



Implications of Chinese folk prints and contemporary prints

There are two major concerns for the investigation. The first concern is related to aesthetics of folk prints and contemporary prints which are contrary to the literati painting. The second concern is related to printing process and technique of traditional woodblock printing workshop which excelled in printing ink or water-based colour on Chinese paper. By conducting a research on both traditional and contemporary Chinese printmaking supported with visits to printing workshops and printmakers' studios in China, I gained not only a better understanding about the practice of water-based colour woodblock printmaking, but also widened my horizon on the scope of aesthetic standards in the exploration of Chinese ink painting.

1. Folk Print

Although printmaking has a long history since the Tang Dynasty (one of the existing earliest woodcuts was an illustration for Buddhist scripture produced in 868), it was considered by art historians for centuries to be a minor art owing to its functional and crafts nature¹. Nevertheless, significant progress was achieved by printmakers of the Ming Dynasty in developing new techniques such as embossing and multi-block colour printing. The production of *Shizhuzhai shuhuapu* (Ten Bamboo Studio Manual of Calligraphy and Painting) in about 1627 by Hu Zhenyen (1584-1674), a publisher of the Ming Dynasty, was ranked among the major achievements of woodcut in the world². Starting from the 17th century, colour printing technique was extensively applied in producing illustrations for Chinese operas and folk prints in many regions.

The Chinese New Year woodblock print (also known as New Year painting or Nianhua) is a typical folk print produced for celebrating Lunar New Year. In contrast to the literati painting, its aesthetics were closely related to folk culture and the living experience of common citizens and peasants. Harvest, fertility and fortune were the most popular themes which reflected their wish and belief. By sticking the prints on door and window, they believed that evil and misfortune would be driven away.



Ten Bamboo Studio Manual of Calligraphy and Painting
Hu Zhenyen. Ming Dynasty



Jinglin Buddhist Scriptures Woodcut Centre, Nanjing, 1995

In order to convey the message more effectively and sensuously, artists tended to employ simplified forms and forceful images with bright colours to express the inherent symbolic meaning. For example, fish and babies were used to symbolize fertility and red was boldly printed to express joy and happiness.



Foshan Printing Workshop, Guangdong Province, 2004

During the Qing Dynasty, Nianhua was produced extensively throughout the whole country. Famous production centres include Taohuawu in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, Weifang in Shandong Province, Foshan in Guangdong Province, Wuqiang and Yangliuqin in Tianjin, Hebei Province.

Regarding the printing technique, the use of water-based colour has achieved some special features. The first feature is tonal gradation which is developed by controlling the amount of water in the inking process. By re-inking and re-printing certain

parts of the woodblock carefully, a gradual change in tone could be achieved subtly. The second feature is the use of brush in the inking process. It provides flexibility for applying different colours on different parts of a single block, thus achieving rich colour effect economically.



Yangjiafo Printing Workshop in Weifang county, 1999 Yangliuqin Printing Workshop, 2004

In general, the application of multi-blocks printing technique was also used to produce multi-colour effect. However, hand painting on printed areas was later introduced in some production centres especially in Yangliuqin, which had created a distinctive feature in Chinese Nianhua. The successful integration of painting with printmaking in Yangliuqin Nianhua involved the use of woodblock to print out the linear forms which were then hand-coloured / painted with rich colours. Moreover, it was found that Western painting style had exerted certain influence over Nianhua³ through the court painters who were immigrants from Italy. The use of chiaroscuro in representing dark and light effect is an example. The process of integrating woodblock with painting provided flexibility for craftsmen to produce a new art form in popular art for the mass public.

With the decline of folk prints in the late Qing Dynasty, these features were gradually neglected and later abandoned with the import of Western printmaking in the early 20th century.

2. Contemporary Printmaking

In the 30s, owing to the unstable political environment in China and the introduction of foreign woodcut prints by Mr. Lu Xun (1881-1936), woodcut became a dominant art form and a powerful tool for protest and for educating the people. The Modern Woodcut Movement lasted for two decades. It witnessed the influence of German and Russian woodcuts with black and white as the major form of artistic expression and printed with oil-based colour. The works are different from folk prints and literati painting of the past with emphasis on realistic representation in relation to the propaganda nature of subject contents.

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, printmaking was still considered a major art form and a powerful medium by the government for the promotion of socialist construction⁴. Similar to painting and sculpture, the typical official style of Socialist Realism was widely adopted by printmakers with emphasis on subject contents related to agricultural and social construction expressed by realistic representation.

However, during the mid 50s, there was a growing awareness among printmakers to develop a national style by rediscovering cultural features in traditional prints and folk art especially the Ten Bamboo Studio Manual of Calligraphy and Painting and New Year folk prints of the Ming and Qing dynasties. As a result, in addition to the oil-based colour woodcut previously introduced from the West earlier in the century, water-based colour woodblock and multi-blocks colour printing processes were revived and applied in artistic expression. Subsequently in contrast to the black and white woodcuts of the 30s, the water-based colour woodblock prints were enriched with subdued tone and colour as evidenced in the works of Wu Fan, Li Wuan Min and other printmakers of the 50s. Although there was a general emphasis on political and educational value of artistic expression, contemporary prints of the 50s had reflected a more harmonious, lyrical and poetic mood.

The initiative in developing a national style in contemporary printmaking by recovering traditional water-based colour printing features was later further explored by printmakers of the Jiangsu Province in the 60s. Eventually a regional style was developed with distinctive features achieved in poetic landscape prints. Unfortunately the development of contemporary printmaking was disrupted for almost a decade during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). It was not until the implementation of the Open Door Policy in the late 70s that the practice of printmaking was gradually recovered. For the past two decades, the increase both in cultural exchange with the West and freedom of expression have enabled printmakers to explore other printmaking processes in addition to woodblock prints. Intaglio, serigraphy and lithography were widely practised in many regions and various styles and art movements introduced from the West were experimented, ranging from abstraction to Photo-Realism⁵.

3. Water-based colour woodblock prints of Jiangsu Province

Although water-based colour woodblock prints have been practised in many provinces since the 50s, printmakers of the Jiangsu Province are especially renowned for their distinctive regional style in landscape prints. Given the favorable conditions of rich cultural heritage and long folk prints history in Jiangsu Province, old woodblock printing centres in Nanjing and Suzhou were able to restore their water-based colour woodblock tradition quickly in the 60s. Workshops were rebuilt to produce traditional folk prints and opened for contemporary printmakers to conduct research on printing process and technique. Supported by the provincial government, leading printmakers such as Wu Jin Fa, Zhang Xin Yu and Zhu Qin Bao succeeded in promoting water-based colour woodblock printmaking by organizing workshops for the younger generations during the early 60s. As a matter of fact, a research centre was established in 1960 in Nanjing to promote water-based colour printmaking. Printmaking academies were founded later in Nanjing, Suzhou and Qi Dong to support professional printmakers and organize exhibitions, workshops and seminars. With the support from various sources, a team of printmakers was formed and they had achieved international recognition for the past decades.



Village in valley
Huang Pi Mo 1984 38.5 x 59.3 cm
Collection of Art Horizon
Printmaking Workshop



Visit to Mr. Huang Pi Mo's studio,
1995

Contemporary printmakers of Jiangsu Province have focused on landscape as their major theme to express their intimate feeling and love for nature. On the one hand, they acquired drawing skill from Western art and developed their ideas and images from their neighborhood landscape which is characterized by humid climate, beautiful mountains, meandering river and water villages. On the other hand they also drew inspiration from both traditional and contemporary Chinese ink painting with emphasis on the expression of poetic atmosphere and lyrical mood. In general, the theme and composition were well planned with colour separations and printed by multi blocks with exquisite craftsmanship.

In a book which included articles by contemporary printmakers: *Essays on Water-based Printmaking of Jiangsu for the Past Thirty Years*⁶, the achievement and contribution of contemporary printmakers of Jiangsu Province were further recognized and the aesthetic quality of their works were attributed to the following four characteristic features:

i.) Emphasis on the use of Chinese paper for printmaking

It is found that the unsized-paper used for Chinese painting could produce the best quality in the printing process. The absorbent nature of the paper enables printmakers to experiment with various saturation of colour and apply repeated inking process to achieve the subdued and delicate effect in relation to the poetic and hazy landscape contents.

ii) Emphasis on the use of water in printing process

In most cases, water is sprayed on the paper to control better inking quality before printing. To further strengthen the soft tonal gradation effect of certain inked areas, water is frequently applied by small brush on the woodblock. During dry weather water will also be sprayed on the wood block to increase the humidity for better inking effect.

iii) Emphasis on textures produced by woodcut knives

In traditional prints which were mostly expressed in linear form, craftsmen were unaware of the textures created by carving could be an aesthetic feature in visual expression. Influenced by contemporary Western woodcut, printmakers of the Jiangsu Province also emphasized the inclusion of textures produced by woodcut knives as an integral part in the composition.

iv) Emphasis on wood grain as part of landscape form

To explore the unique language of printmaking, some printmakers also employed woodblock with coarse texture or patterned wood grain for producing interesting landscape forms, such as rock and ripple.

For the past ten years, at least three exhibitions of contemporary prints from Jiangsu Province were held in Hong Kong with printmakers invited to conduct water-based colour woodblock printmaking demonstration workshop. We also interviewed other leading printmakers later such as Zhang Xin Yu and Huang Pi Mo in 1995. Subsequent to the academic exchange and visits, in 2000 we founded the Art Horizon Printmaking Workshop in Hong Kong.

4. Concluding remarks

Notwithstanding the fact that woodblock print was perceived as a craft or minor art in the past, it is found that the aesthetics and printing technique of folk prints had contributed significantly to the pluralistic development of Chinese art. Moreover, with the support of folk print tradition, contemporary printmakers have been successful in strengthening the art form by assimilating influences from the

West in their work. It is found that in reforming Chinese traditional woodblock print, the development of the medium in the past century had demonstrated a high level of achievement in terms of combining elements of Chinese and Western art and expanding the language of printmaking. The unique characteristics include the use of simplified forms, bold colour and flattening of space together with subtle use of water-based colour or Chinese ink on oriental paper for expression in the contemporary context.

1 For relationship between folk print / art and fine art / orthodox art, see Yeung, Chuntong (1995). *Chinese Folk Art*, University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong. See Introduction, by Professor Chou. Juhsi.

2 See Sun, Shirley (1979), *Modern Chinese Woodcut*. Chinese Culture Foundation, San Francisco. Page 11.
See also Lee, Sherman (1998). *China 5,000 Years: Innovations and Transformation in the Arts*. Guggenheim Museum. Chinese Painting: Innovation after Progress Ends by Cahill, James p. 186-187.

3 See Yeung, Chuntong (1995). *Chinese Folk Art*, University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong. Page 47.

4 See Liang, Ellen Johnston (1988). *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China*. University of California Press, Berkeley p.7 – 18.
Andrews, Julia F and Shen, Kuiyi (1998). *A Century in Crisis*. Guggenheim

Museum, Page 213 -224, *The Modern Woodcut Movement*.
Sun, Shirley (1979). *Modern Chinese Woodcut*. Chinese Culture Foundation, San Francisco.

Wachs, Iris and Chang, Tsong Zung (1999). *Half A Century of Chinese Woodblock Prints: From The Communist Revolution To The Open Door Policy and Beyond, 1945-1998*. The Museum of Art. Ein Harod, Israel.

5 See Liu, Siu Jane (2000). *A Comparative Study of Printmaking in Jiangsu, Heilong Jiang and Hong Kong Post-1949*. Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

6 See Editorial Committee of Jiangsu Shuiyin Banhua Sanshinian Wenji (1991). *Jiangsu Shuiyin Banhua Sanshinian Wenji (Essays on Water-based Printmaking of Jiangsu for the Past Thirty Years)*. Nanjing Publisher (Chinese Edition).