

# Reframing the history of proletarian art: Sino-Japanese relations in modern woodcut print culture

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While China has a centuries-old tradition of writing on art, it was not until the modern era that a historiography of art in the service of the nation began and the European concept of fine arts (*meishu*) was introduced to China via Japan.<sup>1</sup> During the early twentieth century, Japanese texts, as well as European works that were accessible to most Chinese readers in Japanese translation only, were adapted or literally copied in the writing of the first modern textbooks on art history in China.<sup>2</sup> While the role of Japanese texts and translations in the shaping of Chinese art history is well-researched and Sino-Japanese connections in painting as well as lithography and collotype reproduction have been investigated,<sup>3</sup> the importance of Japanese agents, concepts, and artworks in the development of modern woodcut aesthetics, techniques, and motifs in China in the 1930s has not been fully acknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup>On art historiographical writing in the service of the Chinese nation see Wang Cheng-hua, 'Rediscovering Song Painting for the Nation: Artistic Discursive Practices in Early Twentieth-Century China', *Artibus Asiae* vol. 71 no. 2 (2011), 221-46, and Wang Cheng-hua, 'In the Name of the Nation: Song Painting and Artistic Discourse in Early Twentieth Century China', in Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton, eds, *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, West Sussex: Blackwell, 2011, 537-60. On the history of words and concepts such as *beaux arts* (fine arts) in Sino-Japanese translation see Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900-1937*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, 'The Japanese impact on the Republican art world: the construction of Chinese art history as a modern field', *Twentieth-Century China* vol. 32 no. 1 (November 2006), 4-36; Guo Hui, 'Writing Chinese Art History in Republican China', PhD diss., Leiden University, 2010; Kuiyi Shen, 'The Japanese Impact on the Construction of Chinese Art History as a Modern Field: A Case Study of Teng Gu and Fu Baoshi', in Joshua A. Fogl, ed. *The Role of Japan in Modern Chinese Art*, Berkley, London and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012, 228-44.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Vinograd, 'Patrimonies in Press: Art Publishing, Cultural Politics, and Canon Construction in the Career of Di Baoxian', in Fogl, ed. *The Role of Japan*, 244-272, and Wang Cheng-hua, 'New Printing Technology and Heritage Preservation: Collotype Reproduction of Antiquities in Modern China, circa 1908–1917', in Fogl, ed. *The Role of Japan*, 273-308.

The first historiographers of Chinese modern print culture were also involved in the New Woodcut Movement (*xinxing muke yundong*), which started in Shanghai in 1931 and quickly spread nationwide. They, most notably, included the writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) who led the movement, propagated the work of European artists, wrote frequently about Chinese art, and launched the movement with its first woodcut workshop in Shanghai in 1931, assisted by the Japanese schoolteacher Uchiyama Kakitsu (1900–1984).<sup>4</sup> In addition to Lu Xun, other key protagonists in the movement, such as the woodcut artist, painter, and art theorist Li Hua (1907–1994), also wrote about it.<sup>5</sup> In 1935, Li Hua acknowledged the ‘enormous impact’ of Japanese woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*) in a preface to the ninth issue of the Chinese journal *Modern Print* (*xiandai banhua*) that featured eleven contemporary works by print artists from Tokyo.<sup>6</sup> However, despite the connections between Japanese and Chinese modern woodcut practices, most historiographical literature on the subject marginalises its Sino-Japanese aspects. It instead focuses on the influence of European art and conceptual ideas as well as the continuity of Chinese aesthetic practices in the service of proletarian art, framing the movement as the origin of agitational art in China and aligning prints from the 1930s with later propaganda posters.<sup>7</sup> In addition, literature on the visual culture of modern China highlights the Soviet impact on the transformation of art’s role in society and the formation of a ‘new way of seeing’ with a socialist eye, which was consolidated after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.<sup>8</sup> In narratives of teleological development that explain how and why state-canonized forms of socialist print came into being and flourished under Communist rule, the genre’s early experimental years remain overshadowed or neglected. It is therefore easy to forget that the creation of proletarian art was a mission shared by artists across East Asia.

This lacuna in research is not limited to scholarship on the visual arts, but has also shaped the study of East Asian proletarian literature.<sup>9</sup> One of the reasons for the lack of a transcultural approaches lies in the geopolitics of the period itself, as the fact that Japan joined the ‘Western imperialist powers’ significantly complicated the matter of transnational proletarian solidarity in the occupied

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<sup>4</sup> Lu Xun, *Lu Xun lun meishu* [Lu Xun on Art], ed. Zhang Wang, Dongbei: Dongbei shudian, 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Li Hua, *Chinese Woodcuts*, Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1995; Li Hua, ‘Wo yu muke yishu’ [Woodcut Print and Me], in *Di quan ji: Li Hua de yishu licheng*, ed. Li Kang, Hefei: Anhui Meishu Chubanshe, 2012, 14-17.

<sup>6</sup> Li Hua, *Womende hua* [Preface], *Modern Print*, no. 9, 1935.

<sup>7</sup> Chang-tai Hung, ‘Two Examples of Socialism: Woodcuts in Chinese Communist Politics’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 39, no. 1, January 1997, 36-9; Stefan Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda Posters: from Revolution to Modernization*, Amsterdam: Pepin Press, 1995, 31-34; Ellen J. Laing, *The Winking Owl. Art in the People’s Republic of China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Tang Xiaobing, *Visual Culture in Contemporary China. Paradigms and Shifts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 22-23.

<sup>9</sup> Heather Bowen-Struyk, ‘Proletarian Arts in East Asia’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 5, issue 4 (2007), 1-23.

regions of Korea, Taiwan, and China.<sup>10</sup> Increasingly, the transcultural ideal of a proletarian art movement became heavily nationalized in China as well as Korea, a development in which local resistance against Japanese imperialism in each country was pivotal.<sup>11</sup> In addition to resistance from the inhabitants of the occupied territories themselves, Japanese colonial authorities also actively blocked collaborations between Japanese and Korean proletarian movements in the visual arts.<sup>12</sup> The fact that ‘members of the proletariat were said to transcend national categorization and constitute a so-called international class’<sup>13</sup> formed the basis for attempts by Korean and Japanese members of the proletarian movement in the visual arts to ‘overcome the framework of the colonized/colonizer relationship,’<sup>14</sup> but these attempts were ultimately unsuccessful and quickly forgotten. Although Shanghai had been one of the gateways to Russian literature and visual culture for Japanese intellectuals,<sup>15</sup> this was also forgotten in light of nationalist struggles, as was the fact that Tokyo had been the gateway to Japanese (and European) ideas on proletarian arts for Chinese radicals.

This article deconstructs the art historical narrative of modern Chinese woodcut printing as primarily influenced by Western art and recontextualises the New Woodcut Movement in relation to modernisation efforts in East Asian art and society, within which Japan’s role as a model of social activism in art was crucial. It employs a comparative approach to consider the development of the medium of print in the context of a pan-Asian agenda to create woodcuts for proletarian audiences that began in Japan before spreading to China and subsequently informing artistic practices in India. It draws on visual records from China and Japan in addition to period sources written by Lu Xun and Uchiyama Kakitsu, who taught the first Chinese woodcut workshop in 1931, and artists such as Li Hua, Lai Shaoiqi (1915–2000), and Hu Qizao (1915–1965), who were engaged in a heated public debate on art and politics by the mid-1930s.

Due to rising political tensions prior to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, conceptual, pictorial, and technical correlations between Japanese and Chinese woodcut practices were overwritten in artistic works and pan-Asian connections and parallel developments became neglected in historiographical studies. This is illustrated in the ways in which two leading figures of the print movement’s early years, Li Hua and Lu Xun, have been framed in later histories, including the fact that, despite both having studied in Japan, the country received little acknowledgement as a source of their knowledge on art. The arguments and historical evidence presented by this article problematise the prevalence of narratives of divergence and difference between Japan and China in favour of a shared history of commonalities and connections. While the pan-Asian

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<sup>10</sup> Bowen-Struyk, ‘Proletarian Arts in East Asia’, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Bowen-Struyk, ‘Proletarian Arts in East Asia’, 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> Emiko Kida, ‘Japanese–Korean Exchange within the Proletarian Visual Arts Movement’, *positions*, vol. 14, issue 2, 2006, 495-525.

<sup>13</sup> Kida, ‘Japanese–Korean Exchange within the Proletarian Visual Arts Movement’, 510.

<sup>14</sup> Kida, ‘Japanese–Korean Exchange within the Proletarian Visual Arts Movement’, 519.

<sup>15</sup> Bowen-Struyk, ‘Proletarian Arts in East Asia’, 5.

search for proletarian art forms and the 1930s discourse on artistic modernity underlie the creation of 'new modes and relationships of cultural production'<sup>16</sup> that were cemented later under Communist rule, this article revisits them within the complex context of the period itself. It thereby excavates a kind of utopian moment in the 1930s when a transnational idea or ideal of proletarian art offered to unite artists struggling against the exploitative forces of colonialism, imperialism, and globalized capitalism. Before the Communist Party came to power in China and the Soviet system was celebrated as the leading and superior foreign model, the 'ability to appropriate pieces of knowledge from elsewhere' included a blending of Asian and non-Asian knowledge cultures and Chinese intellectuals (*zhishifenzi*) 'westernized' to the degree that their indigenous contexts allowed.<sup>17</sup> However, the longstanding tradition of prioritizing Japanese and Western cultures of knowledge over other non-Chinese sources was heavily impacted by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, when intellectual and material engagements with the enemy became contradictory, as illustrated by 'comprador tycoons [who] boycotted Japanese goods as they invested in Japanese stock.'<sup>18</sup> Before 1937, however, the search for new ways of writing history by thinkers like Liang Qichao (1873–1929), who were invested in the modernization of China and its struggle with the exploiting forces of colonialism, imperialism, and globalized capitalism, was deeply informed by Japanese as well as European thought.<sup>19</sup> The article therefore looks beyond narratives that frame the art of the 1930s through the retrospectively applied lenses of nationalism and socialism and seeks to recover an important aspect of intra-Asian transcultural art history. Going beyond the reductive focus on European influences on Chinese art, this article also analyses what Chinese and Japanese printmakers *added* to the pictorial language of non-Asian artists in the service of art for the masses. It hereby seeks to nuance prevailing histories of the East learning from the West, offering a piece to the puzzle of a new, nuanced, and more complete narrative of proletarian visual culture in a global context that connects Japan to the Global South.

### **Beyond gatekeeping: Japanese agency in modern Chinese print activism**

The story of the modern Chinese woodcut starts with the Shanghai workshop of 1931, the historic occasion during which thirteen Chinese art students previously trained in painting were introduced to the technical, stylistic, and socio-cultural potentials of woodcut printing.<sup>20</sup> The established art historiographical narrative usually stresses the role of Lu Xun in staging this event and his mentorship role,

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<sup>16</sup> Tang, *Visual Culture in Contemporary China*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Tani Barlow, 'Zhishifenzi (Chinese Intellectuals) and Power', *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 16, nr. 3-4, 1991, 211.

<sup>18</sup> Barlow, 'Zhishifenzi', 210-1.

<sup>19</sup> Tang Xiaobing, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity. The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, 'Shanghai Modern', in Jo-Anne Birnie-Danzker, Ken Lum, and Zheng Shengtian, eds. *Shanghai Modern, 1919–1945*, exh. cat. Munich: Hatje Cantz, 2005, 21, and Xu Jiang, 'The 'Misreading' of Life', in Birnie-Danzker, ed. *Shanghai Modern*, 57-77.

aspects that are relatively well explored.<sup>21</sup> While the role of his co-instructor, the Japanese school teacher Uchiyama, was not comparable to Lu Xun's position as a long-term coach and socio-political instigator, it exemplifies some fundamental aspects of the Sino-Japanese exchange in graphic art at this time. Uchiyama instructed the Shanghainese students in the use of Japanese print techniques and tools and talked about the tradition of Japanese printmaking while Lu Xun translated from Japanese to Chinese, adding his own views and distributing various prints for reference, including some of Russian and German origin.<sup>22</sup> Although Uchiyama expressed that it would have been more effective for a Japanese artist to teach the workshop rather than an elementary school teacher,<sup>23</sup> it is remarkable that a schoolteacher was, in fact, able to impart so much practical and theoretical knowledge on historical and contemporaneous woodcut practices.

Uchiyama owed his skills to developments in Japan's educational system based on the initiatives of Yamamoto Kanae (1882–1946). Yamamoto gained fame through his woodcut *Fisherman* (*gyofu*) published in 1904, which became a revolutionary icon of self-expression and artistic autonomy in Japanese art history because it embodied for the first time the new paradigm of the creative print (*sōsaku hanga*): 'self-drawing, self-carving, self-printing' (*jiga jikoku jishō*). This was manifested through the textual framing that accompanied its first publication in the literature and art magazine *Morning Star* (*myōjō*), which celebrated the print as a 'knife picture' (*tōga*) and a 'painter's print.'<sup>24</sup> The term 'knife picture' referred to the direct manner in which, and the minimal equipment by which, the print was produced, using a traditional printing tool, but in a modern way.<sup>25</sup> The expression 'painter's print' emphasises the fact that Yamamoto's image was designed and cut into wood by a painter, not by the block-cutter (*horishi*) or printer (*surishi*) who

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<sup>21</sup> See for example, Ma Tiji and Li Yunjing, eds. *Lu Xun yu Xinxing Muke Yundong* [Lu Xun and the Modern Woodcut Movement], Beijing: Beijing Meishu Chubanshe, 1985, and Shirley Sun, 'Lu Xun and the Chinese Woodcut Movement, 1929–1935', PhD diss., Stanford University, 1974.

<sup>22</sup> Uchiyama Kakitsu, 'Der chinesische Holzschnitt und ich', transl. Masako Shono-Sládek, in Heike Kotzenberg, ed. *Der revolutionäre Holzschnitt Chinas: Künstler aus dem Umkreis von Lu Xun*, exh.cat. (Cologne: Museen der Stadt Köln Museum für ostasiatische Kunst, 1987), 12, which is a selective translation from the Japanese original Uchiyama Kakitsu, *Ro Jin to mokkoku* [Lu Xun and Woodcut], ed. Nara Kazuo, Tokyo: Kenbun Shuppan, 1981, published also in Chinese as Uchiyama Kakitsu, *Lu Xun yu Muke* [Lu Xun and Woodcut], ed. Nara Kazuo, trans. Han Zongqi and Zhou Yanli, Beijing: Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1985.

<sup>23</sup> Uchiyama Kakitsu, 'Der chinesische Holzschnitt', 12.

<sup>24</sup> Cited from the comments by the painter and print artist Ishii Hakutei (1882–1985) on Kanae's print after Chiaki Ajioka, 'Creative Print (Sōsaku-hanga) Magazines', in Amy Reigle Newland and Christiaan Uhlenbeck, eds. *The Hotei Encyclopedia of Japanese Woodblock Prints*, vol. 2, Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005), 300.

<sup>25</sup> Yamamoto used as his main carving tool the *marunomi* (round chisel), a gouge with a U-shaped blade ranging from 4.5 mm to 15 mm that had traditionally been used with a mallet to scoop out waste wood from wide areas between the elevated lines of the print design. Helen Merritt, *Modern Japanese Woodcut Prints: The Early Years*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990, 111.

worked in traditional print production settings. In other words, the image was produced by an independent artist instead of an artisan.

Through the reproduction of the image in an art and literature magazine, an anonymous fisherman wandered from the periphery of rural folk life into the centre of urban artistic life and became an icon of modern print. Yamamoto Kanae's choice of a rural motif illustrates his artistic as well as his socio-political mission: he actively supported the education of peasants in the arts. Inspired by the school projects for the poor and uneducated initiated by the Russian visionary Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), Yamamoto's goal was to revise the apparatus of creative practice in Japan so that art could be studied and made by anybody, regardless of age, social status, wealth, or previous education.<sup>26</sup> He instigated the *Farmers' Art Movement* (*nōmin bijutsu*), which subverted the institutional hierarchies of the art world by educating laymen outside Japan's art academies and urban elite circles,<sup>27</sup> and the *Children's Free Art Movement*, which emphasised genuine creativity over learned skills and led to a move away from technique and copy-oriented drawing lessons to an art education that was creative in a direct and expressive way.<sup>28</sup> Both movements employed woodcut as one of their preferred mediums. Yamamoto's key concepts spread to teachers all over the country through workshops, exhibitions, and publishing projects and by 1924 this modern mode of printing had become commonplace in elementary schools across Japan. Uchiyama's ability to teach Chinese art students about print culture in Shanghai in 1931 can be traced directly to Yamamoto Kanae's initiatives that introduced printmaking into the school curriculum, made *sōsaku hanga* tools cheaply accessible in ordinary marketplaces, and created a demand for How-to Woodcut books.<sup>29</sup> Such books reached Lu Xun and Li Hua in China who were able to read Japanese due to their studies abroad<sup>30</sup> and who propagated the idea of the 'creative print' that had emerged in Japan by 1905<sup>31</sup> more than twenty years later in China in the 1930s.

The Chinese term 'creative printed image' (*chuangzao banhua*) is clearly borrowed from its Japanese antecedent *sōsaku hanga* and written '創造版画'; the Chinese neologism 'woodcut image' (*muke hua*) might be inspired by the Japanese

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<sup>26</sup> Merritt, *Modern Japanese Woodcut Prints*, 166.

<sup>27</sup> Yamamoto Kanae, *Jiyūga kyōiku* [Free Drawing Education] (First Edition 1921) (Tokyo: Reimei shobō, 1972), Yamamoto Kanae, 'Nōmin bijutsu to watashi' [Peasant Art and Myself], in *Chūō kōron* (August 1920), 46-63.

<sup>28</sup> As shown by Julika Singer's contextualisation and interpretation of Yamamoto's revolutionary text *The Main Points of the 'Free Drawing Education'* (*Jiyūga kyōiku no yōten*) that was published in the monthly magazine *Central Review* (*Chūō kōron*) in July 1920. Julika Singer, 'Yamamoto Kanae und die 'Erziehung zum Freien Malen' – Die Reform des Zeichenunterrichts in der Taishō-Zeit', unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Heidelberg, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Merritt, *Modern Japanese Woodcut Prints*, 172.

<sup>30</sup> Lu Xun reportedly possessed Nagase Yoshio's *Hanga O tsukuru hito e* [To People Who Make Prints] and a book on modern Japanese print technique by Masahide Asahi see Uchiyama, *Lu Xun yu Muke*, 9, and Ota Koshi, *Chugoku gendai hanga* [Modern Chinese Prints], Tokyo: Haga Shoten, 1972, 139.

<sup>31</sup> Merritt, *Modern Japanese Woodcut Prints*, 17.

'knife picture' (*tōga*) that stresses the role of cutting the wood block and superseded the Chinese term 'wood(block) printed image' (*muban hua*) that highlights the process of printing.<sup>32</sup> These words belong to a group of Chinese terms appropriated from Japanese that label modern and/or foreign phenomena introduced to China via the linguistic and cultural filter of Japan.<sup>33</sup> In addition to being a gatekeeper for Western texts on art, Japan during the 1920s was also 'a model of social protest in East Asia' for left-wing Chinese intellectuals who were provided with 'a revolutionary language' through Japanese texts and translations.<sup>34</sup> Yamamoto's key texts on peasant art reached China in a translated and abbreviated edition. The Chinese versions omitted numerous Japanese case studies included in the original texts but retained the Russian and European examples.<sup>35</sup> Rather than being treated as a source on Japan, Yamamoto's writing therefore served primarily as a gateway to knowledge on non-Asian phenomena. The strategy to transform a text through selective translation can also be found in Japanese translations of Russian texts on art and Chinese textbooks based on Japanese art historiography that was in turn based upon European models.<sup>36</sup> Such art-specific literature was in line with other selectively translated texts from the period that highlight East-West and Chinese-Soviet exchanges at the expense of intra-Asian connections, thereby contributing to an idealization and fetishization of Western (socialist) modernity.

Li Hua, Lu Xun, and many other leading artists, politicians, and intellectuals, some of whom had also studied in Japan, regularly frequented the famous Uchiyama bookshop in Shanghai run by Uchiyama Kanzō (1885–1959), the brother of the woodcut workshop instructor. Carrying the largest collection of Japanese books in China and stocking almost all extant Chinese translations of Japanese works, this shop was 'the place where Japanese mediation of Western culture was encapsulated in physical form.'<sup>37</sup> Apart from playing a major role in the literary scene,<sup>38</sup> Uchiyama Kanzō was also influential in the visual arts by providing Shanghai's artists with Japanese books and magazines – among them print

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<sup>32</sup> The word 'wood(block) printed images' (*muban hua*) was substituted by Lu Xun in 1933, see Uchiyama, 'Der chinesische Holzschnitt und ich', 11.

<sup>33</sup> One of the most prominent examples is the term *Beaux arts*. Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900–1937*. Stanford University Press, 1995.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Scott, 'Uchiyama Kanzō: A Case Study in Sino-Japanese Interaction', *Sino-Japanese Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, May 1990, 54.

<sup>35</sup> The Chinese text was based on Yamamoto, 'Nōmin bijutsu to watashi' and published under the title *nongmin meishu gaiguan* [An Overview of Peasant Art] in the magazine *Art (Meishu)* in 1935, translated and abbreviated by Zhao Shiming. Felicity Lufkin, 'Folk Art in China, 1930–1945', PhD diss., Berkeley, University of California, 2001, 95.

<sup>36</sup> Andrews and Shen, 'The Japanese impact on the Republican art world'; Guo, 'Writing Chinese Art History in Republican China'; Shen, 'The Japanese Impact on the Construction of Chinese Art History as a Modern Field'.

<sup>37</sup> Shih Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern. Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001, 141.

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Keaveney, 'Uchiyama Kanzō's Shanghai Bookstore and Its Impact on May Fourth Writers', *E-ASPAC Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast Journal* (2001), <http://www.mcel.pacificu.edu/easpac/2002/keaveney.php3> (accessed on April 1, 2007).

magazines, woodcut manuals and art books – that featured foreign ideas on art and printed reproductions of Western artworks. In addition, Uchiyama Kanzō organised the first displays of foreign woodcuts from Lu Xun's collection in his shop. He also produced exhibition catalogues and was, together with Lu Xun, the first buyer and collector of pieces from the first Chinese woodcut exhibitions. Some of the images from his collection survived in Tokyo along with those of his brother and were eventually given to the Kamakura Museum under the directorship of Hijikata Teiichi (1904–1980). Hijikata is one of the few Japanese art historians who have published on Chinese modern print.<sup>39</sup> Together with Lu Xun's print collection, which is housed at and documented in publications by the Lu Xun Museum in Shanghai, the prints owned by the Uchiyama brothers are today's main sources concerning Chinese woodcut production from 1931–1937.<sup>40</sup>

A full acknowledgement of the Uchiyama brothers' agency highlights the fact that socially motivated print initiatives in Japan had nationwide implications long before Lu Xun started to propagate the use of prints for socio-political reasons in China. Without the transfer of techniques, tools, and ideas through the school teacher Uchiyama and the impact of the texts, images, and carving tools available in his brother's bookshop, the New Woodcut Movement would not have originated in Shanghai and spread nationwide within four or five years. More importantly, while the 'writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and [the Japanese Marxist economist] Kawakami Hajime ... filtered into China partly through Uchiyama's bookstore,'<sup>41</sup> which also held copies of Yamamoto Kanae's writings on peasant art, the bookseller's brother presented and implemented the agitational ideas of Leo Tolstoy to a Chinese audience through the filter of Yamamoto Kanae's activism. As Yamamoto Kanae's print *Fisherman* had become an icon of self-expression and artistic autonomy within elitist art circles in the urban centres of Japan, art historical literature has reduced Yamamoto's impact on the Chinese movement to terminological, technical, and aesthetic aspects.<sup>42</sup> It is, however, more importantly Yamamoto's pioneering socio-cultural activism that was fundamental to modern Japanese art education and the Chinese woodcut movement; through his work (as transferred through the Uchiyama brothers via literature and artistic practice) the notion of the print as a social and political tool could take shape and flourish in its Shanghai context.

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<sup>39</sup> Uchiyama Kakitsu, 'Der chinesische Holzschnitt und ich', 9.

<sup>40</sup> For Lu Xun's collection see Shanghai Lu Xun jinianguan, Jiangsu guji chubanshe, eds, *Banhua jicheng – Lu Xun cang Zhongguo xiandai muke quanji* [Woodblock Records – The Complete Collection of Lu Xun's Modern Chinese Woodcut] Shanghai: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1991, 5 vols. The prints possessed by the Uchiyama brothers are partly published in Heike Kotzenberg, ed. *Der revolutionäre Holzschnitt Chinas*.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Scott, 'Uchiyama Kanzō', 53.

<sup>42</sup> The rare exception is Felicity Lufkin, *Folk Art and Modern Culture in Republican China*, London: Lexington, 2016, 46-7.



### Art and politics between Tokyo and Guangzhou

Despite the foundation of the *Modern Print Movement* in 1931 and the staging of huge woodcut exhibitions that travelled the whole of China,<sup>43</sup> print production in Shanghai shifted to the political underground. During 1927's so-called *April 12 Incident* the city formed the stage for violent anti-Communist persecution and left-wing political, literary, and artistic expression and the woodcut artists' lives became in danger.<sup>44</sup> As a consequence, many of the printmakers returned to their home towns in Guangdong, which became an important centre of artistic experimentation between 1934 and 1938.<sup>45</sup> Despite its many connections to the Shanghai circle, the southern group around Li Hua experimented with the aesthetics of rural prints in contrast to the artists associated with Lu Xun and a short-lived cooperation between Japanese and Guangzhou woodcutters reveals transcultural aspects of print production related to a shared interest in folk art.

The Guangzhou artists' works were published in two magazines.<sup>46</sup> In 1935 several issues of *Modern Print* (*xiandai banhua*) featured Japanese woodcuts by artists from the Black and White Society (*shiro to kurosha*).<sup>47</sup> In his preface to 1935's *Modern Print* 9, Li Hua offered a historiographical account of Japanese print practices that began as follows:

The Japanese print went through a major epoch. During the mid-Tokugawa period *ukiyo-e* became the flower of Edo culture. At that moment, in response to the demands of mass culture, popularized and cheap woodcut prints that satisfied the demands of mass taste [for beauty] developed very rapidly ... There was nothing that could not be depicted [in *ukiyo-e*] and this best qualified woodcut as an art representative of its period ... Even so, as the

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<sup>43</sup> The *Second National Traveling Woodcut Exhibition*, for example, which opened in Guangzhou on July 5, 1936, contained 600 contemporary woodcuts.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists in Twentieth Century China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 83-7.

<sup>45</sup> Julia Andrews and Shen Kuyi, 'The Modern Woodcut Movement', in *A Century in Crisis. Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth Century China*, New York: Guggenheim Museum and Abrams, 1998, 217.

<sup>46</sup> These magazines of the *Modern Print Association* constitute roughly a quarter of the prints in the collection of Lu Xun, which is the main extant source for Chinese modern woodcut prints from the early period. *Modern Print* (*Xiandai Banhua*) was published from December 1934 to 1936 in 18 issues with fewer than 100 copies of each issue. The first issue was mechanically reproduced; the following ones were printed manually in reaction to Lu Xun's negative response to their low reproductive quality. See Francesca Dal Lago, 'Between High and Low: Modernism, Continuity, and Moral Mission in Chinese Printmaking Practices 1930-1945', Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2005, 117. The preceding magazine *Woodcut World* (*Muke jie*) published after 1936 had a larger circulation than *Modern Print* but was banned after four issues. See Lufkin, 'Folk Art in Modern China', 140.

<sup>47</sup> Prints by the following Japanese artists are reproduced in issues of *Modern Print*: Maekawa Senpan (1888-1960) (*Modern Print* 10, 185), Fujimori Shizuo (1837-1930) (*Modern Print* 13, 233), Kawakami Sumio (1895-1972) (*Modern Print* 10, 289), Mori Dōshun (1909-1985) (*Modern Print* 16, 271), Ryōchi Chomei (1899-1982) (*Modern Print* 9, 166, and *Modern Print* 12, 220) and Taninaka Yasunori (1897-1946) (*Modern Print* 11, 207, and *Modern Print* 15, 257).

sense of the autonomous woodcut image drifted eastwards from the West, the modern Japanese woodcut artists might become disenchanted with the reproductive approach of *ukiyo-e*. However, aside from shifting from an attitude of reproduction to creativity, a profound tradition was well-preserved. On the one hand Japanese modern woodcut artists diligently exploited a longstanding Asian interest, and on the other they created even more manifold, free and natural modes of expression.<sup>48</sup>

Li Hua here talks about traditional Japanese woodcut printing from a left-wing Chinese viewpoint: starting in the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) as an expression of urban culture, it was available cheaply to all and depicted everything including the more trivial aspects of daily life, a true art for the masses still influential in the 1930s. As Li Hua suggests, however, this powerful tradition of popular, reproductive printed images did not remain unchallenged as the concept of the creative print ‘drifting eastwards from the West’ stimulated Japan’s modern art scene. The juxtaposition of the reproductive and the creative, the traditional and the modern print that Li’s text presents culminated in a duality of ‘Asian interest’ versus the ‘free and natural ways of expression’ associated with the West. The preface starts with an appraisal of *ukiyo-e* as a prelude to a more general eulogy on uses of the past in art, which Li considered a strategy China should learn from the Japanese example. In his view, only the combination of selected foreign features and the merging of the old into the new could eventually lead to artistic reinforcement and cultural self-strengthening. Li avoids the pitfalls of comparing cultural differences or political issues. He mentions Japanese mass culture as a precondition of woodcut practice but does not further discuss it in Marxist or other terms. Although Li’s preface carefully avoids the political, this issue of *Modern Print*, which featured the works of several Japanese woodcut artists, provoked open criticism in newspaper commentaries that described the works as ‘petty bourgeois’ and indicating ‘bourgeois sentimentality’ and ‘fallen consciousness’ within the Guangzhou circle.<sup>49</sup>

The prefaces to the following issue, *Modern Prints* 10, which may have been a public response to this discussion, form part of debates in the 1930s that re-evaluated the social purpose of art and its appropriate subject matter. They illustrate

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<sup>48</sup> 日本木版畫有過一個大時代。‘浮世繪’成了德川中期江戶文化的美葩。當時爲了大眾文化之要求，普及地，廉價地滿足大眾美感的木板畫，很迅速的發展開去。... 莫不繪入畫裡，使木版畫成爲最足代表時代的一種藝術。... 雖然，自創作版畫的空氣從西方彌漫東來，日本現代的木刻家或許會懷疑到‘浮世繪’複制的態度。然而，他們除了將態度從複制轉到創作之外，深厚的傳統還是好好的保存。他們一面努力發揮固有的東方趣味，一面更創出種種自由天真的表現法。Li Hua, ‘Women de hua’ [Preface], *Modern Print* 9, 1935. My translation.

<sup>49</sup> This is how Lu Xun paraphrases the criticism that certain ‘friends in the North’ of China voiced in newspaper supplements and articles ‘published in Beiping and Tianjin’ in correspondence between him and Li Hua, of which a letter from Lu Xun to Li Hua dated June 16, 1935 has survived that was written in response to a letter by Li Hua written on May 24, 1935. Paraphrased in and quoted from: Tang Xiaobing, *The Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2008, 188, 261, n58. See also Lufkin, ‘Folk Art in Modern China,’ 188.

how artists of the time grappled with the tensions between their goals and the models they were expected to draw on. At the core of the comparatively short statements written by five Guangzhou woodcut artists, including Li Hua, is a generic discussion of *l'art pour l'art* versus the use of art for social and political purposes that is very much in line with the discourse of the time on the goals and aspirations of proletarian art. Tang Yingwei (1915–2001) defends the life of art as growing out of the artist's social environment and subjective emotions and protests against the idea that the woodcut artists would occupy themselves with moral decay.<sup>50</sup> Lai Shaoqi describes the ivory tower problem of a subjective art contaminated by the spirit of the *fin-de-siècle* and its hysteria. He claims that building a pyramid in the desert is the most important thing and asks what else he as an artist would have to offer if the mob blew away every grain of sand.<sup>51</sup> His metaphor can be interpreted as referring to the destructive power of the masses who oppose and might eventually destroy cultural production of the highest quality and importance. Li Hua's contribution explicitly argues against a separation of society and art and stresses art's grand social responsibility,<sup>52</sup> concerns he had also voiced in the previous issue's text on Japanese prints. The comment by Hu Qizao reads like a defence of his print *Pink Dream* from 1935. The title *Pink Dream* (*Fenhongse de meng*) is borrowed from a silent film with the same name by Cai Chusheng (1906–1968) that was criticised for its over-use of hedonism and decadence despite the director's intentions to caution against such urban indulgences.<sup>53</sup> Hu Qizao argues that his image of a sleeping girl in front of a garden in which a nightly rendezvous takes place should act as a deterrent from the very moral decay that the picture depicts; the print's theme would urge the youngsters to wake from their (subjective) impulsiveness and develop a real (socio-political) self-consciousness.<sup>54</sup> The prefaces conclude with a contribution by Liu Xian (1915–1990) praising woodcut print as an ideal medium for an art for the people.<sup>55</sup>

The prefaces clearly illustrate the need for Chinese woodcutters to justify their use of Japanese- and Western-style aesthetics for local Chinese purposes. The artists' radical opposition to foreign *l'art pour l'art* concepts and their commitment to the social uses of art legitimise their choice of woodcut as a preferred medium that – as Li Hua explained – had already served the urban masses in pre-modern Japan. In China, the blending of elements of non-Chinese origin – European or Japanese – with indigenous styles was not motivated by aesthetic experimentation alone. It was

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<sup>50</sup> Tang Yingwei, 'Women de hua' [Preface], in *Xiandai Banhua* 10 (1935). Reprinted in Shanghai Lu Xun jinianguan, ed. *Banhua jicheng*, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Lai Shaoqi, 'Women de hua' [Preface], in *Xiandai Banhua* 10 (1935). Reprinted in Shanghai Lu Xun jinianguan, ed. *Banhua jicheng*, 183.

<sup>52</sup> Li Hua, 'Women de hua [Preface]', in *Xiandai Banhua* 10 (1935). Reprinted in Shanghai Lu Xun jinianguan, ed. *Banhua jicheng*, 183.

<sup>53</sup> Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 260.

<sup>54</sup> Hu Qizao, 'Women de hua [Preface]', in *Xiandai Banhua* 10 (1935). Reprinted in Shanghai Lu Xun jinianguan, ed. *Banhua jicheng*, 183.

<sup>55</sup> Liu Xian, 'Women de hua [Preface]', in *Xiandai Banhua* 10 (1935). Reprinted in Shanghai Lu Xun jinianguan, ed. *Banhua jicheng*, 183.

a particular political subtext that called for an adequate visual vocabulary developed on the basis of a stylistic eclecticism whose negotiation with different visual idioms became increasingly dominated by an effectiveness related to the print's socio-political contents.

### **Asian aesthetics, folk art, and modern print**

In January and February 1936, around the same time as the inclusion of Japanese works in *Modern Print* in the spring of 1935 and May 1936, the Japanese *Black and White Society's* magazine *Print Art* (*han geijutsu*) published Chinese prints. The publications were special issues of the journal dedicated to folk toys of southern and northern China and contained depictions of masks and dolls by Chinese artists.<sup>56</sup> According to Felicity Lufkin, the choice of folk motifs and aesthetics can be understood in this context as a 'common currency' in the avoidance of motifs and styles infused with political messages,<sup>57</sup> allowing international exchanges to take place despite government restrictions on leftist artists in both countries and an increase in Sino-Japanese hostility in the prelude to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war in 1937. While artists and intellectuals in China continued to look at Japan as a model for social protest under the umbrella of shared left-wing agendas, at government level Sino-Japanese tensions greatly intensified in 1935 as a result of the Japanese annexation of large parts of northeast China.

In addition to Sino-Japanese tensions, there were fierce discussions on the purpose of art and disagreements among different members of the movement. Correspondence between Lu Xun and Li Hua shows that the mentor of the Shanghai circle advised the leader of the Guangzhou group to favour black and white aesthetics over colour.<sup>58</sup> Within the Shanghai circle the programmatic premise of black and white aesthetics remained largely unchallenged<sup>59</sup> as black and white prints were used for anti-*Guomindang* resistance because they 'allowed a swift and cheap duplication, and the individual tear sheets could be easily handed out at meetings or rallies, or even scattered randomly in the streets from neighboring buildings.'<sup>60</sup> The Guangzhou artists, however, did experiment with colour. It is likely that they were inspired by lavishly coloured Japanese prints, but in terms of technique they followed the Chinese tradition of printed paper charms to which

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<sup>56</sup> Among those artists were Li Hua and Liu Lun (b. 1913), who traveled to Japan a couple of times in 1935 and established the contact between the Guangzhou circle and the *Black and White Society*, see Lufkin, 'Folk Art in Modern China', 168. The issues are *Han geijutsu* no. 45 and no. 46, 1936. Lufkin, *Folk Art and Modern Culture in Republican China*, 64, 68.

<sup>57</sup> Lufkin, 'Folk Art in Modern China', 169-70.

<sup>58</sup> Letter from Lu Xun to Li Hua, June 16, 1935, reprinted in *Lu Xun quanji*, 13: 150-3, quoted and discussed in Lufkin, 'Folk Art in Modern China', 189, and Francesca Dal Lago, 'Between High and Low', 116, 144.

<sup>59</sup> The preserved woodcuts in the five volumes of the Lu Xun Museum in Shanghai indicate that modern woodcut prints with colour were very low in number. The proportion of colour designs to black and white prints is approximately 1:17 within the five volumes that are organised in chronological order and start with an approximate proportion of 1:5 for volume one, which contains roughly 300 prints made around 1931.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Spence, 'China's Modern Worlds', in *A Century in Crisis*, 14.

colour is added manually, often transgressing the black and white outlines of the central motifs.<sup>61</sup>



Figure 1. Li Hua, *China, Roar!* (*Roar, China!*) 1936. Woodcut print, 20 x 15 cm. From *Modern Woodcut 14* (1936). CAFA Art Museum Beijing.

Apart from the use of colour, a 'special understanding that line could be a powerful and expressive element in the woodblock print'<sup>62</sup> is the main feature modern woodcut art derived from folk aesthetics and this distinguished Guangzhou works from those made in the Shanghai circles. The use of particularly powerful and expressive lines is obvious in Li Hua's print *Roar, China!* (*nu hou ba, Zhongguo!*) (fig. 1) first published in *Modern Print* in December 1935, which is one of the most reproduced Chinese woodcut images of the twentieth century. Referring to a Russian play, the exclamatory title is as powerful and evocative as the radical formal reduction of the image itself.<sup>63</sup> The motif is presented as if cut out and pasted on a plain background. Spatially isolated in a manner similar to a Chinese papercut, *Roar, China!* can be seen as merely ornamental at first sight. However, its aggressiveness transgresses the realm of the decorative and visually communicates strong emotions comparable to Käthe Kollwitz's depictions of the tortured and the suffering (that Lu Xun had recommended for reference).<sup>64</sup> Conceptualised as an icon rather than an image, Li Hua's design appropriates features of ubiquitous folk

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<sup>61</sup> Such as New Year prints that are 'ritual objects' rather than mere images. Lufkin, 'Folk Art in Modern China,' 146 ff. Dal Lago, 'Between High and Low,' 147.

<sup>62</sup> Lufkin, 'Folk Art in Modern China', 187, and Lufkin, *Folk Art and Modern in Republican China*, 65-7.

<sup>63</sup> Tang Xiaobing, 'Echoes, of *Roar, China!* On Vision and Voice in Modern Chinese Art', *positions: east asia cultures critique*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2006, 467-94.

<sup>64</sup> Lu Xun, 'Xie yu shen ye li. Kelehuizhi jiaoshou de banhua zhi ru Zhongguo' [Written in the depth of the night – The Woodcuts of Professor Kollwitz in China] (April 7, 1936) in *Lu Xun lun meishu*, ed. Zhang Wang, Dongbei: Dongbei shudian, 1958, 70-2.

prints that depict, symbolise, and embody auspicious deities.<sup>65</sup> These prints' highly stylised aesthetics are by no means documents of reality, but rather representations of the imperceptible 'evocations or embodiments of divine forces.'<sup>66</sup> They possess a ritual and iconic meaning. Despite its modern political message, *Roar, China!* refers visually to this tradition of evocative icons. Although it does not have the same supernatural properties, the image possesses the power of an exceptionally strong visual symbol and the unique force of a carefully conceptualised graphic metaphor. The image has been referred to as an allegory of national identity and understood as evoking the presence of a whole nation through the 'multiple human voices' it calls forth.<sup>67</sup>

In Japanese modern print, similar treatments of the line as a powerful and expressive element can be found in Japan's 'first creative print,' Yamamoto Kanae's *Fisherman*. In contrast to the very fine lines that permeate and constitute *ukiyo-e* aesthetics, the lines that constitute *Fisherman* vary from thick to thin and from massive crude lines to hatched, barely visible ones. While the print's motif could be interpreted as romanticising folk life,<sup>68</sup> its style does not relate to the idiom of any particular kind of rural print tradition and it has striking elements of European-style art.<sup>69</sup> Equally, Yamamoto's apparently awkward application of colour and the overall impression of the image's deliberately naive dilettantism that contrasts heavily with the printed perfection of *ukiyo-e* owe much more to Western high art than to Japanese folk aesthetics. Although Yamamoto's prints do not explicitly refer to folk art, his influential propagation of peasant works is an early example of modern artists' appreciation of Japanese folk-art aesthetics, which, during later decades, gained international attention through the work of the commercially successful print artist Munakata Shikō (1903–1975).

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<sup>65</sup> James Flath, *The Cult of Happiness*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004, 44-8.

<sup>66</sup> Lufkin, 'Folk Art in Modern China', 164.

<sup>67</sup> Tang, *The Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde*, 216.

<sup>68</sup> Many authors interpret the fisherman's outfit as a ceremonial or festival costume, but this is not necessarily the case. Before switching to Westernized clothes during the 1920s, Japanese fishermen wore the *donza*, a coat that was made in a special style and from materials that would keep them warm at sea. See Sharon Sadako Takeda and Luke Shepherd Roberts, *Japanese Fisherman's Coats from Awaji Island*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2002.

<sup>69</sup> Jack Hillier refers to Yamamoto's appropriation of 'an older Western style', see Jack Hillier, *The Art of the Japanese Book*, London: Philip Wilson for Sotheby's Publications, 1988, 1015. He means the impact of traditional European wood engraving in which Yamamoto was educated as a young man. Furthermore, the image's composition and its *horror vacui* refer to the pictorial spaces of European imagery rather than the flattened graphics of *ukiyo-e*, while the picture's frame as an integral part of the image was most likely taken from Western woodcut artists who usually framed their woodcut designs with a comparable – yet steadily carved – line of confinement. The visual language and the motifs of various other images by Yamamoto (e.g., *Breton Woman*, 1919) echo the work of late-twentieth-century woodcut artists such as Félix Vallotton (1865–1925).



Figure 2. Shikō Munakata, *Two Bodhisattvas and Ten Disciples of Sakamuni* (Left: Upali, Master of Vinaya, the Monastic Rules Right: Aniruddha, Master of Supernatural Vision), 1939. From a series of twelve woodcut prints, each 94.5 x 30.0 cm, on individual scrolls of 193.0 x 64.0 cm. Munakata Shikō Memorial Museum of Art, Aomori.

A comparison of Li Hua's *Roar, China!* and Munakata's designs from the series *Ten Disciples of the Buddha* (fig. 2) reveals a number of aesthetic parallels. Both images isolate linear designs on blank backgrounds. They are both constructed of a network of lines that are much more than outlines as they accumulate, diminish, and blend into areas, in a way that distinguishes Asian traditions of printing (and ink painting) from Western styles. Both *Roar, China!* and Munakata's designs evoke papercut aesthetics and their characteristic correlation of empty and filled ornamental spaces. A significant feature of Munakata's later work is his technique of applying colour from the reverse of a sheet of printed paper, which, arguably, partially subverts the optical dominance of the black outlines on one side of the paper by adding forms from the reverse in a similar way to the previously mentioned Guangzhou artists who manually overpainted printed motifs across clearly demarcated shapes defined by black outlines.

Francesca dal Lago proposes reading the Guangzhou artists' appropriation of folk art as an aesthetic experiment with a local other – an anti-academic gesture similar to Western experiments in primitivism. Crucial to this interpretation is the idea of the folk (respectively the idea of the primitive) as 'unburdened by the weight of culture and possessing a more immediate level of naturalness ... associated with spontaneity and directness.'<sup>70</sup> Spontaneity and directness are recurrent concepts that feature prominently in Munakata's writing on his own work, the writing of his

<sup>70</sup> Dal Lago, 'Between High and Low', 147-8.

mentor, the Japanese folk art (*mingei*) movement's leader Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961), and others.<sup>71</sup> Li Hua's image and other works made by members of the Guangzhou circle recall rubbings made in black ink on paper after portraits of Buddhist disciples attributed to the painter Guanxiu (832–912).<sup>72</sup> Munakata's bodhisattvas also evoke associations with traditional Buddhist imagery. It is clear that both artists drew inspiration from similar sources: Asian works in which brush lines define forms and create space, the ornamental logic of traditional papercuts, the pictorial vocabulary of ancient Buddhist rubbings, and the colour application methods, paper charms, and folk aesthetics associated with 'spontaneity' and 'directness'. What makes Munakata's and Li Hua's designs so different from both Western prints and Yamamoto's Europeanised *Fisherman* is their use of folk aesthetics to break with traditional ideas of printing and their rejection of foreign styles and conceptions of three-dimensionality and pictorial space. The visual language of both prints is 'modern' and 'Asian'.

But why is it that – despite Li Hua's demonstrable importance within the Chinese scene and the fact that his iconic print was published as early as 1935 – Munakata was instead the one who gained international fame for representing an Asian style? As a consequence of the American occupation following the 1939–45 war, the Japanese creative print attracted a foreign audience. Many pre-war prints that later became constituents of the *sōsaku hanga* canon were reprinted to meet the demand of American collectors.<sup>73</sup> This led to a re-evaluation of Japanese modern print artists who had sold so few prints before the war that they 'scarcely knew how to price them.'<sup>74</sup> Once a foreign market for *sōsaku hanga* was created, better working conditions and an international infrastructure, such as cross-cultural exhibitions, were accessible to artists such as Munakata. In the case of the Chinese modern print

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<sup>71</sup> Yanagi Sōetsu, 'The Responsibility of the Craftsman' and 'Mingei and the Life of Soetsu Yanagi', in *Mingei. Two Centuries of Japanese Folk Art*, eds. Japan Folk Crafts Museum and International Programs Department, Tokyo: Japan Folk Crafts Museum, 1995, also see Kim Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007. On the reception of Munakata's works by himself, Yanagi Sōetsu and European museum curators see Yanagi Sōetsu, 'Die Kunst Shikō Munakatas' and Viktor Griessmaier, 'Zu den Holzschnitten Shikō Munakatas', in *Shikō Munakata. Holzschnitte. Sonderausstellung*, exh. cat., Vienna: Verlag des Museums für Angewandte Kunst, 1960, 5-6 and 7-12; Eva Vorpapel-Redl, 'Shikō Munakata und Sosaku Hanga', in *Shikō Munakata 1903-1975. Japanische Wege in die Moderne. Japanischer Holzschnitt: Triennale 2004*, eds. Städtisches Kunstmuseum Spendhaus Reutlingen and Ralf Gottschlich (Reutlingen: Städtisches Kunstmuseum Spendhaus, 2004, 7-13.

<sup>72</sup> Lufkin, *Folk Art and Modern Culture in Republican China*, 67, 83.

<sup>73</sup> The foreign collectors' patronage was not restricted to re-prints, but also included exhibitions and publications on the subject. One of the most-cited authors on early *sōsaku hanga* print practice is the American Oliver Statler, who worked in Japan as a civilian employee for the occupying forces. His works include Oliver Statler, *Modern Japanese Prints: An Art Reborn*, exh. cat., Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo: Tuttle, 1956; Oliver Statler, *Japan's Modern Prints – Sōsaku Hanga*, Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1960. On the connoisseur and collector William Hartnett, who also worked for the occupation forces, see Merritt, *Modern Japanese Woodblock Prints*, 155.

<sup>74</sup> Merritt, *Modern Japanese Woodblock Prints*, 153.



there is no comparable process of commercialisation through Western reception, documentation, categorisation, and redefinition. In contrast, in China prints became a crucial constituent of debates on the mass popularisation of literature and culture (*dazhong wenyi*) and it was stressed that they should be accessible to everyone, not as precious collectors' items but to transmit socio-political messages. Moreover, after 1949, Li Hua and other artists in China were supported by the state rather than private patronage or commercial sales and, due to decreasing contact and exchange between the People's Republic of China and non-Communist countries, were cut off from the international art market. The market that exists for these materials today is a relatively recent phenomenon fuelled in parts by private collectors' nostalgia for a socialist past and the motivation of research institutes and university libraries to archive the visual culture of early twentieth-century China.

These two sets of very different preconditions help to explain why Munakata's 'Asian' aesthetics were celebrated by foreign audiences and later also rewarded within Japan,<sup>75</sup> while Li Hua's appropriation of folk art reached a huge Chinese audience<sup>76</sup> and became a national symbol but did not become a global icon of Asian style.

### **Translating Masereel: Japanese and Chinese image novels**

While Japanese prints such as those by Munakata were commercially successful after World War II and Li Hua's political woodcuts received nationwide acclaim, the pre-war work of left-wing printmakers in Japan such as Ono Tadashige (1909–1990) and Abe Jirō (1910–?) were neither widely collected nor well-preserved. In his early works, Ono took inspiration from the Belgian artist Frans Masereel (1889–1972) (who Lu Xun also successfully promoted to Chinese woodcutters during the 1930s). (Figs 3 & 4) To historians of art, Masereel is best known for his extensive production of black and white woodcuts. Considered to be the inventor of the genre *roman en images* (image novels) that anticipated today's graphic novels, it would be tempting to read Masereel's *romans en images* as comic-strip-like narratives in a literary sense. Yet books like *Vingt-cinq images de la passion d'un homme* (briefly *Passion d'un homme*) (1919), *Le soleil* (1919), *Histoire sans paroles* (1920), *L'idée* (1920), and especially *Mon livre d'heures* (1919) are all collections of loosely related graphic impressions connected by a single main character.<sup>77</sup> Conceptually, *Mon livre d'heures*

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<sup>75</sup> The public recognition of Munakata Shikō's oeuvre outside the *mingei* (folk art) movement started in 1952 when Munakata won the prestigious first prize at the Second International Print Exhibition in Lugano, Switzerland and was awarded prizes at the São Paulo Biennial and the Venice Biennale in 1955 and 1956. In 1970 he received the Order of Culture (*bunka kunshō*), the highest honour in the arts by the Japanese government since its establishment in 1937. For a comprehensive overview of his prizes see Ronin Gallery, ed. *Munakata and the Disciples of Buddha*, New York: Ronin Gallery, 2017, 46.

<sup>76</sup> For example, as part of the *Second National Traveling Woodcut Exhibition* in 1936.

<sup>77</sup> *Vingt-cinq images de la passion d'un homme* (briefly *Passion d'un homme*), 1919, is a series of 25 prints; *Le soleil* (The Sun), 1919, contains 63 woodcuts, *Histoire sans paroles* (Story without Words), 1920, 60 and *L'idée* (The Idea), 1920, consists of 83 images (not including the cover design). *Mon livre d'heures* (1919) is published as *Passionate Journey* in English and contains 165 images.



Figure 3. Frans Masereel, *Mein Stundenbuch*, Munich: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1928, unpaginated. © DACS 2023

Figure 4. Ono Tadashige, *Three generations of deaths: a novel without words*, 1931, woodcut on paper, 15.5 x 23.0 cm (book). Dr M J Morrissey Bequest Fund in memory of Professor A L Sadler, purchased 2007. University Art Collection, Chau Chak Wing Museums, The University of Sydney, UA2007.4.

resembles an imaginary photo album based on snapshots rather than a graphic novel or illustrated narrative. While each image features the protagonist, only a few pictures share other parts of the story. As a snapshot, every picture has a life of its own, this intrinsic value being expressed by highly creative graphic solutions to each print's subject. Points of view and relative scale change drastically, realistic compositions contrast with stylised scenes in unnatural dimensions, patterns are juxtaposed with figurative depictions, and flat ornaments merge into multi-dimensional pictorial spaces. Other recurrent stylistic devices include the use of symbols, exaggerated gestures, and self-referential elements such as depictions of the artist's *alter ego*. Themes such as death, Christianity, romantic love, prostitution, and the city recur throughout all Masereel's image novels.

Masereel's artistic project to stage contemporary city life through the experiences of the man-in-the-street reflects a left-wing ideology. His image stories feature milieu studies of urban social life that occasionally include proletarian perspectives, even when the main character is not a proletarian (as in *Passion d'un homme*), but a classless figure (as in *L'idée* and *Le Soleil*). A recurrent motif in his image novels is a confrontation between the main character and hatted men in suits that can be read as a reference to class struggle. As early as 1926, the German writer Thomas Mann (1875–1955) defended Masereel's oeuvre against a misconception of 'something like 'Masereel' as ... Bolshevism' praising humaneness as the image

novels' main feature.<sup>78</sup> Mann demonstrates that the protagonist of *Mon livre d'heures* cannot be seen as a revolutionary in the political sense as his encounter with socialism remains 'one episode among many others' depicted in only four out of 165 prints.<sup>79</sup> In addition, Masereel's image narratives can be interpreted as representing Christian symbolism and value systems. Mann's contemporary, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881–1942), refers to both religious and ideological aspects of *Passion d'un homme* by describing it as a 'bible of the proletariat' based on the book's widespread global circulation to the underprivileged.<sup>80</sup> In the second edition of *Passion d'un homme* – as a German *Volksausgabe* of 700–800 copies mechanically printed on rag paper and available for as little as 3.50 *Reichsmark* – Masereel's prints escaped the restricted distribution circles of artists' books and became available in newsagents and bookshops to the very people they depicted.<sup>81</sup> Since they did not include words and hence did not need translation, while being reproducible at low cost due to their black and white designs, the books were quickly published within and outside Europe.<sup>82</sup> Accordingly, Masereel's wordless books were not only easily accessible but also 'readable' at first sight from Brussels to Berlin and from Shanghai to Tokyo. Lacking terms in need of translation, Masereel's pictorial vocabulary appeared to be a visual *lingua franca*. But was it?

Ono Tadashige's *Three Generations of Deaths* of 1931 was the first modern woodcut image novel made in Asia.<sup>83</sup> Its subtitle *A Novel without Words* refers directly to Masereel's *Histoire sans paroles* of 1920.<sup>84</sup> Ono's image series features a proletarian protagonist in settings that include a coal mine and a prison or labour camp surrounded by symbols of poverty and death. Slightly deviating from Masereel's exclusive focus on one main character, Ono features two stories in one by including the life stories of the protagonist's parents. Accordingly, the title of the Japanese work claims to depict the fate of entire generations rather than the passion of a single man. Ono tells his story primarily through the main protagonist's exaggerated body language, but his use of theatrical gestures is purely narrative in effect without the employment of visual humour in the caricature-like images of Masereel. Despite being known for his post-war woodcut production and his

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas Mann, 'Einleitung', in Frans Masereel, *Mein Stundenbuch*, Munich: Kurt Wolff, 1928, 8.

<sup>79</sup> Mann, 'Einleitung', 27, 29.

<sup>80</sup> Stefan Zweig, 'Zum Werk Frans Masereels', in Frans Masereel, eds. Pierre Vorms et al, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1959, 7-22.

<sup>81</sup> See advertisement of the Kurt Wolff Verlag in Frans Masereel, *Die Passion eines Menschen*, Munich: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1924, appendix.

<sup>82</sup> *Mon Livre d'heures* reached the USA in an edition of 600 by 1922. See: <http://www.broward.org/library/bienes/lii03300.htm> (accessed June 19, 2008). In China *Passion d'un homme*, *Le soleil*, *Mon livre d'heures*, and *Histoire sans paroles* were published in 1933 by Liangyou Tuhua Gongsi, Shanghai.

<sup>83</sup> Ono Tadashige's *Three Generations of Deaths. A Novel without Words. A Study (Sandai No Shi. Ji no nai shōetsu shisaku)*, 1931, contains 51 black and white woodcut prints including the front cover of the book.

<sup>84</sup> Mizusawa Tsutomu, 'When the Workers' song stopped', in *Modern Boy Modern Girl*, eds. Ajioka Chiaki and Jackie Menzies, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998, 97.

writings on print,<sup>85</sup> during the 1930s Ono had been 'more deeply involved in theatre (stage design) ... than art.'<sup>86</sup> His use of exaggerated body language might therefore have initially been inspired by Masereel, but the eventual staging of certain scenes owes some of its dramatic quality to theatre itself. Masereel's image stories and *Three Generations of Deaths* share constant changes in perspective and the alternating sizes of pictorial elements. In contrast to Masereel's books, which never show close-ups of his protagonists' faces, Ono included detailed portraits. Bringing faces closer to the picture plane of the beholder, he thereby enhanced the viewer's sense of empathy with the emotional suffering entailed in proletarian life.

Ono's choice of black and white aesthetics is inspired by Masereel's conceptual radicalism, but in the Japanese works black is more than just a powerful graphic device. While Masereel applied the metaphorical quality of black in a small number of images, Ono developed a special print technique that turned the darkness that marks his protagonists' fates into an omnipresent visual feature of his prints. By applying white colour to black paper, he achieved an unusual interplay of deep-inked black alongside opaquely and permeably printed white areas.<sup>87</sup> As a result, darkness comes to possess an overall visual relevance, a metaphorical meaning and a symbolic connotation in visualising the 'dark' despair in the lives of *Three Generations of Deaths*. Ono also used black and white throughout the sixteen-page print series *Battle in the Streets: A Compilation of Woodcut Prints (Shigaisen. Hanga shū)*.<sup>88</sup> At least one other left-wing woodcutter, Abe Jirō (1910–?),<sup>89</sup> produced woodcuts in black and white, while drawings made in the service of proletarian art also featured the use of black as a metaphorical device.<sup>90</sup> Bernd-Uwe Karsten has argued that black and white were chosen due to the meagre working conditions that made it difficult to execute more sophisticated colour designs,<sup>91</sup> a suggestion supported by Ono's shift from black and white to colour print production under improved professional circumstances following World War II using a technique that built on the white printing on blackened paper but required additional materials

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<sup>85</sup> See Ono Tadashige, *Kindai Nihon no hanga* [Modern Japanese prints] Tokyo: Sansaisha, 1971; Ono Tadashige, *Hanga no miryoku* [The Fascination of Woodcut Art] Tokyo, 1971; Ono Tadashige, *Otsu-e* [On the genre of 'images from otsu'] Tokyo: Zōkeisha, 1974; Ono Tadashige, *Shiba Kokan* [On the woodcut artist Shiba Kokan (1747-1818)] Kyoto, 1977; Ono Tadashige, *Mokuhanga nyumon* [Woodcut Manual] Toyko: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1977.

<sup>86</sup> Omuka Toshiharu, 'The Non-Continuity', in *Modern Boy Modern Girl*, 140.

<sup>87</sup> For an in-depth explanation of Ono's innovative technique see Gaston Petit and Amadio Arboleda, *Evolving Techniques in Japanese Woodblock Prints*. Tokyo, New York and San Francisco: Kodansha International, 1977, 90.

<sup>88</sup> *Battle on the Streets* contains 16 black and white prints plus the front and back covers of the book that are printed in black and red.

<sup>89</sup> Abe Jirō exhibited woodcut prints from 1931–1932 in conjunction with the proletarian art movement and also used the names Muro Juniji and Saitō Jirō. Helen Merritt and Nanako Yamada, *Guide to Modern Japanese Woodblock Prints: 1900–1975*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992, 7.

<sup>90</sup> For example, the drawings of Matsuyama Fumio (1902–1982).

<sup>91</sup> Bernd-Uwe Karsten, 'Politische Tendenzen in der japanischen Malerei und Zeichnung der Jahre 1920 bis 1945. Dargestellt am Beispiel der proletarischen Künstlerbewegung Japans', PhD diss., University of Bonn, 1978, 58.

and labour.<sup>92</sup> Black and white aesthetics were therefore a conceptual choice, but also the result of poor and politically repressed working conditions.

Within the *Federation of Proletarian Art Movement* (*Zen Nippon Musankaikyū Geijutsu Renmei*) established in 1928, a year characterised as ‘perhaps the apex of the Japanese proletarian movement,’<sup>93</sup> woodcut artists were a minority compared to the larger groups of painters and caricaturists.<sup>94</sup> Although a few woodcuts were included in the first two *Great Exhibitions of Proletarian Visual Art*,<sup>95</sup> it was not until 1932 that the first society for left-wing printmakers was founded under the aegis of Ono.<sup>96</sup> In the same year, restrictions were imposed on the newly formed *Japan Proletarian Culture League* for the first time and Ono Tadashige’s *Three Generations of Deaths* was officially banned from exhibitions.<sup>97</sup> Despite this, Ono managed to organise exhibitions that included foreign black and white prints such as those by Käthe Kollwitz that Uchiyama brought to Japan after teaching the Shanghai workshop.<sup>98</sup> While there is a direct link between Lu Xun and Ono through the prints that Uchiyama received from Lu Xun and lent to Ono, the extent to which Ono’s work was familiar in Shanghai and accessible to people like Lu Xun remains unknown.

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<sup>92</sup> For a detailed description of the technique see Vorpägel-Redl, ‘Der Holzdruck in Japan heute: das Überleben der alten Traditionen des Holzdrucks und seine technischen Neuerungen seit 1900’, PhD diss., University of Vienna, 1993, 165.

<sup>93</sup> Faye Yuan Kleeman, *Under an Imperial Sun. Japanese Colonial Literature of Taiwan and the South*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003, 167.

<sup>94</sup> The painters constituted the early proletarian art movements such as the *Japan Proletarian Art Alliance* (*Nihon Puroretaria Geijutsu Renmei*) founded in 1926. The Association of Japanese Caricaturists (*Nihon Mangaka Renmei*) was founded as early as 1926. Its manifesto called for the autonomy of satiric art. The caricaturists had access to various publication forums, such as the tradition-steeped satire magazine *Tokio Puck*. Even though left-wing caricatures had some features in common with the proletarian woodcut prints (for example, their formal reduction and black and white aesthetics), they were aesthetically inspired by the linear drawings of George Grosz (1893–1959), not by Masereel’s flat and woodcut specific designs. See Karsten, ‘Politische Tendenzen’, 74, 81-2, 88, 110-26.

<sup>95</sup> Held in 1928 and 1930, see Emiko Kida and Brian Bergstrom, ‘Japanese–Korean Exchange within the Proletarian Visual Arts Movement’, in *positions: east asia cultures critique*, vol. 14, no.2 (Fall 2006), 495-525.

<sup>96</sup> This first society was the *New Print Group* (*Shin Hanga Shūdan*) with the affiliated woodcut magazine *New Prints* (*Shin Hanga*) published from June 1932 to December 1935. On the programme of the *New Print Group* see Omuka Toshiharu, ‘The Non-Continuity’, 142. The *New Print Group* was reformed due to official disapproval in 1937. Its name changed to *Sculptural/Plastic Print Association* (*Zōkei Hanga Kyōkai*), which implied a conceptual move away from a focus on proletarian art. Merritt, Yamada, *Guide to Modern Japanese Woodblock Prints*, 209.

<sup>97</sup> Mizusawa Tsutomu, ‘When the Workers’ Song Stopped’, 107.

<sup>98</sup> Uchiyama received these prints from Lu Xun and mentions that Ono borrowed them from him several times to put them on display. Uchiyama, ‘Der chinesische Holzschnitt und ich’, 13.



Figure 5. Wen Tao, *Her Awakening*, print 18, 1936, woodcut print. From Shanghai Lu Xun jinianguan, Jiangsu guji chubanshe, eds. *Banhua jicheng - Lu Xun cang Zhongguo xiandai muke quanji* [Woodblock Records – The Complete Collection of Lu Xun’s Modern Chinese Woodcut], Shanghai: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1991, 472.

In 1932, one year after the publication and banning of *Three Generations of Deaths* in Japan, Lu Xun published his decisive text *In Defense of ‘Illustrated Stories’*<sup>99</sup> that praises the serial prints of Frans Masereel as role models for a new mass-oriented Chinese art. In October 1933, Lu Xun published Masereel’s *Passion d’un homme*, *Le soleil*, *Mon livre d’heures*, and *Histoire sans paroles*.<sup>100</sup> Subsequently, the first Chinese image novels were created,<sup>101</sup> forming part of a genre called *lianhuan hua* (coherent or serial pictures) that existed before Lu Xun’s publication of Masereel’s works and can be linked to other traditional forerunners such as Chinese book illustrations and narrative New Year’s pictures in terms of their visuality and popularity.<sup>102</sup> (Fig. 5) Encouraged by Lu Xun, the Modern Print Movement tried to align itself with this popular art form, but the movement’s attempts at *lianhuan hua* did not reach the same kind of mass audience until the *lianhuan hua* industry was brought under state control and popularized under the Communist art and

<sup>99</sup> Lu Xun, ‘Lianhuan tuhua bianhu’ [In Defense of ‘Illustrated Stories’], *Nankong beidiao ji* (May 1932), reprinted in *Lu Xun lun meishu*, ed. Zhang Wang, 98-101.

<sup>100</sup> They were all published by Liangyou Tuhua Gongsi, Shanghai, in September 1933: *Passion d’un homme* as *Yi ge ren de shounan* (The Suffering of a Man), *Le soleil* as *Guangminde zhuiqiu* (In Search of Light/The Pursuit of Light), *Mon livre d’heures* as *Wode Chanhui* (My Confessions), and *Histoire sans paroles* under the literally translated title *Mei you zi de gushi*.

<sup>101</sup> Among them *The Death of the Fifth Uncle* (*Wu shu zhi si*), 1933, by Wen Tao (1907–1950), a series of 34 images, published in Shanghai Lu Xun jinianguan, ed. *Banhua jicheng - Lu Xun cang Zhongguo xiandai muke quanji*. See Tie Xiao, ‘Masereel, Li, and the development of the Woodcut Picture Book in China’, *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture* vol. 15, no. 2 (2013), <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2230&context=clcweb> (accessed April 14, 2020) Further early examples are Chen Tiegeng’s visualisation of a story by Ding Ling, *The Meshes of the Law*, autumn 1933, and Zhang Yefu, *Flood*, autumn 1933.

<sup>102</sup> John C. Hwang, ‘Lien Huan Hua: Revolutionary Serial Pictures’, in *Popular Media in China: Shaping New Cultural Patterns*, ed. Godwin C. Chu, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1978, 51-72.

propaganda apparatus from the 1950s onwards. In terms of content, the modern *lianhuan hua* of the mid-1930s shifted away from its apolitical predecessors and constituted a form of visual propaganda. This was the direct result of the politicisation of the format by Lu Xun and others who considered popular imagery and what they thought of as ‘simple forms’ – such as those found in picture books – most suitable for the dissemination of left-wing ideas.<sup>103</sup> Lu Xun defined *lianhuan hua* as producers’ art (*shengchang zhe de yishu*) that is made by and for the producers and stands in opposition to the consumers’ art of the elite (*xiaofei zhe de yishu*). In this way, the *lianhuan hua* debate provided a direct connection between the contents of the popularisation of the literature and culture movement (*dazhong wenyi*) and the formal language of urban and experimental woodcut artists. The publication of Masereel’s works by Lu Xun can be seen as a response to some of the more critical voices in this debate that expressed doubts about the value of the emerging medium of print.<sup>104</sup> In 1932, intellectual discussions lead to the Communist Party’s acceptance of serial prints as one important component of ‘proletarian mass culture’ (*puluo dazhong wenyi*),<sup>105</sup> a development in line with later and heavily politicized implementations of the genre under the post-1949 government but that was still somewhat problematized in the 1930s by the fact that left-wing artists struggled to understand why and how popular genres reached wider audiences and to create work on their own that effectively reached wider audiences.

Certain linguistic transfers that filtered through the prism of the politicised perception of *lianhuan hua* shaped the artistic reception of Masereel in China. Lu Xun’s translations of Masereel’s titles deviated considerably from their originals. *Le soleil (The Sun)* became *In Search of Light (Guangminde zhuiqiu)* and *Mon livre d’heures (My Book of Hours)* turned into *My Confessions (Wode Chanhui)*. To Lu Xun, Masereel’s titles might have seemed idiomatic and culture-bound, but his choice of turning a book of hours (*livre d’heures*) into a story titled *My Confessions* testifies to a rather creative style of translation. Similarly, his translation of *A Novel in Images* and *A Novel without Words (roman en images and roman sans paroles)* using the established Chinese term ‘picture strip/coherent images’ (*lianhuan tuhua*) and the expression ‘continuous images’ (*lianxu tuhua*) testifies to a certain amount of liberty. Most consequential, however, remains Lu Xun’s addition of short captions to each image that explained Masereel’s pictures, an act that translated images from the visual to the textual realm. Many of the *lianhuan hua* subsequently made by Chinese artists featured this kind of commentary, which absurdly undermines one of the main left-wing justifications for their creation – namely to address an ‘illiterate’ mass audience (despite this in itself being a misconception as many New Year pictures and serial picture books that had been popular before the 1930s included Chinese characters engaging in highly sophisticated forms of wordplay). The captions that Lu Xun added to Masereel’s wordless pictures undermined a differentiation between the prints as artworks and examples of a narrative kind of visual culture, a

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<sup>103</sup> Dal Lago, ‘Between High and Low’, 68.

<sup>104</sup> Tie Xiao, ‘From ‘His Suffering’ to ‘Her Awakening’: A Transnational / Translational Visual Encounter – Wen Tao’s Wood-Engraving Lianhuan Hua and Its Belgian Connection,’ 6-8. Source: <http://cas.uchicago.edu/workshops/apea/xiaotiepaper.pdf> (accessed Mai 17, 2008), 7.

<sup>105</sup> Tang, *The Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde*, 144-48.

transformation in line with his argument in *In Defense of 'Illustrated Stories'*<sup>106</sup> that art that tells a story (through words or otherwise) is no less valid or valuable than any other form of art. Yet, the insertion of explanatory texts and politicized language doubtlessly impacts the perception of Masereel as a creator of autonomous or subjective visual expression, moulding him into the role of a socially committed narrator in line with left-wing politics.

Both Japanese and Chinese artists appropriated Masereel's format of narrative serial prints in the service of socially committed art. They shared a preference for black and white, which they used towards different ends. Ono developed a special technique to make darkness work as a metaphorical element and took inspiration from stage design, while Chinese artists more closely relied on the Belgian artist's technique,<sup>107</sup> motifs,<sup>108</sup> and pictorial strategies.<sup>109</sup> Ono's serial prints took a marginal position in the political arena and the art world of pre-war Japan, whereas in China left-wing *lianhuan hua* were at first far less popular than the widely distributed commercial *lianhuan hua*, but were precursors of later trends in propaganda art until the government forced non-political forms of visual expression off the market in the 1950s. Ono and Masereel were the exclusive authors of their respective visual narratives, but *lianhuan hua* were often based on pre-existing stories (for example, by the writer Ding Ling) and provided with an introduction as well as other textual commentaries. While Masereel's novels contain neither text nor letters, the Asian image stories feature Chinese and Japanese characters on labels and demonstration posters and further contributed to the politicisation of the prints' visual language. Various prints by Belgian, Chinese, and Japanese woodcut artists characterised the city through visual tokens such as high-rise buildings, steel or iron cast architecture, and smoking factory chimneys. These elements are almost interchangeably similar in some of the prints. They did not seek to present culturally distinct features but instead form indices of the city as the stage of a putatively global industrial and architectural modernity.<sup>110</sup> As markers of modern

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<sup>106</sup> Lu Xun, 'Lianhuan tuhua bianhu'.

<sup>107</sup> For a discussion of the difference between the Chinese adoption of Masereel's flat designs as opposed to linear drawings in wood, see Lufkin, 'Folk Art in Modern China', 158.

<sup>108</sup> Heike Kotzenberg refers to the motif of the naked prostitute as introduced to Chinese print through Masereel's designs. Kotzenberg, 'Introduction', in *Der revolutionäre Holzschnitt Chinas*, 16.

<sup>109</sup> Susan Zantopp addresses Masereel's way of depicting sunbeams as copied by Chinese artists. Susan Zantopp, 'Der Holzschnitt als künstlerisches Medium einer west-östlichen Bewegung', in *Brücken und Brüche: Chinas Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Ursula Toyka-Fuong, Munich: Edition Global, 1998, 77-98.

<sup>110</sup> Discussing the concepts of modernity and global modernity would go beyond the focus of the present study, but it should be acknowledged in this context that in China and elsewhere historically and geographically constructed 'dichotomies like modernity and tradition, or the modernized West versus the pre-modern non-West have been instrumental in the establishment of modern knowledge, or technologies or institutions of knowledge'. Liu Kang, 'Aesthetics, Modernity and Alternative Modernity: The Case of China', in *Aesthetics and Marxism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, 14. Today, the model of multiple modernities allows for an understanding of the historic context through the spread of a specific cultural program that originates in Western Europe and is dominated by the



urban life, these pictorial elements formed part of the visual vocabulary of an international proletarian art. As indices of modernity, they had been introduced from the West like the visual material that inspired proletarian art in China and Japan. European elements were not only perceived as other to the East, but primarily as new and linked to Western modernity that was seen as the goal of universal history.<sup>111</sup> Thus, visual elements perceived as foreign and Western were at the same time symbols of the modern and the universal.

Shih Shu-mei uses the concept of an Asian Occidentalism to describe Chinese intellectuals' uses of the West for specific discursive purposes in the first decades of the twentieth century. She argues against judgemental evaluations of the practice and sees the possibility of misreading Western material as an inevitable but conscious part of the 'processes of negotiation and appropriation that accompany the traveling and translation of ideas.'<sup>112</sup> In the words of Chen Xiaomei, 'Chinese Occidentalists were constantly 'revising and manipulating' Western theories and discourses with the power of selection and incorporation thoroughly on their side. They imagined the questions, looked for the answers from Western culture, and came up with 'misreadings' as a 'sociological', not 'epistemological,' conception, and one which does not assume the preexistence of an epistemologically grounded 'proper' and 'correct' understanding.'<sup>113</sup> This separation between a sociological and an epistemological reading is also useful for the understanding of transfer processes in visual culture. If one applies a structural separation between a sociological and an art historical reading of *lianhuan hua*, it becomes possible to see the appropriation of Masereel's visual language as the conscious exploitation of selected aspects of his work rather than an act of misreading. The conceptual framework of artistic appropriation in China had, however, been formed by one of the leading Occidentalists, the non-artist Lu Xun. It is through a politicised filter of perception and translation that Masereel's concepts and pictorial strategies were appropriated by Chinese artists. Thus, the concept of individual artistic expression as it was propagated by European expressionism (and therein articulated in a variety of techniques and styles) was relegated to the sidelines in China and stifled in favour of the popularising characteristics of a new art for the people.

In Japan and China, compositions that appropriated Masereel's style, technique, and/or motifs were perceived as Westernised by the average beholder, who may well have noticed the otherness of their aesthetics but would not necessarily have recognised any direct and/or indirect references to Masereel's oeuvre. Negotiating and subverting traditional pictorial conventions, the unconventional images used the tool of aesthetic provocation for political goals. Their graphic design and intention was not only new and modern, but also directly

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dichotomies of centre *versus* periphery on a global scale as well as on a national level. See Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ed. *Multiple Modernities*, New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1981.

<sup>111</sup> Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 134.

<sup>112</sup> Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 132.

<sup>113</sup> Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 133, citing from Chen Xiaomei, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 85-97.

linked to the 'Western universal.'<sup>114</sup> Appropriating Masereel in Japan and China meant the application of a specific visual vocabulary with European roots to create proletarian art that was as international as the proletariat that it addressed. However, as the histories of Japanese and Chinese modern print are usually narrated through disparate stories, the shared aim of early twentieth-century artists to create proletarian art across borders has faded into oblivion.

### Conclusion

Studies in literature and linguistics have explored Japan's role in twentieth-century transfer processes between Europe and China.<sup>115</sup> Recent research has also integrated this transcultural approach in relation to turn-of-the-century developments in Chinese art and culture, for example, the making of Chinese art history and other 'inventions of Shanghai.'<sup>116</sup> In the history of Sino-Japanese relations, woodcut practices provide another useful case study for understanding the processes and results of transcultural transmission in artistic creation and cultural production. In the history of the modern woodcut, common points of departure, such as a shared interest in European expressionism, Asian folk aesthetics, and international left-wing aesthetics, were outweighed by later developments in Chinese art. Conceptual parallels remained but were increasingly hidden as a result of the politicisation of China's art scene.

As Nicolas Nercam has shown, Japanese conceptualizations of pan-Asian aesthetics and early twentieth-century Chinese woodcut prints also played an important role in the larger project of left-wing art practice outside East Asia and informed socially engaged art in post-colonial Bengal.<sup>117</sup> While Indian intellectuals were introduced to Japanese and Chinese aesthetics through three separate channels during the first half of the twentieth century, this article has revealed the inherently transcultural nature of the woodcuts made in China that had themselves been informed by Japanese practices before inspiring artists in Bengal and elsewhere. Insights of this kind oblige a rewriting of not only national stories of art, but also art history as such, to incorporate the subtleties of intra-Asian networks of exchange

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<sup>114</sup> A term used in Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 131.

<sup>115</sup> See for example, Liu, *Translingual Practice*, Christopher Keaveney, *The Subversive Self in Modern Chinese Literature: The Creation Society's Reinvention of the Japanese Shishōsetsu*, Basington: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

<sup>116</sup> Most recently the contributions to Fogel, ed. *The Role of Japan in Modern Chinese Art*. Notable earlier contributions to the field include Aida Yuen Wong, 'Inventing Eastern Art in Japan and China', PhD diss., Columbia University, 1999, and subsequently Aida Yuen Wong, *Parting the Mists: Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2006. In addition, a number of dissertations are worth mentioning in this context: Yue Meng, 'The Invention of Shanghai: Cultural Passages and Their Transformation 1860–1920', PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2000, 206–16, 382–96, 509, Guo, 'Writing Chinese Art History in Republican China' and Yu-jen Liu, 'Publishing Chinese art: issues of cultural reproduction in China, 1905–1918', PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2010.

<sup>117</sup> Nicolas Nercam, 'The Gentleman, the Craftsman and the Activist: Three Figures of the Sino-Indian Artistic Exchange in Colonial Bengal', *Artl@s Bulletin* vol. 5, no. 2 (2016), <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol5/iss2/3/> (accessed 14 April, 2020).

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relations in modern woodcut print culture

that served the first truly global project of international artistic collaboration, the worldwide creation of proletarian art.

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