

From New Woodcut to Modern Chinese Printmaking

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Introduction

The evolution of modern graphic art in China has been distinct from elsewhere in the world in that it started out heavily tinted by political motives. From early on, graphic art was used as weapons, reflecting sharp and uncompromising criticism. Such close association with the revolution greatly influenced graphic art development for decades to come. This article is a brief account of the birth, development and changes of modern Chinese graphic art in the recent decades.

The long and brilliant history of Chinese graphic art is well known to the world. In the Yin-Chou period, the Chinese people created “oracle bone writing,” ancient pictorial characters carved on turtle shells or bones using cutters. The portrait plaques, bricks and seals of Han Dynasty already exhibited the frameworks of graphic art; the sculpting techniques and tools profoundly influenced the future development of printmaking. Later, in the Five-Era period, Buddhist art was the predominant manifestation of graphic art. The cover page of *Diamond Sutra*, made in the ninth century, was the earliest evidence of graphic art in the recorded history of the world. The prints produced in Sung and Yuan dynasties, with the economic prosperity of small farming communities and the consequent demand for aesthetic culture, showed inclinations towards folk art. Printmaking had a wide spectrum of applications in religious and book illustrations, and was increasingly used for practical purposes. Graphic art development peaked during the Ming dynasty, with innovative contents, subject matter, and methods. Especially noteworthy were *shih-chu-chai shu-hua p'u* (*Treatise on the Painting and writing of the Ten Bamboo Studio*) and *shih-chu-chai chien p'u*, which exemplified the ultimate state of graphic art—it no longer served as the accompaniment, but an artistic expression in and of itself. Ching dynasty saw, besides the palace reproductions represented by *Chieh-tzu-yüan-hua-p'u* (*Paintings Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden*), the reemergence of folk prints. The most famous New Year's folk woodcut prints were from Green Willow in Tienjin, Peach Blossom Village in Suzhou, Yang Port in Shandong, and Buddha Mountain in Guangdong. Unfortunately, the advancement of traditional printmaking halted after this time, and was never able to revive.

In the 1930s, a new wave of printmaking was launched, with its headquarters in Shanghai. It was distinct from the Chinese printmaking thus far, and was named

“new graphic art.” It marked the beginning of the creative printmaking in China, set the foundation for the modern Chinese graphic art development, and greatly influenced the aesthetics and techniques to the present.

Before starting the discussion, some clarification of terminology may be warranted. Creative printmaking: Distinct from the Chinese reproductive prints, this genre was adopted from Europe. The artist would perform the entire process including painting, carving, and pressing. Different techniques of plate making and printing would be utilized to produce works of artistic values.

New Graphic Art Movement: Life in China at the time and the aesthetic standards of the Chinese people were portrayed using techniques of creative printmaking. Innovative interpretations of subjects, people, and styles characterized a new era of graphic art. This period, between the introduction of the New Graphic Art Movement in 1930 to the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976, was also termed “New woodcut Movement” for its almost exclusive focus on woodcut prints. It was the same as “Woodcut Movement” named by Lu Hsun.

After the founding of the Republic, the development of the new graphic art consisted of three important periods—the first from 1930s to 1949, the second from 1949 to the Cultural Revolution, and the third after 1980. Significant contributions were made in all of these periods, which became indispensable components of modern Chinese graphic art.

1930-1949: First Period of New Graphic Art Movement

I. The Emergence of New Graphic Art

—Lu Hsun and New Graphic Art Movement

Lu Hsun, a philosopher and literary master, became a dedicated advocate during his later years for printmaking education and promotion, and was considered the founder of the New Graphic Art Movement. His convictions and conceptions for printmaking laid the basis for modern Chinese graphic art, and greatly enforced its battle framework and influenced aesthetic principles of its development.

Although Lu Hsun never wished to be an artist, his lifelong devotion for art was evident in all his essays and letter related to this subject. Except for a brief period in his youth, Lu’s devotion was far from a personal interest. In 1913, while working in the Department of Education, Lu indicated in his very first critical essay on art that it “is an exposition of culture, sustainer of morality, and savior of economy.” Therefore, he devoted his effort to elevating the artistic standards in the

country, and introducing the public to the famous masterpieces throughout the world.

In 1927, Lu and his family relocated from Guangzhou to Shanghai, and spent the last ten years in the city. In addition to producing literary works, he critically examined the social situation. In the process, he discovered the usefulness of printmaking.

Lu experienced a series of wars during his lifetime from Japan vs. Ching government and Japan vs. USSR to the beginning of World War II. The people of China adopted the belief that the only path to hope was through constant resistance and wars. The nation was in great turmoil during the 1930s, with the Japanese invasion in the Northeast provinces and attempt to takeover the whole of China. The cruel and urgent reality stimulated overwhelming dissatisfaction especially among the young Chinese citizens, and inspired passionate patriotism. In this struggle against foreign invasions, Lu always stood on the frontline, and firmly believed that the most important weapons that can lead the nation out of darkness, besides literature, was graphic art (called woodcut prints by Lu).

Lu's effort to collect and introduce the nation to graphic art works from abroad started in 1928, although he was already accumulating foreign art works while studying in Japan. The effort intensified in his late years, despite the difficult times due to the war, political unrest, and unstable income, not to mention the risk for life. Lu did not hesitate to contribute part of his living expenses to purchase famous books all over the world, so as to educate and nurture the young students.

From late 1928 to September 1929, Lu published *Flower Pilgrimage Weekly* and *Flower Pilgrimage Monthly*, in which lithographic works were displayed. Nevertheless, Lu was not content with the random displays of these printed works, but preferred a systematic way of introduction. In 1929, after more than 6 months of preparation, together with Ro-Shi, Cui Zhen-Wu, and Wang Fang-Ren, under the name of *Flower Pilgrimage Society*, Lu published a 5-volume set of print albums called *Flower Pilgrimage in the Garden of Art*. These five volumes were *Modern Woodcut Collections I and II*, *Lu-Gu-Hong Children's Art Collection*, *Collection of Paintings by Aubrey Vincent Beardsley*, and *New Soviet Art Collection*. Lu personally wrote the preface, notes and introductory essays for each volume, and presented the history of printmaking, characteristics, and notables of the artists and their works. Unfortunately, the publication of seven more volumes covering book illustrations from England, France and Russia and sculptures by Rodin were cancelled due to the discontinuation of Flower Pilgrimage Society.

After 1930, Lu produced several more valuable albums such as *The picture of Cement*, *the Suffering of One Person*, *Gathering Jade*, *Process of woodcutting*, *the*

Soul of the Deceased, *USSR Printmaking Business*, and *Collection of Prints by Käthe Kollwitz*. Except for one or two, all the above books were published by Lu's private funds. Lu selectively edited and produced prints by foreign artists, exhibiting greater and greater preference to those that contain revolutionary or war-related messages. In 1930, Lu published 10 woodcut prints by Carl Meffert, a young woodcut artist in Germany, which were the illustrations in the novel *Cement* by Fëdor Vasilévich Gladkov of the Soviet Union. Carl Meffert fully portrayed the prosperity of the industries after the October Revolution. He was highly regarded by Lu in the Preface for being "the artist with the most revolutionary insights in Germany," and for his inclination towards producing print series related to revolution." In 1933, Lu wrote the preface for *One Person's Suffering*, the album of works by the famous Belgium frontline woodcut artist Frans Masereel. Lu especially recommended the "realistic works" by this artist. Another important publication was the *Käthe Kollwitz Selection of Prints* of 1936 (consisting of etching and lithographs, plus 3 woodcut prints), which greatly influenced the scene of modern graphic art. Käthe Kollwitz, a revolutionary woman graphic artist whose strong emotional expressions in her works shocked the art community, described the poverty, hunger, deaths, and struggles in the war-torn Germany. Kollwitz prints sparked strong empathy among the Chinese, and was especially well-received by the young frontline woodcut artists.

At the time, young artists were already discontent with sketches and paintings of still-life and models, the classroom settings, and the stale lectures on "art for art's sake" and "the ultimate art." As a result, Lu Hsun's self-funded publications such as Carl Meffert were immediate eye-openers and sources of inspirations, and prompted many artists to switch from oil painting to printmaking.

Upon this social and historical basis, Lu held the first woodcut printmaking conference in Chinese history. He invited Uchiyama Kanzo, brother of his friend Uchiyama Kakitsu, and served as the translator. Although there were only 13 participants in the week-long event, this conference was a milestone in the development and formation of New woodcut Movement. Thereafter, organizations dedicated to this art form continued to emerge, the audience of woodcut prints increased dramatically, and the enthusiasm of the young woodcut artists reached an all-time high. Lu kept close contact with all these artists, provided prefaces for their albums, visited their exhibits, and offered financial support for their promotional activities.

In addition to familiarizing the Chinese youth with information from abroad, Lu sponsored exhibitions which motivated many young artists to study art, and use art as a tool to better lives, to serve the blue-collar workers, and to improve the society.

Records indicate that Lu organized the Western woodcut Exhibition, Graphic Art Exhibition of German Artists, Exhibition of Modern woodcut Prints, and Exhibition of Book Illustrations from the Soviet Union and France. Lu also contributed introductions and writings to accompany each exhibition.

Why did Lu Hsun select graphic art and promote New Graphic Art Movement?

In his *Introduction to the Modern woodcut Collection I*, Lu stated that the origin of woodcut printmaking was in China. Around the end of Ching dynasty and beginning of the Republic, the introduction of modern western printing technology into China caused the traditional Chinese printed art to reach its valley. Ironically, the Chinese printmaking techniques that were brought to Europe earlier gave rise to sophisticated civilizations and advanced printing technology. Since mid-19th century, Europe has seen the continuous rise of graphic art, in contrast to China's lagging behind by 60 or 70 years. Under these premises, Lu dedicated his efforts to popularizing, promoting and reinvigorating woodcut printmaking in this Country, so that this art form could again flourish on its land of origin.

In the 1920s, a civilian uprising attempt again failed, and Yuan Shih-Kai enthroned himself as the emperor. It was during this time that Lu discovered the simplicity and powerfulness of black-and-white patterns from studying painted bricks and plaques from Han dynasty. He started advocating this unique representation of Chinese tradition in the form of black-and-white woodcut printing. Considering the unique appreciation for black-and-white among Chinese, as demonstrated by Chinese ink paintings, the thriving of black-and-white prints was a matter of course.

Lu realized that the vast majority of Chinese people at the time were completely or partially illiterate, and reading essays was an impossible task for them. The serial pictures, passed down from the ancient times, on the other hand, were very well received. He therefore strongly recommended that young artists adopt this form of creation. Lu explained that, although these serial pictures were not necessarily the art of the working class, but they stood opposite from the art of the elite. Hoping that the young artists could transform these into an art of the labor force, Lu actively introduced Chinese artists to the works of Carl Meffert and Franz Masereel, and attempted to promote folk art through serial pictures. He believed that wood was the medium of choice because of the crude printing technology in contemporary China, and the simplicity and mass production potential of black-and-white prints. These features made woodcut prints an effective tool for the propagation of revolutionary ideals. Lu brought in many creative graphic art works from the Soviet Union and Germany, which directly influenced the direction of the Chinese New Graphic Art Movement. Although early works were really exercises, and did

not possess much artistic value, two major styles could be discerned. One was realism, and a reflection of the Soviet Union revolution. Leading examples included Xu Shi-Chuan, highly regarded as “the First Member of New Graphic Art Movement.” His works stressed the effects lighting, and revealed characteristics of sketches. Jiang Fong’s works, on the other hand, exhibited powerful and genuine emotions. Additionally, Zhang Fong, Luo Ching, Chen Tie-Geng were all representatives of this school. A second major woodcut style was the adoption of European expressionism. The unrefined *Go to the Frontline* by Hu I-Chuan and *the Roar of China* by Li Hua exemplified this school, and exerted great impact on the society.

The New woodcut Movement from late 1930s to middle 1930s intertwined with the lives of the common people during this time of unrest. It paved the road to revolutionary Chinese printmaking, established the “battle tradition,” and was intimately associated with reality of life. The contents were drastically different from the traditional Chinese landscape and scenic paintings, and were no longer obliged to praise the nobility and religious figures. The focus was now on the common people, their daily lives, and social problems such as unemployment, starvation, pains, protests, and uprising. Despite the lack of sophistication of these works, the New woodcut Movement was an honest illustration of the cultural spirit, and its significance was far beyond the works themselves. Woodcut printmaking was used ever since its reemergence to transmit political messages and to depict social issues. Retrospectively, such attitude might have been extreme and off target from the aim of art. Nevertheless, amidst the decadent society and corrupt political system, and with the contemporary art being distant from the reality of the mass, the New Woodcut Movement was a fresh catalyst in the evolution of Chinese arts, and redirected its development into an expression of the mass.

II. The Advancement of New Chinese Woodcut Printmaking

The Chinese society underwent enormous political upheaval almost immediately following the death of Lu Hsun in October, 1936. In 1937, the eight-year war against Japan commenced, and China stepped into a historical period of political irony—between invasion and anti-invasion. Graphic artists in Shanghai and major coastal cities relocated to Wuhan, Chongqing, Guilin, and the “Liberated District” in northern Shaanxi. During this period, a “National Government--Occupied District” referred to an area controlled by the K.M.P., “Liberated District” by the Communist Party, and “Enemy-Occupied District” by the Japanese army. Graphic art was allowed to continue developing mainly in the National Government-Occupied and Liberated districts.

1. Nationalist Government-Ruled Districts

The twelve years of war-torn period—eight years China against Japan, and 4 years Nationalist against Communist Governments—were considered the period of growth for Chinese creative printmaking. The Modern Chinese woodcut Movement followed the path created by Lu Hsun in the 30s and flourished during this period. Most significantly, the Movement gave rise to national organizations dedicated to printmaking never before known in Chinese history.

After Shanghai was lost to Japan in 1937, the majority of woodcut artists congregated in Wuhan, and established in April 1938 the Wuhan woodcut Artist Association. Two months later, the first National Wartime Woodcut Exhibition was held on this basis. Meanwhile, the Chinese Society of woodcut Artists Against Enemies (CSWAAE) was established. The Society was relocated to Chongqing due to war-related unrest. Over the next year, the relative stability in Chongqing resulted in a great increase in membership throughout the nation, establishments of provincial offices of the Society, and a multitude of activities including exhibitions, charity sales, and printing. With the bombing of Chongqing in 1939, the Society again relocated to Guilin, Guangxi, and persisted until 1941. Shortly after the Wan-Nan Incident earlier in 1941, the Society was forced to adjourn. Nevertheless, the members were not at all discouraged. They struggled against the circumstances and continued to strive for the advancement of woodcut graphic art. In January 1942, former members reconvened in Chongqing, and founded the “Chinese Woodcut Research Association,” keeping all the woodcut artists in the country united until the war against Japan ended. In 1946, the Association moved back to Shanghai, the birthplace of the first woodcut artist organization, and was renamed “Chinese Woodcut Association.” Despite the different names, the organization retained its essence through the years, and continued to lead the graphic art movement of the nation.

During the twelve years of war, national woodcut organizations held numerous exhibitions throughout the nation, mostly as touring exhibits. These, plus local exhibits, contributed to the success of the Woodcut Movement. The Chinese woodcut Research Association also organized and sponsored lectures and woodcut workshops, which cultivated a new generation of novice woodcut artists and stimulated further advancement of the Modern Woodcut Movement. This period was an extension of the tradition in the 1950s, and woodcut works frequently appeared in a large variety of publications such as books and picture books, particularly in the supplemental sections of newspapers. These machine-produced works successfully promoted the Woodcut Movement in China, united and augmented the level of communication among woodcut artists, popularized and

elevated the standard of creativity.

The contents of the works produced during these twelve years can be seen as the wartime record of the civilians. Realism predominated, and genuinely reflected the commotion and sufferings that characterized the National Government-Ruled Districts. Previously, woodcut artists congregated in major cities, and worked in pavilions. The abrupt social changes brought graphic artists to the frontline of the war, to be in contact with all sorts of people, and to express their experiences and feelings through their works. Woodcut artists, in their own way, fully participated in the war, and left a deep impact on the people of the time.

Gradually, the European influence waned, and woodcut prints became more and more popularized and culture-oriented. Prints were now the most widely appreciated, tangible and popular form of art, and print artists strove to explore the aesthetics of the public and folk art, and to portray the world from the perspectives of the common people.

The aesthetic standards of the time were determined largely by the strong reform-orientation and power struggles prevalent in the society. Graphic artists were surrounded by the unique political background and social demands, and were motivated to create art for the sake of revolution, life, and society. Works were of various kinds—belligerent, majestic, unrefined, and satiric. Still, evidence of developmental immaturity such as strict following of formulas, concepts, techniques, and rigid confinements of individual schools still existed.

Representative works from this period included “After Selling Blood” by Huang Xin-Buo, depicting the pain and grief of the unemployed; series of *Get Up* by Li Li-Kua, praising the rebellion of the farmers; “Jia-Ling farmers ” by Wang Ren-Feng; *Professor* by lang Ke-Iang; *Struggle in Starvation* by Wang Mai-Gan. They were well-received by the public, promoted social awareness, and intensified realism of the art.

2. Liberated Districts

The months before and after Wuhan was taken by the Communist forces, several patriotic proponents of New Woodcut Movement, including Hu I-Chuan, Wuo Zha, Li Chun, and Jiang Fong, gathered in Yanan, and provided momentum for the Movement in the Liberated Districts.

The Lu Hsun Academy of Arts was established in Yanan in Spring of 1938, and housed literature, music, theater, and fine arts departments. The Academy

embraced the belief that arts— theater, music, visual art and literature—were extremely powerful tools for propagating ideas and uniting the mass. Artists were ascribed great responsibilities, and the cultivation of national unity was a task of utmost urgency.

The Academy overcame a series of obstacles immediately after its founding. In the poverty stricken northern Shan province, materials for oil painting could not be obtained, but high quality wooden boards were prevalent. Old cutters and used saws were made into carving knives, and the locally produced strawboard paper was suitable for woodcut printing. More importantly, the Academy was gifted with a group of woodcut print artists who were cultivated by Lu Hsun himself. Lu's passion, dedication, and background in painting, aided by the relative simplicity of the woodcut printmaking, were successfully transmitted to these first generation New woodcut artists.

Woodcut printmaking became a requirement at the fine arts department of the Academy, and all fine arts students learned the techniques. The relative stability of Yanan allowed productivity and research, and elevated the standard of creativity. Artists had the opportunity of getting to know the subjects they portrayed. The political atmosphere was conducive to raising the ideological and artistic standards. Mao Ze Dong delivered several speeches at the Academy, and clarified much ambiguity among artists at the time.

Because Yan-an was a much less populated city compared to metropolitan centers such as Shanghai, individual or group exhibitions were impractical. The means to reach the public included street postings, direct distributions, or publications in the forms of woodcut picture books or serial pictures. These were welcomed by the people, and the Academy replaced Shanghai as the center of Chinese graphic art development during the war against Japan.

The subject matter was a sharp contrast against that of the National Government-Occupied Districts. Works in the Liberated Districts largely glorified the prosperity under the Communist rule, and were closely associated with various government-sponsored activities. For the illiterate farmers and other residents, these prints with lively images delivered a great deal more than the newspapers and books, and effectively conveyed policy-related information to the public.

The early stage of graphic art development in the Liberated Districts was based on imitations of European techniques and forms, and did not complement well with the Eastern aesthetic values nor the preferences of the agricultural community. Later, connections with the public and reality were explored and improved, gradually

giving rise to folk art which was characteristic of the people. The 1942 Yanan Art and Literature Conference was the turning point which marked the unification of creative consciousness, and the beginning of folk-oriented printmaking.

In order to achieve such folk orientation, artists needed to be familiar with traditional as well as contemporary folk arts. They began to learn New Year's prints and paper carving, and used relief lines to brighten up the pictures. Black-and-white prints were still most commonly used, while color woodcut emerged and gained popularity. Works were simple, rustic, straightforward, and down-to-earth. Woodcut artists produced New Year's prints with a touch of revolution in the contents as an attempted to appeal to the public. Looking back, these were simply the extreme reaction against the European influence in the 1930s, and artistic expressions were very much restrained. Works were highly politicized and conceptualized. Despite these limitations, the place of folk woodcut in graphic art history was secured. The peaking of productivity marked a new period of graphic art development.

The twelve years between Lu Hsun's death and 1949, Chinese graphic art made significant advances compared to the 1930s, and reached maturity. Woodcut prints now covered a wide range of subjects, and continued to move closer to the lives of common people. Artists started to realize the importance of image, rhythm, and technical investigations. International exchange among artist communities also began to receive attention. It was no longer through the effort of individuals such as Lu Hsun in the 1930s, at the risk of his life, but the responsibility of national graphic art organizations to promote the global connections. Thus, these were indeed important twelve years during which the foundation of subsequent graphic art development was put in place.

1949-1976 Second Period of New Graphic Art

I. The Seventeen Years Since the Founding of the Republic

The Republic of China was born in 1949, ending years of repression and discrimination. To face the drastic change and new challenges, members of Chinese Woodcut Association elected to discontinue this organization and form the Chinese Artist Association. Graphic Art Division was set up, and systematically promoted printmaking throughout the newly unified nation. Printmaking departments were established in all major university, with brass plate etching and lithography added to the curricula in addition to woodcut. Many young graphic artists also joined in to expand the realm of this art, to set individual and regional styles, and to conduct studies on the history and techniques of printmaking.

The years immediately after the nation's birth, graphic art productivity dipped a few times, but always managed to bounce back rapidly. Several national exhibitions exerted positive impact on the society, and marked the emergence of revolutionary realism, formation of three major schools, and the rise of a new army of graphic artists. The Emergence of Three Schools of Printmaking: Sichuan, Heilongjiang, and Jiangsu.

The Sichuan School was characterized by black-and-white woodcut, and emphasized on human figures. This was the earliest and most sophisticated school in the early years of the Republic. Several generations of graphic artists, many from the Liberated Districts, congregated at the Sichuan Provincial Arts Association, and brought the woodcut tradition to Sichuan. People and their lives were the focus of creativity. Sichuan bordered Yunan province and Tibet, and exhibited unique and complex multiethnic and multicultural features. As a result, artists of the Sichuan school showed a wide spectrum of styles and characteristics, and took on a variety of directions. Representative included Li Huan ming, known for his unrefined works; Wu Fan, for his simplicity and naivete; and Wu Chiang nien, for his thoughtfulness and underlying meanings.

Heilongjiang color prints, also called "Northern Wilderness School," emerged and immediately created a spectacle. In 1958, many soldiers responded to the government plan to develop and utilize the fertile wilderness in the northeast, and set up large scale farms in Heilongjiang. Some artists joined in to provide spiritual demands and encouragement. From these motivated young people emerged a group of print artists. Their works, through realistic approaches, reflected the seasonal dynamics as well as the sharp contrast between the openness of the landscape and the hardship of the pioneers. Many used oil color prints to portray the brilliance and magnificence of the natural environment and agricultural establishments. The Heilongjiang school broke out of the black-and-white tradition, and integrated people and environment in the compositions. Representative works that conveyed the beauty of the north included *Starting from Scratch* by Zhao Mei, *On Yung River* by Du Hongnien, and *Overcoming Obstacles* by Zhang Zuoliang.

Also at the turn of the decade from late 1950s to early 1960s, the school of Jiangsu Water Ink Prints rose from the rainy and humid region south of Yangzi River (Chang Jiang). This school was characterized by water ink color printing, and had the advantage of rich literary and art history in the area. The "Wu Family School," "Eight Painters of Jinling," and "Eight Peculiarities of Yangzhou" were all famous schools of graphic art in history; works such as *shih-chu-chai hua p'u* (*Treatise on the Painting of the Ten Bamboo Studio*) by Hu Zheng-yan sent color woodcut

development to a height of glory. The graphic artists of Jiangsu were typical cultural elite, and possessed poetic and romantic qualities. They embraced the mission to explore folk traditions and new realms of creativity, and started investigating the potential of water ink woodcut techniques. These artists were very capable of extracting lyrical rhythm from daily lives, and express the pure aesthetics of the art even in works that contained evolutionary or belligerent spirits. The refined and almost delicate geography of Jiangsu was unlike the openness of Heilongjiang or massiveness of Sichuan. Elegance was seen from trees and rivers to bridges and artificial streams. These were important reasons for the uniqueness of the Jiangsu school of water ink prints. Representative works and artists included *The Greening* by Wu Jiuan-fa, *Pleasant Rains of Jiangnan* by Huang Pei-muo, Zhang Shu-yun, and Li Shu-ching.

In addition to the three schools described above, works that came out of Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Guangdong were also significant contributions to the contemporary Chinese graphic art.

The seventeen years after the birth of the Republic were considered the developmental stage of Chinese graphic art. Accompanied by the cultural direction of the new China, and the vast improvement of social environment and conditions, art works often expressed approval and praise. Therefore, this period could also be considered an extension of printmaking in the Liberated Districts. Artists passionately applauded the new era and asserted their patriotic sentiments. Most works could be categorized as revolutionary realism.

The monotonous artistic conceptions and techniques during this period produced an image of standardized and restricted graphic art compositions and creativity. Print artists were still uncertain about the forms and techniques that would best portray the new socialist China and the message that people ruled. Nevertheless, the suffering, struggle and despair were nearly completely replaced by the optimism of industrial and agricultural constructions, and the hardworking and enthusiastic people. Socialist realism had replaced critical realism.

Another feature of this period is the large increase in landscape color prints. This was the result of the increased aesthetic demands from the people. Equal weight was placed between black-and-white and color prints, as well as between portraits and landscape. Meanwhile, oil prints and water prints were under the impact of oil paintings and water ink paintings respectively, and black-and-white woodcut exhibited likeness of sketches. In some works, the uniqueness of woodcut printing was diminished, while in others, this was resolved gradually in the process of maturity. Some artists transformed such inclination into their own styles.

Artists during these seventeen years also strove for lyrical expressions. Aesthetic values were elevated compared to the beginning of the Republic, and the public exhibited higher taste for art. Many young graphic artists were especially known for their expressiveness, and the older generations also lightened up from the didactic and old-fashioned formulas of creativity to appeal to the public. Individualism, regional characteristics, and folk features became increasingly emphasized. The transformation of aesthetic consciousness gave rise to a new appearance of graphic art.

II. During the Cultural Revolution

In 1966, Mao Ze-dong miscalculated the domestic political situations, and initiated the disastrous “Cultural Revolution.” This turned out to be a ten-year-long path of no return which brought serious harm to the nation and its people.

The first victim of Cultural Revolution was the art and literature, and printmakers did not escape the fate. First generation graphic artists in the New Woodcut Movement, some of them leaders in the Chinese Art Association, regional art associations, institutions and publishing companies, were tortured and sometimes killed. The first five years of the Revolution dismantled all efforts in international exchanges, education and publication, and denied all literary and artistic accomplishments during the first 17 years of the nation.

New Woodcut was employed as tool of critical trials by the ill-motivated lot. woodcut prints produced early in the Revolution had comic-like features. This was actually the case with woodcut prints in Chinese history. By typifying, generalizing, extracting and exaggerating, woodcut prints expressed people’s disgust for ill-used power, and became effective tools of criticism. Comics (particularly political comic) are the extreme exaggeration of weaknesses and corruption, and were direct lashes on the dark sides of the society. Woodcut was only means of such works, which should be classified as cartoons rather than woodcut prints. Even then, the artistic values of these works as cartoons cannot be regarded highly.

The later years of Cultural Revolution saw the reawakening of graphic art movement, with many print artists returning to schools and their original professions. Some art schools started recruiting art students among workers, farmers and soldiers. Political needs allowed graphic art to return to classrooms, and provoked huge public interest in arts. This comeback was of historical importance, and the extent was never before seen. A generation of amateur artists thus emerged.

One of the features was the rise of prints by the working class.

The later years of Cultural Revolution was the time of the working class. Amateur printmaking, mainly consisting of soldiers, farmers and laborers, surfaced to the mainstream, and art classes for the novices were applauded by the government officials. This popularization brought about an improvement in the artistic foundation and creativity among the amateur artists. Because of the pluralistic property of woodcut printing, portraits of government leaders, promotional materials could be mass produced, making this a heavily utilized art form during the Cultural Revolution. Printmaking classes were ubiquitous at the time. Some works were each composed by many people, so that the shortages of some could be complemented by the strengths of the others. These works appeared professional and technically sophisticated; however, the preoccupation with accuracy and sophistication sometimes overpowered the unique regional and folk characteristics. The contemporary social situation also led to the three major emphases: to portray protagonists among the mass, heroic figures among them, and champions among the heroes. It was evident that works were extremely concept-oriented, and focused only on educating the public and promoting slogans and government propaganda.

The second feature was the emergence of printmaking by young intellectuals.

Since 1968, large groups of young intellectuals joined in the movement to work in the countryside. Among them were shining new stars in graphic art. The most remarkable were the team of intellectual young graphic artists in the northern wilderness. By then, the Northern Wilderness School already exhibited great potential and secured a place in the graphic art stage. First generation print artists, who were stepping into middle age, were eager to seek out successors. The support of regional government officials and the promotional needs created an ideal creative environment for the young intellectual artists. Although their works were tinted with characteristics of the Cultural Revolution, they were devoid of the political criticism, but focused on the lives as laborers and the spiritual states of the youths. The modernization process of agriculture was another focus, demonstrating the down-to-earth, practical perspectives of the people, rather than the philosophical concepts or political views. Oil color prints still predominated the stage, and the artistic sophistication was lagging behind their predecessors. The end of Cultural Revolution also brought an end to this wave of intellectual youth graphic art movement, as they returned to the cities for further education or employment. Nevertheless, some print artists with solid potential did emerged out of this movement.

Thirdly, the works by professional artists.

Almost all the professional graphic artists experienced various degrees of atrocity during the Cultural Revolution. Some lost their right to create or personal freedom, others were tortured to death or irreversible ailments. Although these artists were gradually granted some freedom towards the end of this period, their works were still required to follow strict rules in order to be displayed in public exhibits and to avoid being falsely accused and put in jail. Many graphic artists therefore rather ceased working altogether as a silent protest. Some chose to comply with the rules, and ended up in a confinement along with leftist philosophy, and were classified in the same category as the working class prints. Yet some others either produced landscapes, or incorporated historical subject matter and Lu Hsun's images in their works. Their professional training and research on traditional landscape and figure painting resulted in some quality works.

Looking back, the ten years of Cultural Revolution indeed produced a large number of printed works. Both the numbers of artists and prints far exceeded those in the 17 years prior to the Revolution, and so were the sizes, scales and quantities of these productions. However, the extreme leftist ideology at the time also adversely influenced graphic art, leaving the tradition and theories in disarray, and creating a peculiar artistic phenomenon. Yet, works still existed that depicted the lives of common people, avoided direct connections with political situations or leftist influence, and followed predetermined creative processes. These were therefore valuable works that were not disfigured by the exaggeration characteristic of the Cultural Revolution. One observation is worth mentioning: the large number of amateur print artists joined in from a wide range of locations, worked together to create and study, and actively promoted graphic art in the nation. The impact of this movement crossed the boundary of printmaking and influenced other artists, and was an important contribution to the future of Chinese art.

New Graphic Art of the New Era

In October 1976, with the collapse of "Gang of Four," the Cultural Revolution came to an end, and a brand new page for graphic art began.

In late 1978, the national assembly voted to terminate the slogan of "class criticism as the basis," and established the preliminary "guidelines for reform." The emphasis was now shifted to economic construction. This drastic change also crossed over to the literature and art. The literary scene quickly became more lively, and fine arts followed with in-depth discussions on forms, methods, and contents of realism, individualism, and artistic essence.

Graphic art again flourished following these political changes, more so than during the 1950s and 1960s. The older generations were at the core, and middle-age artists who thrived in the 1950s and 1960s were at the height of their creativity, and the young generations possessed active minds and dared to differ. Chinese Graphic Art Association was again founded in 1980, after a 30-year interruption, to oversee national print exhibitions, publish books and albums, hold conferences, and promote international exchange.

In the relaxed atmosphere, the ports reopened, and modern artistic concepts and ideas arrived from the West. The influx of these ideas and schools of thought, formed over the last hundred years, occurred within a few short years. The long period of isolation was broken, and the Chinese artists rapidly engaged in discussions on new concepts of art, modern Western and contemporary schools, traditional Chinese paintings, attractions of primitive art, comparisons between traditional and modern, and between abstraction and symbolism. After 1985, the intellectual vigor prompted many young artists to explore and experiment with new styles and methods, break out of the confinement of printmaking, and head for the multidirectional artistic development. These fresh faces were mostly students in art schools after the Cultural Revolution who succeeded at least to some degree in dismantling the monotonous framework of printmaking, and explored the multitude of possibilities in contents and methods of expressions. Despite evidence of imitation of Western modern art, this influx created a positive impact on the people.

Characteristics of Graphic Art in the 1980s:

1. Regional collective activities

In Sichuan province, young graphic artists emerged from Sichuan Academy of Arts. They incorporated folk and foreign arts, emphasized on individualism, and focused on form and modern taste.

The Northern wilderness also cultivated a third generation print artists. Distinct from the young intellectuals before them these artists were born and raised in the north, and possessed strong sentiments for their hometown. Under the influence from Japanese and European modern art schools, they replaced the traditional oil printing with water and silkscreen printing, which were better media of expression. The intimate association with modern lives was reflected in creative concepts, form and color compositions, angles of observation and perspectives of these artists.

The water ink printing of Jiangsu continued to follow its deep-rooted tradition. The

large number of artists, productivity, abundance of exhibitions and international activities allowed the Jiangsu water ink school to reach its peak of prosperity in the 1980s. won lots of admiration for the rich ethnic and regional characteristics.

Yunan was another pleasant addition to the modern graphic art development in China. The unique natural environment and multiethnic, multicultural features were valuable asset to the art community. The beautiful, rich and mysterious ethnic colors plus modern ideas from the West gave Yunan prints a touch of modernity.

Extraordinary graphic art also arose in Tienjin, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Hubei, and Anhui. These works exhibited strong regional characteristics integrated with foreign and traditional arts. Although the collective features initially limited the development of individualism, some artists gradually matured and shifted away from this collectivism, and formed their own styles.

2. Increasing Popularity of the Three Media

The increasing popularity of the “three media”—brass, lithography, and serigraphy, was another sign of prosperity of graphic art. Previously, especially before the Republic, wood plates heavily dominated the scene, thus the terms “New Woodcut” and “Woodcut Movement.” Although brass plate and lithography existed in the school curricula as early as the first few years of the Republic, they remained obscure. Into the 1980s, the “three media” and other techniques became more widely known, people started to realize that woodcut alone was insufficient in representing Chinese modern graphic art. Print artists therefore applauded to the replacement of “New Woodcut Movement” with “New Printmaking Movement.”

The groundwork for brass etching and lithography was in place even before the Cultural Revolution. Serigraphy, on the other hand, had no basis until early 1980s. Because the “three media” relied heavily on science and facilities, the increasing economic affluence in China prompted their maturation. Artists who already had adequate training and technical basis were able to produce works of artistic value using these new media. In the end of 1981, the first exhibition that focused on the three media other than woodcut was held. Five more such exhibitions followed, thanks to the strong support from Liao Shiou-Ping, famous Taiwanese graphic artist, who organized lectures and provided financial assistance. His contributions allowed “three media” to thrive and reach a high artistic standard in a short time. Major art schools and institutions opened classes and workrooms for the “three media,” which were soon elevated to the same status as woodcut.

3. The Rise of Book Plates

The Book-plates were imported into China in the 1920s and 1930s along with creative printmaking. They appeared in early 1960s, but did not thrive. In 1984, the first book-plate organization was founded and named the Chinese Graphic Art Book-plate Research Institute. Organized activities started to take place. After 1985, grassroots organizations were established in many provinces, producing a wave of enthusiasm for book-plate. These works were mainly woodcut prints, and possessed distinctive ethnic characteristics. Artists incorporated a wide variety of subject matters from daily lives to historical tales and legends. Most works mainly consisted of images accompanied by words, and revealed the artists' own individual styles.

The decades between 1930s and late 1970s saw the progress of New Graphic Art Movement from infancy to maturity, and finally securing a place along with oil paintings and Chinese paintings. Several generations of graphic artists were generated, producing works which were intimately associated with the society and successfully captured the spirit of the time. In other words, graphic art development was stimulated by political ardor and needs, and artists, including those during the Cultural Revolution, all followed certain guidelines. Technical sophistication produced some brilliant artists and prints. After the 1980s, Chinese politics, economy, and civilization experienced a reawakening, and the art community was ready to excel. As discussed previously, the artists who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s with sound technical and artistic foundation reached a peak in creativity and productivity in the 1980s, while a new generation, influenced by foreign modernism and gifted by the unrestricted creative environment, set out to explore new realms of printmaking and individualism. Gradually, graphic art entered into a new era, which could be named the "transformation or new period." The restrictions and formulas which used to confine creativity were now dismissed, and artists returned to the normal path of following the natural rhythm of art.

In the 1990s, printmaking scene might have appeared uneventful, perhaps because the previous decades had been overly action-packed. After entering the "transformation period," people have started to reacquaint themselves with the basic features of printmaking—"marks" and "pluralism." Theoretically, art critics are not fully aware of the association between tools, materials, and the creative process of printmaking, are deficient in their ability to appreciate, and are unfamiliar with the concept of "plates" and "printing." Therefore, they are not equipped, as they are with oil paintings and Chinese ink paintings, to question traditional aesthetic values, reflect new aesthetic standards, focus on the spiritual questions of people in our times, and connect graphic art to the rest of artistic development. Among the lay audience,

knowledge in graphic art is often short compared to that in water ink or oil ink paintings. The certain ambiguity explains why graphic art so far remains obscure and under impact in the modern art stage, and people's perceptions of this art form cannot be considered correct.

Works in the 1990s tend to be calmer, more subtle, and with less passion. They also reveal the features of modern Chinese culture. First of all, realism has become the mainstream in graphic art. Reality is heeded, either directly or indirectly, but the subject or content of the work is not explicitly stated. Rather, the spirit and essence of the culture, ethnic characteristics, or the generation are contained. Secondly, the multifaceted styles, forms, arts, and languages, on top of figurative, abstraction, or expressionism, show that the artists have clear awareness and control of the artistic rhythm.

Visually speaking, works from this period transformed graphic art. Such transformation is seen in the transcending of traditional forms and colors, and the collapse of traditional realism compositions. Artists utilize the uniqueness of printmaking, emphasize on the production process, techniques, richness of media, and explore the wide spectrum of possibilities which exceed all other methods. For the first time, the vocabulary of printmaking is being systematically purified, and new graphic art is experiencing a visual transformation.

Realistic works still predominate in the 1990s. Realism has a long history in China, and a large number of accomplished artists were in this school. In the 1990s, graphic artists continue to strive for improvement of techniques in realism. Nevertheless, their approaches are very different from the past attempts to recreate and resemble. Rather, they investigate a rational integration of realism and abstraction, so that certain spiritual element can be expressed in their works.

Undoubtedly, printmaking today still faces many problems and obstacles. It is still in the transformation period, and therefore full of uncertainties. The inadequacy of ideas and maturity are shortcomings that cannot be resolved in a short time. Subjective and objective conditions are constantly changing. Although artists increasingly emphasize on individualism, works tend to be detached from the society, and deficient in public consciousness. The lack of interaction and exchange between artists and the public seems prevalent. Moreover, graphic art does not yet have a properly established market, nor is it effectively promoted or appreciated by the public. This is reflected in the shortage in equipment, facilities, materials, and production process. The strong influence of Western modern art push some young artists to neglect our excellent folk traditions, and therefore masterpieces are scanty.

Epilogue

Stepping into the year 2000, we reflect on the seventy years of new Chinese graphic art development in the hope of identifying the direction of Chinese graphic art in the new century. Although printmaking originated in China, modern Chinese graphic art, woodcut and three-media, was an import from abroad. All imports have to go through the process of digestion, transformation and development. Woodcut was introduced in 1930s. Forty some years later, older generation print artists have done a remarkable job bringing it to maturity. Now, political reform brought in another large quantity of modern prints. The formidable task of introduction, transformation, development and surpassing is once again on hand.

New graphic art has undergone seventy years of hardship. Its development can be compared to a seed germinating from the crack of a large rock. The little sprout endures the harsh winds and storms, and finally grows to become a fine tree. The modern Chinese graphic art, although still in the transition period, has gradually found its own rhythm. Striving ahead against all odds has always characterized new graphic art, and is the most valuable feature of contemporary Chinese printmaking. It has left a remarkable segment in our long and glorious history of printmaking. With the large number of creative artists, the year 2000 is a departure towards a splendid new period.

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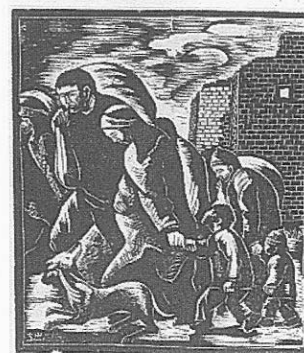
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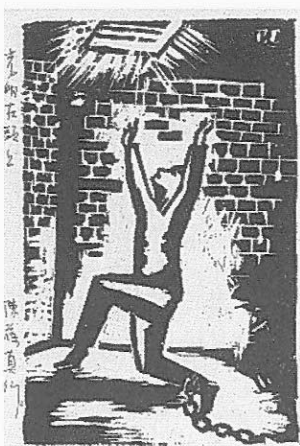
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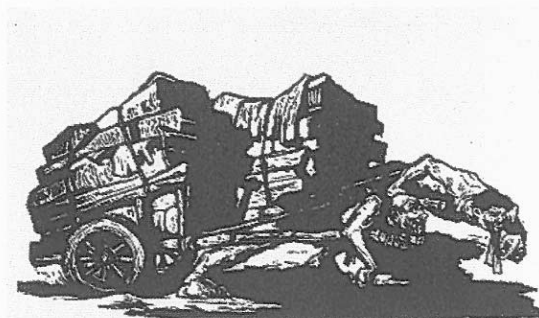
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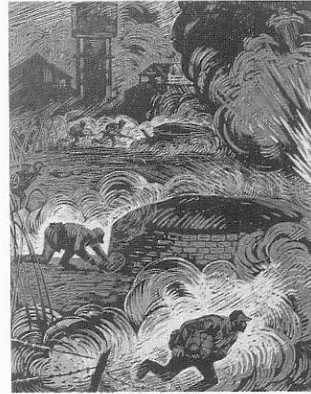
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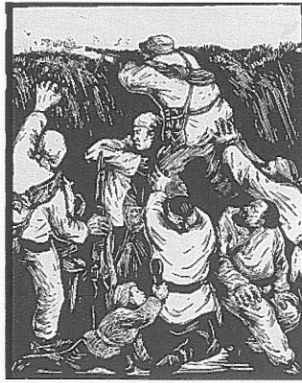
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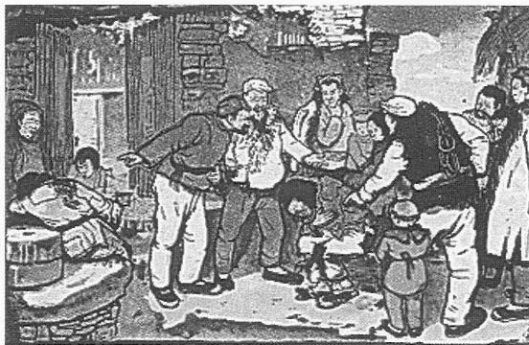
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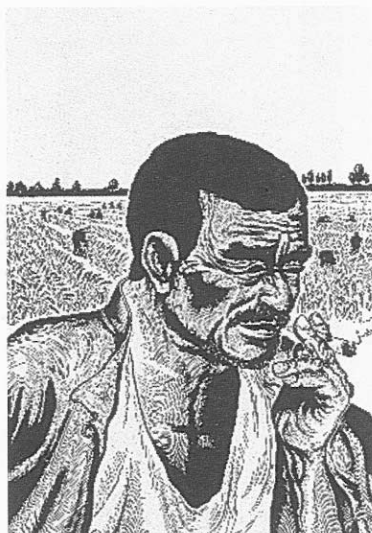
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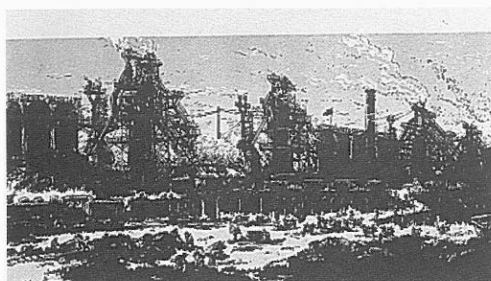
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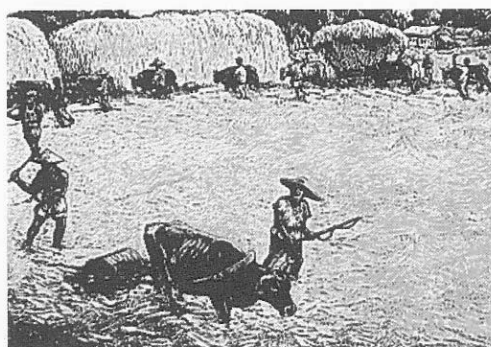
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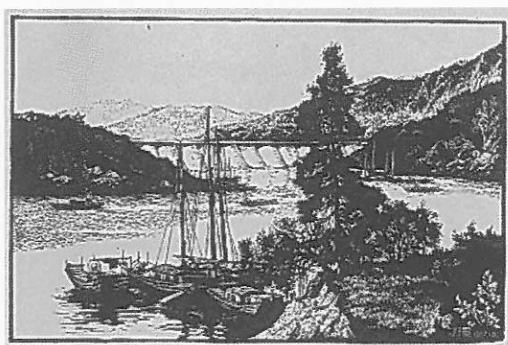
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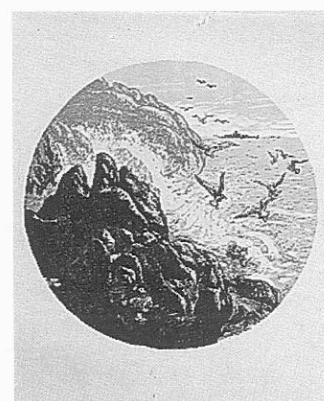
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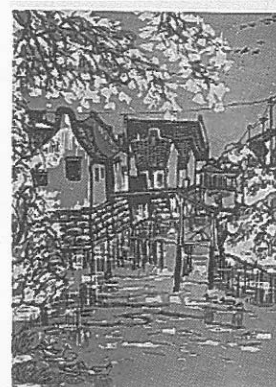
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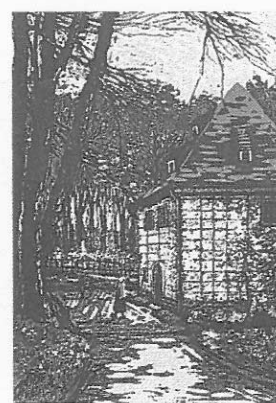
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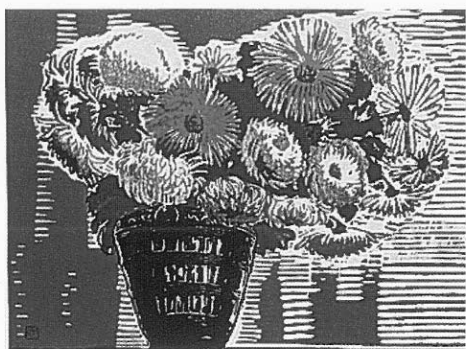
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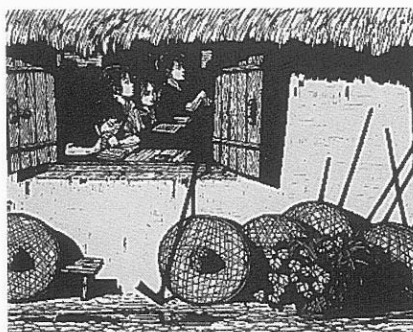
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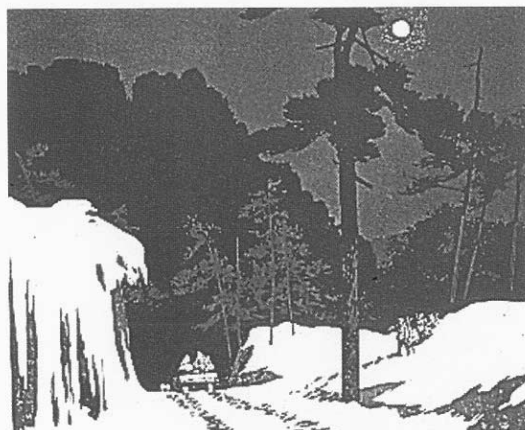
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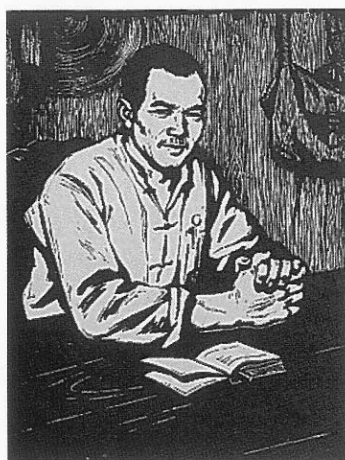
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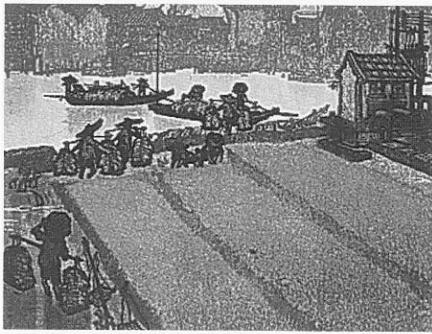
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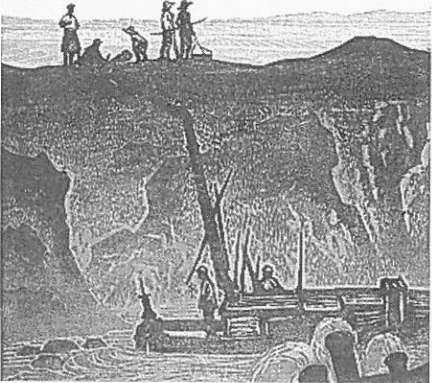
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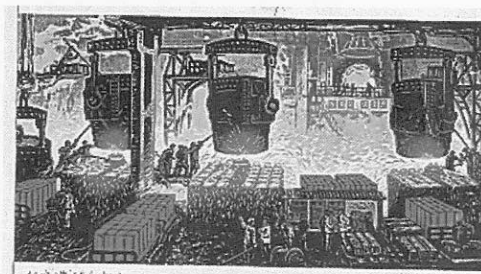
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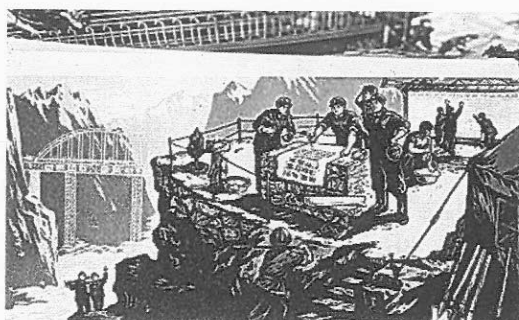
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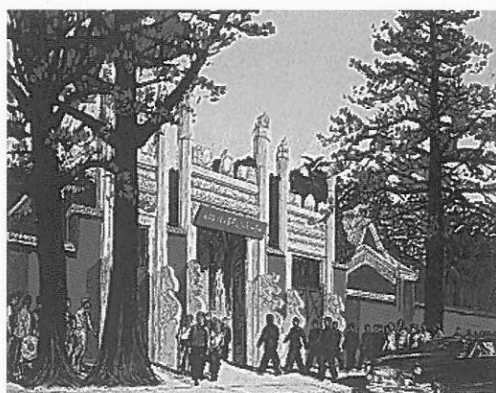
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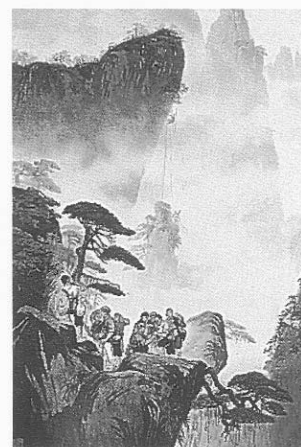
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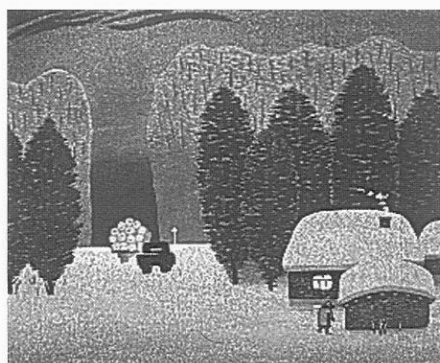
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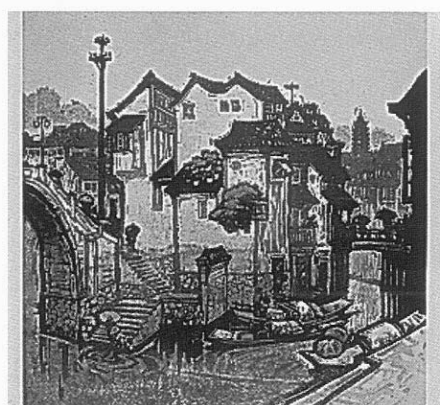
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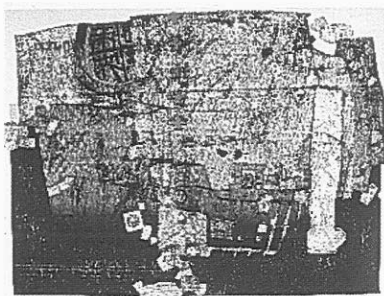
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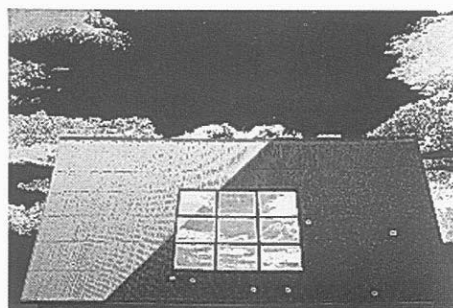
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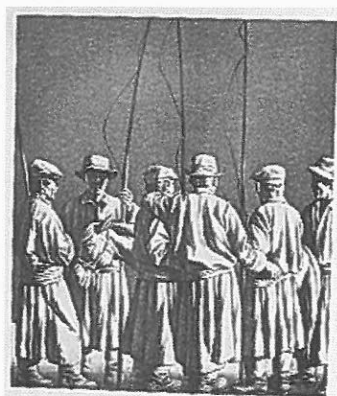
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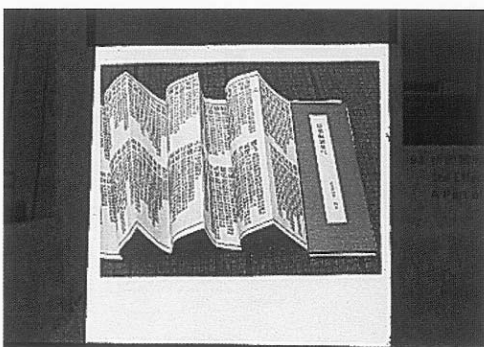
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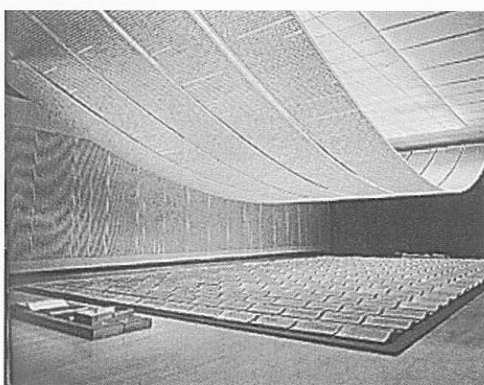
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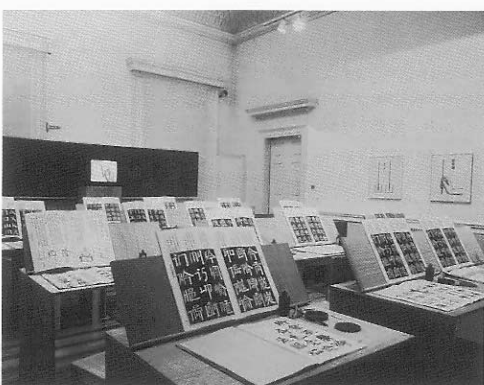
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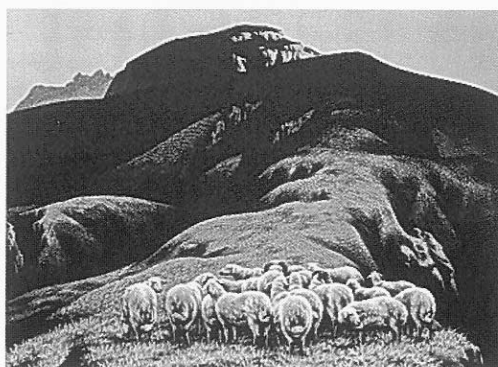
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102



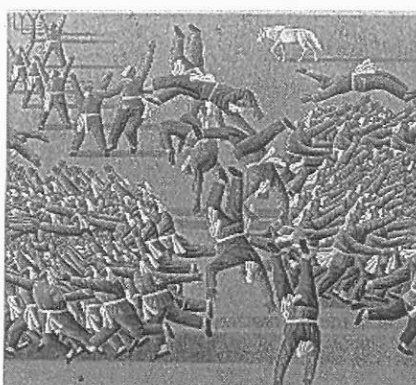
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103



100



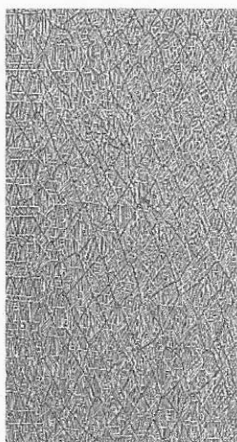
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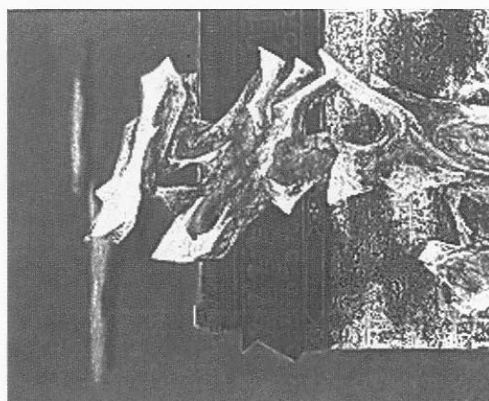
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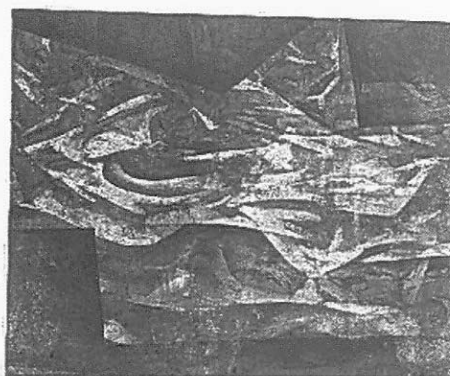
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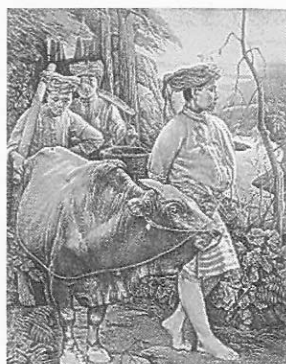
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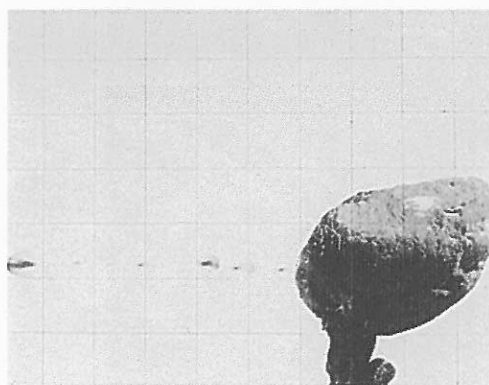
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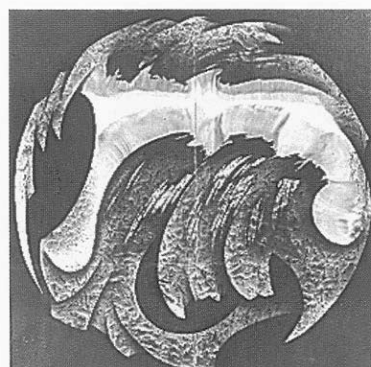
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112



113



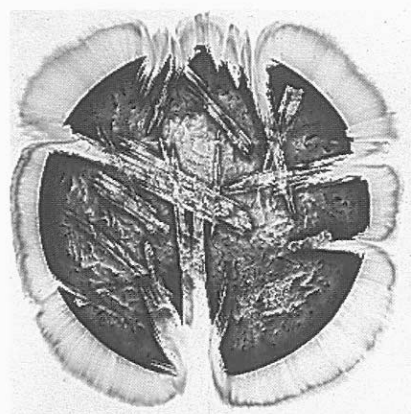
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114



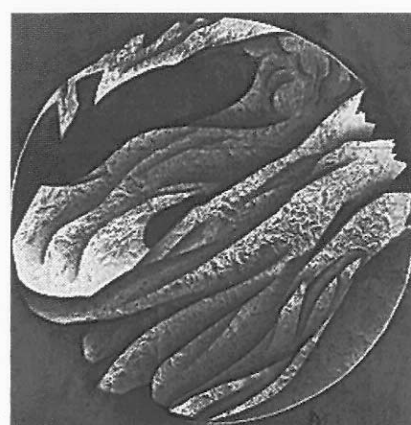
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