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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BLACK AND WHITE RELIEF PRINTMAKING AND VOICE OF THE ACTIVISTS IN THE FAR EAST

*Nianjan Das

Development of pictorial woodblock printing in China and Japan

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*Corresponding author: Nianjan Das

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses the black and white relief printmaking as a tool for social justice and voice of masses in the context of the Far-East. Black and white relief Printmaking, being the most democratic of art-making processes, and its easy reproductive quality have been used by artists and printmakers globally as a voice against social violations. This research aims to explore how artists and printmakers employed the medium to register social issues in the context of Far-East.

INTRODUCTION

Development of pictorial woodblock printing in China and Japan

In ancient Chinese philosophy, Yin and Yang signify the primordial balance between positive and negative in black and white. Positive and negative space vis a vis black and white are also fundamentals in printing. Woodblock printing was first invented in China. The earliest single-sheet woodblock prints, consisting of both texts and images, were discovered from the *Cave of Thousand Buddhas*. Historians and archaeologists confirmed it was constructed during the Tang Dynasty, dating back to 168-908 AD. These single-sheet woodblock prints are rudimentary black and white reproductions of paintings, produced to be presented as votive offerings to shrines. Pictorial elements in these prints are delineated only in black linear outline; no attempt at shading was made. Preparing printing ink from lampblack in the Sung dynasty (960-1279 AD) was another important invention in printing technology. The ink was prepared by placing an iron dome or funnel over a well-lit wick; further, it was mixed with a solution of water-soluble gum. Chinese ink was water-based, excellent for printing from woodblocks, yet incapable of printing from metal surfaces. Unlike Japan, pictorial

magnificent pictorial representation in *Ukiyo-e*, an indigenous school of relief printmaking that emerged between the 17th and 19th centuries. *Ukiyo-e*, acknowledged for its outstanding pictorial representation in colour, means "pictures of the floating world". Mythical creatures, heroes from Japanese legends, illustrations of flora and fauna, daily life activities, erotic compositions, and other popular imagery are often represented in these fine 17th century book illustrations. Up until the mid-17th century, the illustrations are seen in black and white. Hishikawa Moronobu (1618-1694), the predecessor of the *ukiyo-e* tradition, published hundreds of book illustrations in black and white. Adapting his skills in traditional calligraphy, Moronobu applied the technique to express human emotions through the use of lines. His prints often contain decorative elements from the textile designs that he absorbed as a part of his family tradition. Another illustrator, Okumura Ma-Sanobu (1686-1764), the disciple of Moronobu, had a significant contribution to the development of printmaking in Japan. He redefined the format of book illustrations, summarising texts to enhance the visual impact of printed pictures. Following in his master's footsteps, he published several *Yehon* or picture albums in the same genre as Moronobu. The emergence of *Yehon* eventually replaced illustrated texts with single-sheet printed pictures. '*Yehon Oshukubai*' was published in 1740 in Osaka by another influential illustrator, Tachibana Morikuni (1679-1748) of the Edo period.



Woodblock print from the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas,
Tang Dynasty, China, C.950 AD



Hishikawa Moronobu, *Two Lovers*, Woodblock print on
paper, 1664, 22.9 x 33.7 cms

The book contains some charming black and white prints of birds and Japanese heroes, engraved in linear lines often accompanying flat silhouettes. With the advent of printed pictures, the demand for *Yehon* among the merchant classes of Osaka and Edo grew considerably in the final quarter of the 17th century. As a result, a paradigm shift from books to single-sheet woodcut prints occurred. Single-sheet compositions were printed in black outlines. To make them more enticing, the blank space came to be filled in with hand-tinting. Colour printing was invented soon after.

Foreign influences and the advent of the avant-garde in the Far East: In the first quarter of the 20th century, the tradition of *Moku-hanga* came under threat as Western ideology took hold, leading to the adoption of an 'original print' aesthetic. Prior to the 20th century, the *Moku-hanga* was produced following the assembly line method or *hanmoto* system. But after being exposed to Western influences, Japanese artists developed a concern for self-assertion. Departing from the *hanmoto* system, artist Kanae Yamamoto (1882-1946) individually executed a small print in black and white, titled 'Fisherman'. As a result, 'self-drawn, self-carved, self-printed' became the ideology of the '*Sōsaku-hanga*' or creative print movement.



Kanae Yamamoto, *Fisherman*, Woodcut, 1904

In the first half of the 20th century, the Chinese government was ambushed - internally due to the Communist revolt, and externally by the Japanese army. In this time of crisis, Chinese Communist Party member, Lu Xun, invited Japanese artist Uchiyama Kakechi in 1931, to demonstrate Western relief printmaking techniques to Chinese artists. Lu Xun wanted to introduce relief printmaking as a non-violent weapon against the Government as it was inexpensive and immediately reproducible. Soon, Chinese progressive artists adopted the Western aesthetic of the 'original print' in woodcut. They began to produce woodcut-printed flyers and posters to arouse revolutionary fervour amongst the illiterate Chinese people. The Chinese avant-garde artists employed simplified, consolidated outline and expressive gouging, rejecting the conventional Chinese linearity to scathingly criticise the ethics and moral values of ancient China. Li Hua, Jiang Feng, Zheng Yefu, and Hu Yichuan are prominent artists involved in this movement. During the movement, several woodcut groups were formed, such as the MK Research Society, Woodcut Research Society, etc. Lu Xun's initiative has inspired many artists from other Far Eastern countries. Huang Rong-can (1920-1952) was a Taiwanese relief printmaker well known for his monochrome woodcut print '*The Horrifying Inspection*.' Inspired by the New Woodcut Movement in China, Huang



Li Hua, *Celebrate the Surrender of Japan and the Victory of China*, Woodcut on paper, 1946, 20 X 27 cms

Rong-can responded to the terrible genocide committed by the governor Chen Yi on February 28, 1947 in Taiwan, also marked in history as '228 incident'. In *The Horrifying Inspection*, the artist attempts to capture a fragment of the '228 incident', portraying the army's brutal killings of innocent civilians in a black and white woodcut. As a means to depict the forcefulness of the moment, Huang rendered the civilians thrust against speedily ripped horizontal lines, enlivening their petrified reaction to the incident. The shadows and highlights are contrasted in wonderful silhouettes against white spaces.



Huang Rong-can, *The Horrifying Inspection*, Woodcut, 1947

The woodcut movement in Singapore gained momentum in the aftermath of World War II. The socio-economic crisis, nationalist fervour, natural calamities, and the struggle to overcome adversity were depicted in Singapore's post-war woodcuts.

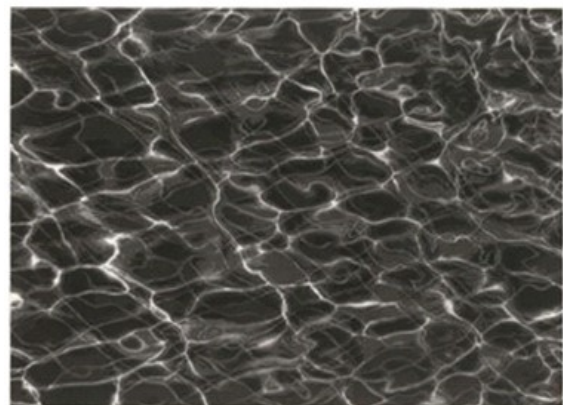


Liu Kang, Woodcut, 1960s



Choo Keng Kwang, *Insident 519*, Woodcut, 1954

Liu Kang, for example, delineates people in dynamic action, unblocking a path, while artist Choo Keng Kwang attempts to capture a political scuffle between students and police in a black and white woodcut. With the advent of the New Woodcut Movement in Japan and China, the art of relief printmaking, or more accurately, the art of black and white relief printmaking, was reborn in the Far East. Perhaps the rationale for black and white execution was that it was relatively inexpensive, immediately reproducible, and, above all, was its stark simplicity in conveying the day to day travails of the common people. Contemporary Chinese printmaker Chen Qi re-contextualised this socialist philosophy in the light of more recent global crises such as the politics of ecology. "Chen is not simply restating those visualisations. Rather, he articulates a nuanced reference to the socialist period with cognisance of how it is understood today."^[1] To justify his concern for ecology, Chen eliminated the oil-based Western method of printing, in favour of the Chinese traditional water-based ink or non-toxic approach. On the other hand, he questioned the value of mass-producing relief prints in this digital age, preferring instead to create unique-edition relief prints.



Chen Qi, *The Water*, Water-based woodcut print, 2014



Zhang Huan, 'Tui bei Tu', Woodcut, 2006



Xu Bing, *Ghost Pounding the Wall* ink rubbing on paper with stones and soil, 1990-91

His recent large scale monochrome and black and white relief prints represent his continuous association to the waterbody and Arabic geometry.

[1] Liu Mengyao, *Experiments in the Anthropocene: Towards a Transformative Eco-Aesthetic in the Work of Four Contemporary Chinese Visual Artist*, University of Washington.

Artist Xu Bing, is a multidisciplinary artist with a special interest in printmaking. One of his famous projects, titled "*Ghost Pounding the Wall*", is a series of rubbings taken from a section of the Great Wall of China on large scale paper. The method is associated with the old Chinese practice of obtaining an ink imprint from an engraved stone. The title of the work alludes to a widespread Han-era belief that those who perished during the construction of the Great Wall were buried within it. Shanghai-based artist Zhang Huan's woodblock prints are very experimental. He purposefully left white gaps throughout the ink rolling or inked unevenly, resulting in a white-on-white embossing and uneven gray tones. He also paid great attention to the surface texture, employing the tactile quality to full effect.

The legacy of relief printing invented in the Far East, has come a long way, through many technical and aesthetical transformations. Oriental and western ideologies share their courses parallel in the history of relief printmaking in the Far East, yet remain consistent in enlightening society; *Sōsaku-hanga* or the New Woodcut Movement, portrays the brutal reality and crisis of the proletariat, while *Ukiyo-e* promulgates the euphoria of the floating world in the masses to relieve them from the terrestrial toils.

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