

# MODERN CHINESE WOODBLOCK PRINTS & REVOLUTIONARY ART

Beginning in the 1930s, almost all Chinese art forms were caught up in the turbulent currents of Chinese politics. Probably the most straightforwardly political of the visual arts was woodblock prints. Woodblock printing was certainly not new to China and traditionally was the common medium for mass producing Buddhist devotional art for over a thousand years. Woodblock prints also illustrated popular books, and even created very sophisticated landscapes in the traditional style. But it was in the 1930's during the Creative Print Movement, supported by the Chinese leftwing writer Lu Xun, that this old art form was reshaped to serve new political purposes.



*Tripitaka Illustration, Jin Dynasty*



*China Roars, Li Hua, 1935*

China giant, bound and blindfolded, roaring with rage as he gropes for a knife to free himself. The boldness and simplicity

One of the most famous early prints coming out of this movement is Li Hua's "Roar China" inspired by China's helplessness in the face of Japanese aggressions that started with the Manchurian Incident in 1931. The print depicts the



*Dream of the Red Chamber Illustration, Qing Dynasty*



*Safeguard Our Territorial Integrity, Duan Ganqing, 1936*



*The March of Democracy, Li Hua, 1947*

of this print is characteristic of the period that witnessed the revival of woodblock prints but now with clear nationalistic messages. Besides patriotism, a major theme of these politicized woodcuts was social protest. With the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 the twin themes of patriotism and social protest came together and gained wide popularity. During this period, most woodcuts were black and white, somber and dark to illustrate the suffering and the despair of the Chinese.

While artists who remained in the cities controlled by the Nationalist Government specialized in caustic social and political commentary, other woodcut artists went to the Communist “Liberated Areas” in the north where their work was actively encouraged and patronized by the Communist Party. Their themes focused on the revolutionary



*After the Grain Collectors Leave, Li Hua, 1947*



*This is How a Professor Lives, Yang Keyang, 1947*

political and social changes taking place in the Communist controlled areas. Gu Yuan emerged as the most famous Yan'an woodblock artist during the 1940s. Revolutionary social change was illustrated as in this scene of a reluctant landlord being forced to reduce his rents. Woodcuts also served the revolution even more

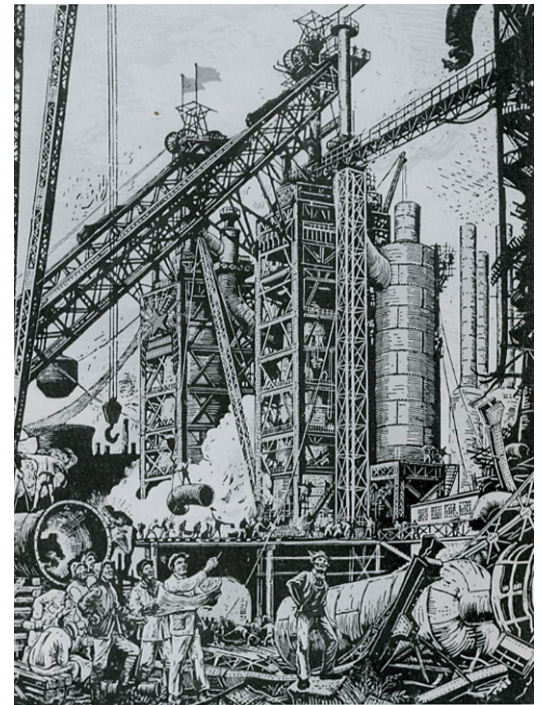


*Rent Reduction Meeting, Gu Yuan, 1943*

directly as in this print showing the popular support of the Communist Red Army.



*Joining the Red Army, Xia Feng, 1947*



*Rehabilitation of the Anshan Steel Works, Gu Yuan, ca 1950*

Woodcuts continued to be one of the favorite art forms after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. But after the Communists came to power, the prints tended to become much more optimistic and positive as they portrayed the accomplishments of socialism under the leadership of the Communist Party. Workers and peasants were glorified and "liberation" was celebrated.

Throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s woodcuts remained political but now incorporated traditional styles and illustrated the accomplishments of socialist construction and the new political order in China. While



*Construction of the Foziling Reservoir, Chen Yanqiao, 1954*



*Perpetual Spring, Zhao Zongzao, 1960*



*The Golden Road, Li Huanmin, 1963*

still directly serving politics, the post 1949 woodcut generally abandoned the stark black and whites of the 1940s for a more generous use of color. More tranquil domestic scenes were depicted but even these are charged with an obvious political message. According to Communist Party policy, during the 1960s a spirit of “revolutionary romanticism” should infuse art. There was none of the somberness of earlier

“socialist realist” woodcuts. However, other works depicted the tense atmosphere of foreign threats and China’s support for revolutionary struggles such as the war in Vietnam.



*We Can Deal with All the Men Johnson Sends, 1966*