigms represented the received values of the orthodox Confucian authorities and implied rigid and unequal social relationships. Lu Xun's special contribution was the addition of critical consciousness, which focused on the adversity that followed from this social organization.

Thus the Creative Print of the 1930s was new both in content and style: a) it focused on the facts of everyday life, especially class contradictions, and depicted the labor of those on the bottom of the social scale, the subjects being (in Lu Xun's words) "hardness and difficulty," "revolting conditions," and "shouts of protest;" b) the designs met Lu Xun's aesthetic criteria: they were simple and avoided elaboration, used the contrast between black and white clearly, and were permeated with "vigour" and "sprightly spirit."

Lu Xun was interested in the preservation and development of traditional Chinese woodblock techniques as well as the importation of techniques and styles used in Western graphics, and this also was to play a role in the creation of the new kind of woodblock. He thought modern Chinese art should "show Chinese characteristics, so that one could tell that this was a Chinese person or Chinese subject matter after just taking a look: art needs local color." Thus he also advocated the study of China's own art as a source for the new print. [] In his letter to Li Hua (1907-1994) he adds: "If someone deliberates on stone engravings from the Han Dynasty and on illustrations in Ming Dynasty books, and familiarizes himself with *nianhua* (New Year's pictures) enjoyed by ordinary people, and combines elements of these with the new European methods, perhaps he can produce a better kind of woodblock."

Not many years later (though after Lu Xun's death, in 1936), his advice to Sinocize the Creative Print came to concrete expression in the work of young artists working in Yan'an, in the northern province of Shaanxi; this city had become the headquarters for the Red Army from January, 1937, some months after the Long March ended. There, in May, 1942,

Mao delivered his Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art. The speech was addressed mainly to the teachers and students of the Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Arts, including young woodblock artists, followers of Lu Xun, who had made their way to Yan'an because they felt their talents could best serve their country's interests there. In this speech Mao systematically and clearly instructed artists to use the ordinary activities of working people for their subjects and to make their art serve the masses. Artists were to seek means of formal expression, which the common people loved.

The Yan'an artists saw this as the logical extension of Lu Xun's admonitions to create a new but Chinese-style woodblock. Lu had warned artists not to simply mimic European models. He had recognized that in their eagerness to adapt European modes, the earliest artists of the new woodblock movement had [mimicked the work of German Expressionists and used western-style shading.] The faces of the figures had been shadowed in such a way that for ordinary Chinese people, accustomed to seeing the simple lines and flat color of *nianhua*, they were hard to accept; also, such shadowed images were associated by the peasants with ghosts..."

So the young artists adopted elements of the *nianhua* style so popular with the masses. They used simple outline instead of chiaroscuro and tried to make the background as clear as possible so that figures would be intelligible and prominent. All stage properties that had nothing to do with the story were omitted.

Yan'an artists investigated other interesting aesthetic problems as well; for instance, how a complex story could be made clear at first glance within the confines of a small and narrow format, and how to show the actions of real life. The events described were not taken from tales and historic stories like those in *nianhua*, and depictions of the human body were not restricted to the very conventionalized models found in traditional Chinese art, [but these elements were blended into the new, creative works]. Gu Yuan (1919 - 1996), Yan Han (b. 1916) and others produced effective works in this style.

With the development of the Yan'an style of woodblock, artists had come to an absolutely new understanding of the function of art. By comparison with the early stages of modern woodblock art which was a revolutionary cultural tool made by intellectuals and that attracted intellectuals (a very limited part of the population), the Yan'an woodblock was meant to have appeal to the peasant masses and was intended to be a kind of "fighting weapon" in the struggle for total social revolution. At Yan'an, the young woodblock workers aimed first to be revolutionaries and then to be artists, and the needs of the revolution would take precedence over independent artistic preferences.

The way subject matter was handled also changed. The earlier works had focused primarily on the depression, rage and misery of the masses. Now, according to Mao Zedong's instructions, the lives of the peasants going about their daily routines were to be portrayed in a positive and attractive light. The artists did not give up the critical outrage which animated the earlier woodblock prints, but criticism was now directed only against specified enemies, not workers or peasants.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China, in 1949, the makers of policy for literature and the arts decided that the principles established at Yan'an must serve the social revolution for the whole country. Woodblock printing, which had been a leader in creating revolutionary images, was seen as an art form in its own right and, within a few years, organizations were created to set aesthetic standards and to support production:

departments of woodblock printing were set up in academies of fine arts, artists' associations were set up in every region, and woodblock artists were attached to publishing houses and art research institutions to create illustrations where needed. [Woodblocks and socialist realist oil painting were the dominant artforms chosen by Mao for 20+ years.]

Li Qun, Li Hua and Wang Qi observe in their book *Fifty years of the Chinese Woodblock Print*, circa 1981:

"As the construction of a modern industrial nation took on urgency, artists took on totally new areas of subject matter: industry and mining, massive engineering works, construction of all kinds, the food-producing plains of the countryside, the taming of mountains and valleys, the wealth of beautiful forests in the border regions ... all these were depicted to enhance the people's pride and love of country. They aimed to show a spirit of selflessness in the people's labor, and to demonstrate the huge power inherent in the masses ability to improve nature, and they strived to imbue their characters with strength and vigor. In the works of this period, our laboring people no longer appeared as insulted and injured characters, as in the 1930s woodblock works, but appeared as the masters of our country. This was an epoch-making revolution in art production."

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