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SPIRIT OF THE IRON PEN: An Exhibition of Modern Chinese Printmaking

David Ihrman

Notes for A Joint Exhibition Organized by Grand Valley State University
and the Muskegon Museum of Art

中国新兴版画运动

Despite increasing interest in China, the history of modern Chinese printmaking is largely unknown in the West. Historically, woodcut printed images were used as illustrations as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.C.), but woodcut printmaking as a modern, creative art form was first introduced in China in 1929 by the writer Lu Xun because of his belief that it was ideally suited to express the Chinese struggle for a better life.

Western Prints Introduced as Models

Following the May 4th movement of 1919, progressive intellectuals began exploring Western ideas about science and democracy, Marxism, educational theories, literature, and art in their effort to forge a new, democratic China. In 1929 Lu Xun compiled the first of a series of collections of British, German, French, Soviet, and American woodcuts and etchings that created a model for modern woodcut creation in China and effectively re-introduced woodcut to China as a creative art form, rather than an art of illustration.

These early print collections and the most significant artists that they included—Käthe Kollwitz, Frans Masereel, Carl Meffert, Favorsky, Rockwell Kent, and others--defined a way of thinking about the Chinese struggle to free men and women from the oppression of ignorance, poverty, human and spiritual slavery, and passivity, and had a powerful influence on young students, intellectuals, and artists who were searching for a new road out of China's dynastic past, following the impetus of the May 4th movement.

The First Woodcut Class

In 1931, Lu Xun organized the first woodcut class in Shanghai which was taught by a Japanese friend, Uchiyama Kakichi, and until his death guided and encouraged young woodcut printmakers to develop a high standard of artistic practice that was uniquely Chinese, meeting specific Chinese needs, and expressing a uniquely Chinese reality.

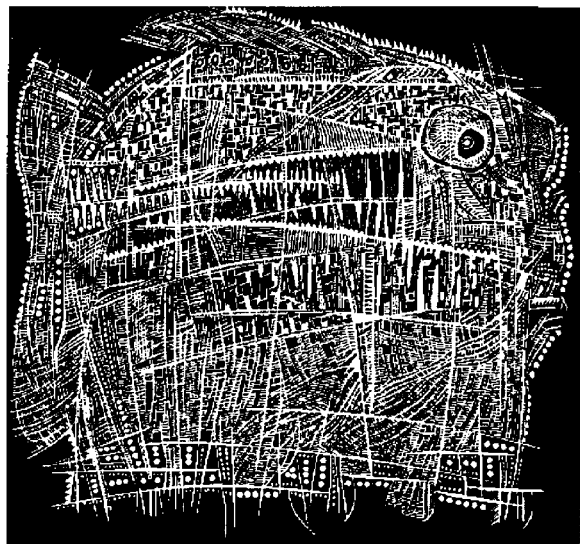
Woodcut's appeal was clearly evident: the strong, bold contrast of black and white, the relative simplicity of the tools and techniques required, and ease of reproduction made it an ideal tool to disseminate the message of social and political reform promulgated by progressive intellectuals. Many of the earliest modern Chinese printmakers were attracted to woodcut in the 1930's because of its power in expressing their anger at the Japanese invasion of Northeast China in 1931, their dissatisfaction with the corrupt Nationalist government of Jiang Jie Shi (Chiang Kai Shek), and their aspiration for a socially more democratic and revolutionary government. They were turning away from the static traditionalism of art academies and embracing social issues, and the real-life conditions of ordinary Chinese people in their art.



Li Hua, "Shout China," 1935.

A New Art Form

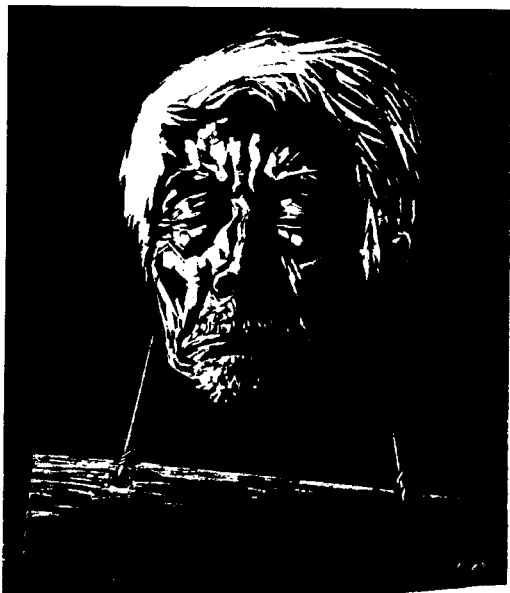
As a new art form, woodcut printmaking allowed graphic, innovative expression to artists who fully realized woodcut's range of techniques, using Chinese subjects, and building on elements from China's dynastic past (e.g. Han dynasty brickcuts, traditional folk woodcuts and new year's pictures, and the art of chop carving).



Wang Jian, "Fish" 1990.

Through their efforts, Chinese woodcut printmakers redefined this "Western" art form to express a uniquely Chinese sensibility, at the same time tying woodcut to the process of social and political transformation occurring in China.

The Chinese historian Guo Mo Ruo wrote this tribute at the exhibition held in 1946 to commemorate the end of the Anti-Japanese war; his lines express the dynamic role woodcut played through the 1930's and 1940's. He wrote, "China is just like a piece of hard wood, it depends on you [artists] to engrave the masses' bitterness, sorrow, agony, and struggle, to gain



Zhao Yan Nian, "Nightmare No. 1" June, 1989.

brightness from the darkness. After seeing these woodcuts, we really feel encouraged and comforted. China is on earth and has a future, people will eventually be liberated. Point your knife toward the hard wood!"

The Chinese New Arising Print-making movement was born of the need for social change, and it has been used to reflect the political goals of the Chinese Communist Party, but it is also an artistic movement, born of a spirit of struggle, with a unique role alongside more well-known traditional Chinese art forms like National painting and calligraphy, and deserves to be better known and appreciated in the West.

Joint Art Exhibition

Lu Xun used both literature and art to awaken Chinese to the necessity of

reform; the history of modern Chinese printmaking is not only a history of the development of an art form, but is also a history of modern Chinese people, depicting their struggle against oppression: it is an art born of conflict, which developed through struggle and saw its purpose as liberating Chinese from their condition. Today the printmaking movement is struggling to redefine its purpose. Many artists are seeking to create an art that comes from their own artistic understanding, and reject the narrowly political definition of the function of art articulated by the CCP.

The forthcoming exhibitions at Grand Valley State University and the Muskegon Museum of Art express both the history of this struggle, and the process of artistic redefinition that characterizes printmaking in China today. The public is invited to all activities, but space is limited for some of the workshops. For further information please contact David Ihrman.

Grand Valley State University Gallery Opening
August 29, 1995 to October 12, 1995
Gallery Reception 4:00-7:00 PM, August 31, 1995.

The show will focus on early and contemporary printmaking in China with special emphasis on the political and artistic trends that have shaped modern art creation. 35-40 works will be on display including early works from the 1940's, through the Cultural Revolution (1965-1976) to the present.

Chinese printmakers in residence at GVSU: two major printmakers will be arriving September 1, for several weeks' visit. They will hold printmaking workshops through the GVSU Art Department, and will participate in calligraphy and Chinese painting demonstrations in the gallery.

- Li Ping Fan is one of China's most important artists, introducing waterprint woodcut from Japan into China in the early 1950's. He is also former editor of the journal *Printmaking World*, and has a museum dedicated to his work in Tianjin.
- Chao Mei is the founder of the Great Northern Wilderness school of printmaking in Heilongjiang and is a national jurist for the Chinese National art exhibitions. He is one of the most important printmakers and art leaders in Northeast China.

Muskegon Museum of Art Opening
September 7, 1995 to November 17, 1995.

The show will include masterworks from the history of modern Chinese printmaking, with special emphasis on recent printmaking. 45-50 works will be on display, representing the pictorial range and diversity of modern printmaking in China.

Workshops and demonstrations will also be organized at the Muskegon Museum, and will include "Printmaking for Children and the Young At Heart," as well as organized lectures, demonstrations, and conversations with the artists.

An exhibition of Chinese bookplates will be on display in Zumberge Library at GVSU, and the Hackley Public Library in Muskegon.