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Mary Scott

San Francisco State University, mScott@sfsu.edu

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LOOKING BACKWARD FOR THE AVANT-GARDE

Mary Scott

Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement
by Xiaobing Tang. Berkeley:
University of California Press,
2007. pp. xii, 310. \$75.52 cloth.

The cover of Xiaobing Tang's *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde* makes his central question clear at a glance. It is a 1935 monochrome woodcut by Luo Qingzhen that shows a line of boat haulers, their backs bent with effort and their faces hidden under identical straw hats. Behind them, under a lowering sky, lies a river with a few sturdy trees on its opposite bank. Although the image's humble, anonymous subjects and scratchy crosshatching seem simple or even crude at first, a complex pattern of triangles soon emerges in the ropes that link the pullers to one another and suggest their kinship to the trees across the river. One begins to see how subtly the various cuts and lines evoke the textures of earth, rock, water, and sky. Yet it remains a straightforwardly readable 1930s social realist image that might have come from the hands of Rockwell Kent, Rufino Tamayo, or Franz Masereel. For anyone who expects that an avant-garde worthy of the name will deliver the shock of the new, these images seem too familiar, too easy to read, too naively realist to qualify. In what sense, then, were the works of the 1930s Chinese woodcut artists avant-garde? Were they part of an international avant-garde? Were they the forerunners—as the book's title seems to imply—of a contemporary Chinese avant-garde? Or were these images avant-garde only in relation to the Chinese art and politics of their time?

Xiaobing Tang's book presents the case that the Chinese woodcut movement of the 1930s was indeed an avant-garde in the broadest sense because it maintained a critical distance from the existing art field and because its innovative exhibition practices promoted radically new conceptions of art, creating a new audience and new kinds of subjectivity for both artists and viewers. As he puts it,

It was a truly avant-garde movement because the first generation of woodcut artists not only challenged the existing institution of art, the prevalent visual order, and aesthetic tastes, but also greatly extended the reach, vocabulary, and grammar of the woodcut as an incomparably expedient and politically relevant visual Esperanto of the modern age. (218)

Although his argument is ultimately persuasive, it also shows how far the definition of avant-garde must stretch to accommodate twentieth-century Chinese experience.

First of all, Tang's argument raises the question of the woodcut movement's relationship to the existing art field in China, which he describes with great sensitivity. Photography, photolithography, linotype, and other imported

technologies for text and image reproduction had dramatic effects on modern Chinese visual culture, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. These technologies made reproductions of Western and Chinese art and new kinds of images like advertising much more widely available, but they also supplanted older technologies of image making, especially Chinese woodblock book printing. Painting and calligraphy in ink survived, but Western-style oil and watercolor painting flourished alongside it, and some artists painted in several modes or actively tried to synthesize them. The historian of all this must also address continuing innovation within the inherited modes of ink painting, and artists' responses to successive waves of European modes of representation—some avant-garde in their own context, some not—without getting trapped in the assumption that work in ink on paper or silk is necessarily traditional or that work in oils is necessarily more modern.

Tang begins by introducing us to well-known modern painters whose works now sell to mostly Chinese buyers for vast sums of money, but whose names are still unfamiliar to most collectors and historians of twentieth-century art in Europe and the United States. Among them were Liu Haisu, Lin Fengmian, and Xu Beihong, all of whom studied in Europe and returned to China to occupy

prominent positions in China's new art academies and its modernist art pantheon. Another was Feng Zikai, whose paintings and drawings reflect both his early training in ink painting and his studies of Western art in Japan. Although each was a cosmopolitan in his own way, they shared a liberal-humanist view of art that gravitated toward realism and avoided extremes like cubism, Dadaism, and futurism. A painter like Liu Haisu, as Tang notes (246), could be inspired in equal measure by the seventeenth-century painters Zhu Da and Shi Tao and by Michelangelo, Cezanne, and Van Gogh, while Xu Beihong embraced the rigorous realism of French academic painting and dismissed Matisse and Cezanne for lack of seriousness about mimesis.

In the visual arts as in literature, many Chinese intellectuals of the 1920s associated realism with scientific rationalism and popular democracy. For them, developing a realist art and literature was a step toward dissolving the rigid hierarchies of late imperial elite rule. Late imperial literati painters, whose calligraphy and painting in ink had helped define them as members of the ruling elite, expressed a distinctive shared subjectivity based not only in their mastery of classical texts but also a general disdain for mere mimesis in painting. At least for the moment of May Fourth 1919, one might make the

argument that Western modes of realist painting were avant-garde, since they did actually provide the shock of the new, fundamentally altering the ways in which viewers looked at art and shifting the viewing context from the private collection to galleries and museums. But that moment did not last long, as the realist painters soon became part of the "existing field" to which woodcut artists were responding.

One of the book's particular strengths is its engagement with an emergent early-twentieth-century Chinese discourse on the visual arts, locating the beginnings of the woodcut movement in early-twentieth-century polemics about art education as part of the early Chinese republic's striving toward science and democracy. This provides a new context for the well-known early 1920s argument between the Literary Research Association and other advocates of "art for life" social realism, and the Creation Society, who argued that the primary purpose of the arts was to express the artist's subjectivity. Although one might expect that the woodcut movement would have emerged from the ranks of the social realists, Tang argues that woodcut artists' avant-garde subjectivity was actually rooted in the Creation Society's advocacy of a revolutionary proletarian art that could erase the bourgeois distinction between art and social activism. The May Fourth ideal

artist-teacher, imagined as one who depicted the suffering of one group of Chinese to another group who might be moved to take action on their behalf, was supplanted later in the 1920s by the idea of an artist who was just one of the masses who were both his subjects and his audience.

Artists and writers in early-twentieth-century China often had institutional ties to universities and art schools, and they also formed groups bound by personal and ideological ties within and against such institutions. In less skilled hands than Tang's, an account of their manifestos and short-lived publications and political broadsides might have become a tedious blur of names, but he is able to convey the place-specific character of the core membership of such well-known printmakers' groups as the Shanghai-based Storm Society, the West Lake Eighteen Art Society and Wooden Bell Woodcut Research Society in Hangzhou, and the Guangzhou Printmaker's Society. Tang shows that political repression of the arts was strong in Shanghai but surprisingly weak elsewhere in the country, and shows us how local groups of woodcut artists eventually coalesced into the National Traveling Woodcut Exhibition, one of the strongest pieces of evidence for Tang's contention that woodcuts fundamentally changed the relationship between artists and viewers, not just by taking

exhibitions to rural areas where even the notion of a museum or an art exhibition was unknown, but by making the exhibition schedule depend on responses and requests for more art from an increasing number of rural audiences.

Art is a political category in which the Chinese state has always had an interest, but the terms in which that interest is expressed change with the forms of the state itself. The question of whether the woodcut movement constituted an avant-garde must be answered in terms of its relation to state power, but it is further complicated by the fact that celebrating woodcuts was part of Communist Party orthodoxy in the arts from the mid-1930s onward. Tang focuses on the period from 1926 to the full-scale Japanese invasion of China in 1937, avoiding the problem of how to theorize an avant-garde movement that eventually became art orthodoxy for the Chinese party-state. Tang also emphasizes that he is interested in the subtler aspects of modern subjectivity revealed in these prints, not just in their obvious political content. His richly detailed narrative of the early institutional contexts of woodcuts shows that—unlike works that continued in the literati mode of brush and ink, or East-West hybrid realist or expressionist oil painting—woodcuts were a broadly populist and popular form practiced by artists who were both patriots and socialist

internationalists, but not necessarily Communist Party members, at least not at first.

Here Tang's book is really wonderful, restoring to us a time when the different strands of what eventually became Communist Party modernity were still ideologically separable. Often he uses the artists' own words to situate them on the ideological spectrum, as when the printmaker Cao Bao remarks, "Native and foreign painting in China—the former is escapist and feudal, the latter is bourgeois and hedonistic"(209). For readers who know little or nothing about modern Chinese art and culture, Tang provides an admirably clear and balanced introduction to many of the major figures in China's impassioned modern conversation about the arts, including not just modernist painters but also the noted printmakers Li Hua, Lai Shaoqi, and Jiang Feng, among others, who carved powerful images of workers, farmers, prisoners, rickshaw pullers, and hungry children. He situates the artists within the discursive context on art education and the political importance of new forms of art established by New Culture philosophers (Cai Yuanpei, Chen Duxiu, and Hu Shi) and writers of new-style vernacular poetry and fiction (e.g., Guo Moruo and Tian Han) and introduces us to the complex fragmentation patterns of the Chinese Left as it coped with Guomindang repression, the

growing threat of war, and the Left's own internal divisions.

Looming at the center of all of this is the figure of the Lu Xun, the great writer and patron of other writers and artists, who fostered the woodcut movement during the last few years of his life. The movement developed through a series of exhibitions that featured his collection of modern Japanese *sō saku hanga* (creative prints), Soviet prints, and expressionist works by Käthe Kollwitz and others. Tang gives us a poignant vantage point on the painful last year of Lu Xun's life, when the League of Leftist Writers was dissolved—at the Comintern's direction but against his will—for the sake of a united front with the Guomindang against Japanese aggression. Lu Xun, like many other Chinese intellectuals, had studied in Japan and remained close to Japanese friends even through the war. Focusing on Lu Xun also enables Tang to highlight the importance of personal connections between Chinese and Japanese leftist artists and thinkers in the 1920s, a topic often elided in Chinese scholarship because of lingering anger about Japan's wartime behavior. As the threat of Japanese invasion grew during the 1930s, woodcuts increasingly focused on the suffering caused by war and on the necessity of resistance to the Japanese. "By the mid-1930s," Tang writes, "the woodcut had become the preferred artistic medium for advocating the

national cause of resisting Japanese military aggression and for voicing political dissent” (218).

This in turn raises the question of what kinds of subjectivity revealed itself in other kinds of twentieth-century art when it was exhibited in China. That is, how is it that forms of modernist art like cubism or futurism, which would have looked at least as radically new and strange to Chinese viewers as they did to European viewers, nonetheless seemed less truly new, less avant-garde than woodcuts? Woodcuts at least had some formal kinship with older Chinese arts like papercuts and woodblock printed book illustrations, and the social realists, after all, had not just been extolling what they saw as the radical political implications of European-style realism—the least avant-garde style of all in early-twentieth-century Europe—but were also appealing for artists to reconnect with certain mimetic aspects of earlier Chinese image making, especially Buddhist mural painting and other forms of anonymous popular art.

Here a comparison between Tang Yingwei’s *Record of Major National Events* (1936) and Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) may be helpful. Both are in black and white, and Tang’s unusually long horizontal woodcut print, which depicts the clash of armies and the suffering of Chinese civilians, shares something of the mural’s political passion and monumental scale. But

where *Guernica*’s powerful symbolism and jarring lines and angles denounce all war, the massed figures in *Record of Major National Events* comprise a silent cry for the justice of this particular war—a war for the survival of the Chinese nation. It articulates the widespread popular desire to fight the Japanese to defend Chinese soil—precisely not the Chinese Republican government’s policy until its reluctant 1936 second united front. The print is thus avant-garde in the sense that it suggests resistance to the Chinese state, but not in the sense that this was the sentiment of a tiny minority.

In his concluding essay on Li Hua’s famous print, “Roar, China!” Tang argues that that woodcuts were particularly apt vehicles for evoking a popular voice that could not be made audible through written texts. He makes a good case for this, even as the reader murmurs to herself that the subaltern cannot speak. One could also make the argument, however, that woodcuts are not just audible but tactile, and that their claim to avant-garde status resides in this as much as anything. Modern woodcuts have a different kind of tactility from painting—a tactility that palpably conveys the artist’s bodily exertion, even suffering, and shares it with the viewer. They thus convey a very different sense of the artists’ body than either literati ink painting, a gestural body attuned to the

flow of cosmic energy, or academic oil painting, a body shrunk to little more than a voyeuristic eye. Prints evoke a national body in which not only has the line between the artist and viewer been erased, but artist and laborer are one.

To return to the questions with which I started: this book shows that the Chinese woodcut movement was part of an international 1930s antifascist avant-garde movement in the visual arts. Artists everywhere discovered that prints were cheap to make and easy to circulate, and that woodcuts were a particularly powerful medium for galvanizing political feeling among and on behalf of the voiceless. As for whether the woodcut artists were in any sense the predecessors of the contemporary Chinese avant-garde, the answer is mixed. Certainly there are

contemporary painters who have recycled 1930s woodcut images into ironic pastiche. Such works stake a claim to avant-garde status that enables them to sell quite well, but one suspects that the real avant-garde of this moment is in performance art, including Internet performance art, rather than in forms that can be shown in galleries without much challenge to viewers' understanding of the nature and purpose of art. Among many other things, *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde* reminds us how quickly an avant-garde can lose its cutting edge.

Mary Scott is professor of humanities at San Francisco State University. A specialist in late imperial and modern Chinese literature, she is writing a book on Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958), a noted literary editor, scholar, collector, and historian of Chinese woodblock printing.

