DID LU XUN DISCOVER HIS VISION FOR MODERN WOODCUT IN JAPAN?

AN INVESTIGATIVE COMPARISON BETWEEN THE LU XUN-LED MODERN WOODCUT MOVEMENT IN THE 1930’S AND THE SOSAKU HANGA MOVEMENT OF EARLY 20TH-CENTURY JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to seek out the degree to which Lu Xun’s 1930s Modern Woodcut Movement was influenced by earlier stylistically and ideologically similar Japanese movements. In the process I will use images from both movements and excerpts from Lu Xun’s writings to show that his movement can be considered a critical reaction against the generally unpolitical message and nature of the Japanese woodcut movements.

KEYWORDS: Lu Xun, Modern Woodcut Movement, Sasaku Hanga Movement, 1930's.

INTRODUCTION

The Modern Woodcut Movement, as Andrews & Shen (1998) call it, was a movement in the 1930s led by famous writer Lu Xun 魯迅. This woodcut movement strived towards a “creative” kind of woodcut, which would
transform the craft that was normally associated with the division of labour and mass production into an individual piece of art, in which the artist would be responsible for all parts of the production process. As a distinctive hybrid art, Andrews & Shen (1998: 213) claim that these modern *banhua* (版畫 woodcut print) should be seen in the context of international art, particularly since these artists considered the woodcut movement Western and modern. They also mention the possible influence of the Japanese woodblock print tradition and its connection to the modern woodcut movements in Japan.

Although Andrews & Chen do not expand very much on said Japanese influence, one only needs to open a *Sosaku Hanga* (創作版画 ‘creative woodcut prints’) collection (or look at the images in the appendix) to understand that despite some artistic differences, there is likely a relation between the two movements. The *Sosaku Hanga* (hereinafter referred to as SSH) movement emerged from artists’ desires for individuality in the early 1910s and saw woodcut as the medium for expressing their creativity and individuality. This was roughly 20 years before Lu Xun’s Modern Woodcut Movement (hereinafter referred to as MWC) would take off and considering Lu Xun’s tight involvement with the arts during his stay in Japan it is, like Andrews and Shen suggest, not strange to suppose that Lu Xun might have been & or triggered by this movement.

What this paper then aims to do is to expand where Andrews & Shen did not and try to elaborate upon the notion of a link between these woodcut movements in Japan and China. I will first do this by analytically comparing a set of these images from both sides using both the images itself and basic ideas and convictions of the artists involved. After this I will deal with primary sources such as Lu Xun’s writings and other secondary scholarship to establish the nature and scale of this connection.

**Comparison between images and basic ideas of both movements**

Before we commence with the comparison, it is necessary to emphasise that the focal point in the comparison is the MWC movement. Since the SSH movement was a very broad movement consisting of many substyles and spanning multiple decades, I have systematically picked works that are stylistically similar to those of the MWC movement to allow for a more smooth comparison.

As mentioned in the introduction, the stylistic similarities between
the early 20th-century woodcut movements in Japan and the later 1930s movement led by Lu Xun are apparent. Visually, this is especially noticeable due to a preference for monochromaticity. As the majority of the images provided in the appendix highlight, black and white are often chosen over colour and when colour is employed, the artists seem to prefer darker shades and somewhat muddy colours. It is not that these artists were incapable of producing bright and vivid colours, which on the contrary were a primary feature of Japanese Edo period woodcuts, but it is rather that artists consciously chose this palette in order to suit their creative purposes.

However, these movements expressed their similarities in palettes in different shapes. For example, in his pivotal piece *The Fisherman*, Yamamoto Kanae 山本健藏 used a lot of cuts to create a realistic watercolour-like quality, despite the work not employing any colours. The use of shading on the coat is also remarkable. In the majority of the works that fall under the 1930s MWC movement, this is quite different. In *Blue Memory and Brooding*, Tang Yingwei 唐英偉 and Li Hua 李桦 use uneven shapes and less defined contours to give the works a more absurd, less realistic atmosphere and strokes of black were added to accentuate rough details, for example in *China Roar!*, where the artist would cut around the places where he wanted to create a basic and rough muscle tone or in *Brooding* to give basic, yet intentionally uneven accents to the clothing.

Another striking difference is that the subject matter between the two sets of images differs widely. The majority of the MWC images focus on obviously political issues, such as the corrupt Nationalist government in *The Dictator* or China’s plight in the international world in *China Roar!*, where the former was even sent to exhibitions in Russia and France by Lu Xun in 1933, possibly also to create extra political awareness abroad (Andrews & Shen 1998: 217). The Japanese prints on the other hand are generally portraits, such as in the case of *The Fisherman*, or landscapes like the *Osaka during Wintertime* print. Even when a potentially sensitive subject is depicted, such as the great Kanto Earthquake in *Scenery of the Earthquake at Chanomizu*, the destruction and death that are caused by the earthquake are left out of the image and instead the viewer is left with a silent and in a way tranquil image that in a sort of surreal fashion avoids the actual human tragedy of the earthquake. This strong discrepancy in subject matter will be further expanded upon in the second section of this paper.

A similarity that shows the strong connection between these movements and the literary world is the frequent usage of their work as
covers for literature and magazines. In the MWC movement, the connection to literature is quite obvious, considering the fact that their patron Lu Xun was a major literary figure, but in the case of the SSH movement there was just as much of a connection. Natsumi Soseki 夏目漱石 for example, often dubbed Japan’s greatest modern writer, was also heavily interested in art and woodcuts and often wrote critical assessments of art as a whole, not just the field of literature. From the covers of the magazines and the book covers listed in the appendix of this paper it becomes clear that they these movements probably shared the practice of using woodcuts for the covers of modern literature, something Lu Xun might have picked up during his extensive contact with literature while in Japan.

This connection to literature also brings us to the very similar ideas and principles underlying both movements. The aforementioned Natsumi Soseki and many other artists from different fields and disciplines rallied together in the 1910s to promote the individuality and control of the artist over his piece of art, the idea of art as an individual expression. These ideas found their way to Japan through the West and were explained in (and on) their own terms in Japan, where many of the artists would devote serious space and attention to formulating these ideas in magazines. The consequences for woodcut were significant and this is where the SSH movement comes into play. Woodcut artists were making the shift from being mere cogs in the artistic machinery, to an artist who would control every single aspect of the production of his work of art, whereas in the past many aspects, such as the cutting process itself, were left to specialized craftsmen. It is in this aspect that the SSH movement would find its identity; sosaku 創作 means creation and it signified the complete control of the artists over their original creation. Since woodcut in the past was almost primarily meant for commercial distribution, the works of artists such as Hokusai 北斎 were never produced for a single person, but were almost always meant to be mass-produced and distributed. This purpose was also revamped by the SSH artists who renounced the original commercial nature of woodcut. It would be purely l’art pour l’art. These principles, embedded in the three practices of doing the drawing by oneself (jiga 自画), the cutting by oneself (jikoku 自刻), and and printing by oneself (jishu 自刷) were expressly articulated through art magazines and became very much like guidelines to artists aspiring to become woodcut artists (Sekiguchi 2006: 92). These principles were also propagated by Lu Xun in the 1930s in his efforts to transform woodcut in China. Even though one can argue that Lu Xun could just as easily have absorbed these ideas
through Western channels, his constant exchanges with intellectuals during his long stay in Japan, the connection of the art scenes to literary scenes and the well-known fact that Lu Xun read Western works in Japanese translation make it quite likely that Lu Xun picked up his ideas on the individuality of art through Japanese channels as well. It is the likelihood and most of all the nature of this connection to the SSH movement which I will examine in the following section of this paper.

**The nature of the Lu Xun’s connection to Japanese woodcut movements**

As the comparison in the previous section suggests, it is highly probable that Lu Xun was in some way triggered by Japanese woodcut movements. Statistics on Lu Xun’s woodcut collection suggest the same, since the majority of his collection consisted of Japanese works, namely 1047 pieces, compared to 198 and 164 for respectively Russia and Germany, where woodcut movements were also popular (Sekiguchi 2006: 91). Although the predominance of Japanese works may be due to the fact that Lu Xun had much easier access to Japanese prints than prints from other countries, these numbers still prove that Lu Xun was very interested in the study and collection of Japanese prints.

Lu Xun’s writings on Japanese woodcut have a rather negative tone. Lu Xun seems to condemn Japanese artists for downplaying the social function of their work too much. Around 1934, he wrote in his correspondence with MWC movement artist Liu Xian 劉巋: “Their character is that all of them try very hard to distance themselves from society and enter the mind-state of some kind of recluse, which means we should not learn from the content of their works and that we can only employ their considerable technique” (Sekiguchi 2006: 92; trans. by author). He also wrote that “Japanese woodcut artists are too detached and their artistic schools are also different from ours” (Li 1994: 62; trans. by author). The explanation that Li (1994: 62) gives for Lu Xun's attitude towards Japanese woodcut is that he believes that Japanese prints did not satisfy the needs and purposes of the national situation of China and the young woodcut artists in China, and that they did not coincide with Lu Xun’s propagation of woodcut as a vehicle for revolution. It is likely that the political situation of KMT oppression and Japanese encroachment and eventual invasion have strengthened this desire for art with a political message among Chinese artists in the 1920s and 1930s, as Andrews & Chen (1998: 213) also suggest. Furthermore, Yang (1995: 60) points out
that although Lu Xun possessed a great amount of Japanese woodprints, he never compiled and published any of them in China, nor would he regularly recommend or inscribe them to others, the main exception being the works of Taninaka Yasunori 田中安規. In any case, here it becomes obvious that what Lu Xun wants from art is mostly absent in the Japanese works he has viewed.

I would say that this is reflected in the different works that I compared in the previous section. For example, the rough contours in the works from the MCW movement are a departure from the somewhat more realistic style that was frequently used by Japanese artists, who were quite often influenced by the Japanese artistic trend of *shasei* 写生, which literally means ‘sketch’ and was a style which aimed to reproduce reality in a faithful way. Even the work of artists who had a strong influence on Lu Xun like Taninaka Yasunori, who is from a later generation than most of the Japanese artists dealt with in this paper, is generally not associated with social or political messages either and instead derives more from the dream-world and the subconscious. One could argue that Lu Xun largely adhered to the artistic motivations of the SSH movement, such as individual expression and individual labour that should lay at the basis of every work of art, but that he found their works lacking in social function and that the departures, from some of the stylistic elements of the Japanese movements were considered necessary by Lu Xun in order to facilitate the transformation of woodcut into a vehicle for social criticism and awareness, something which Sekiguchi (2006: 92) also suggests. In that sense, we can interpret Lu Xun’s harsh criticism of Japanese woodcut, while at the same time adhering to some of their fundamental principles as a reaction to close study and collecting of Japanese works.

The remaining, pivotal question when accepting this explanation is to what degree Lu Xun as a patron of the MWC movement was a defining factor in the artistic outlook of the artists that actually produced these works. To assume his influence as paramount would effectively mean denying the artistic freedom of these artists. These artists naturally had their own creative thoughts and, depending on the individual, also had different perceptions and judgement about Japanese and other woodcut artists. Li Hua, for example, is known to have embraced exchange with Japanese artists and, unsurprisingly, had spent time studying in Japan (Sekiguchi 2006: 92). Moreover, there have most likely been many other artists in the 1930s producing all kinds of woodblocks whose works simply have been lost since they did not have the Lu Xun and/or CCP seal of approval, which would have kept them relevant.
and properly stored. In that sense, one could see Lu Xun as a figure who did indeed stand above the individual artists, since what survived the ravages of time are works that in some way were approved and supported by Lu Xun. Also, the influence of German and Russian prints, which Lu Xun seriously collected and held in high regard due to their social messages, is something which is most likely also related to Lu Xun’s evaluation of Japanese prints. Therefore, a much more extensive study that is beyond the scope of this article is necessary to fully bring the nature of all these connections to light.

**Conclusion**

In short, because of his long stay in Japan, extensive collection of Japanese prints, engagement with Japanese art through Uchiyama in Shanghai, as well as his writings on his 1930’s contemporary Taninaka Yasunori, it seems obvious that Lu Xun was in fact very up to date with Japanese woodcuts. This is evident in his adaptation of the artistic values promulgated by the SSH movement. However, despite his enormous collection of Japanese prints, Lu Xun condemned Japanese artists for distancing themselves from society and for not engaging with social and political issues. The fact that he barely introduced and recommended others prints from his collection underlines his critical stance towards these prints. However, what becomes clear from most of the images I have presented throughout this paper, is that Lu Xun studied a large collection of Japanese prints and that despite partly acknowledging their technical and artistic methods, such as monochromaticity and the artist’s total control over the creative and production process, he came to the conclusion that he, like the Russian and German prints of which he possessed less, should have his movement move towards the addressing of social and political issues, which indeed the majority of artists of his movements did. The Japanese influence on Lu Xun can therefore be characterized as a critical reaction to artistic works that he vigorously collected. The exact nature of the connection between Japanese prints and the MWC movement is still hard to pinpoint. Lost prints, divergence among artists, difficulty of complete understanding and access to Lu Xun’s thought process, the sheer amount of Japanese prints, and other issues require a much larger study than this paper to draw a complete image of this process. In that context, I would like to view this article as a preliminary attempt to understand the scope and nature of this connection, an attempt which so far seems to have only been made in Japanese and Chinese scholarship.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX: IMAGES USED IN ARTICLE

A Blue Memory, 1935
By Tang Yingwei
After Century of Crisis

The Fisherman, 1904
By Yamamoto Kanae
After Sōsaku Hanga no tanjō
Brooding, 1935
By Li Hua
After *Century of Crisis*

Roar, China!, 1935
By Li Hua
Coll. Lu Xun Memorial Hall

China’s Dictator, 1933
By Zhang Wang
After *Century of Crisis*

To the Front!, 1932
By Hu Yichuan
After Li Hua *Chinese Woodcuts*
Osaka scenery at Sumiyoshi, 1918
By Oda Kazuma
After Kindai hanga no akebono

Scenery of the earthquake in Chanomizu, 1925
By Hiratsuka Unichi
After Kindai hanga no akebono

Cover of Xin de Tansuo
By Lu Xun
From The Huntington Collection Archives

Cover for 33 issue of Asakusa Bunko, 1914
By Kubota Shizuo
After Sōsaku Hanga no tanjō
Street Sweepers, 1935
By Li Hua
After Century in Crisis

Poster for the second publication of “Tsukuhae”, 1914
By Onchi Koshiro
After Sōsaku Hanga no tanjō