Two Images of Socialism: Woodcuts in Chinese Communist Politics

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The scene was Chongqing, China’s wartime capital; and the time was 1942, the fifth year of the Sino–Japanese War (1937–45, known in China as the War of Resistance against Japan). An anti-Japanese woodcut exhibition was held at the Sino–Soviet Cultural Association (Zhong-Su wenhua xiehui) from October 10 to 17 to rally people’s support for the war. With 54 artists participating and a total of 255 pieces of work on display, this was an unprecedented event, capturing widespread attention in this inland river city at an uncertain time.1 Besides being uncommonly large, the show was unusual because it included woodcuts from the Communist-controlled territories, among them the works of Gu Yuan (1919–96) and Li Qun (1912—).

The exhibition was held at a time when the second alliance between the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was crumbling, spurred in part by the New Fourth Army Incident of January 1941, in which thousands of Communist troops were ambushed and killed by the Nationalist forces in southern Anhui. But, despite increasing tension, the two parties still managed to convey an appearance of cooperation in the face of a deadly outside enemy. For the Communists, the show offered an additional advantage: a rare opportunity for them to display artistic achievements from their isolated border regions and, more important, to break temporarily the GMD-imposed blockade and present their carefully manufactured images of socialism to the Chinese people through one of the most potent propaganda tools available to them.

The week-long exhibition was a big success. One visitor, the painter, Xu Beihong (1895–1953), was so impressed that he lauded Gu Yuan and his work as “one of the greatest talents in China’s art circles” and “a great artist in the Chinese Communist Party.” “There is no doubt that people leaning to the right never go near woodcuts—a peculiar phenomenon in China. But not all woodcut lovers are folks leaning to the left,” observed Xu in his article about the

Each of the eighteen woodcuts in the special illustration section inserted in this essay was originally printed in now-defunct newspapers or magazines from the 1930s, 1940s, and the early years of the People’s Republic of China.

1 Yu (1942:4). See also Li Hua (1946:38).
show.\textsuperscript{2} The favorable comment by a renowned artist such as Xu came as a surprise, since the woodcut as an art form had never received wide recognition within established art circles. For the Communists, however, Xu’s endorsement was more than just a morale booster for an underrated art; the fact that he singled out a Communist artist for praise took on a symbolic meaning, in that it gave much-needed publicity and a sense of legitimacy to a form of art practiced so effectively by the Communists in the 1930s and 1940s for a revolutionary cause. To no one’s surprise, Xu’s article, which appeared in a Chongqing newspaper, was embraced enthusiastically by the Communists and later reprinted in Yan’an’s party-controlled newspaper, \textit{Liberation Daily (Jiefang ribao)}.\textsuperscript{3}

Perhaps more than anyone else, the Communist artists fully recognized the significance of graphic art and its ability to sway public opinion through forceful images. Woodcuts, like other visual arts such as cartoons,\textsuperscript{4} were used by the Communists in the War of Resistance and the ensuing civil war period (from 1945 to 1949) not only to comment on political as well as social developments but also, and more important, to portray visions of a new society under Communist rule.

Chinese Communist woodcuts were of two basic types in the 1930s and 1940s. They were either nationalistic—scathing attacks against imperialist powers and the GMD—or socialistic—unreserved expressions of praise for the CCP. These were in turn associated with two leading practitioners of this art: Li Hua (1907–94) and Gu Yuan. Whether lithographers, woodcut artists, or copper engravers, graphic artists are often reliable chroniclers of their times, as demonstrated in the works of Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Honoré Daumier (1809–79). But visual arts can reveal much more than the scenes they depict; they can also tell us about the artists’ inner struggle to find their own identity and their effort to reach out to the world. Hence, visual images, if analyzed with care, can provide valuable information about history that documentary evidence does not furnish.\textsuperscript{5}

Like the Soviet graphic artist, Dmitri S. Moor (1883–1946), who recorded the Russian civil war with forceful and colorful images (such as the noted piece, \textit{Have You Enrolled as a Volunteer?} [1920]),\textsuperscript{6} Li Hua and Gu Yuan vividly captured modern China’s tumultuous political changes in their prints. At the same time, they created, respectively, emotional images of nationalism and promising pictures of China’s countryside undergoing socialist transformation. This article will analyze these two different but related directions and the visions that they projected. Through a close study of images, themes, and

\textsuperscript{2} Xu (1942).

\textsuperscript{3} The article was reprinted in \textit{Jiefang ribao} (Liberation Daily), March 16, 1943, 4.

\textsuperscript{4} For a discussion of the use of cartoons in the Communist areas, see Hung (1994: ch. 6).

\textsuperscript{5} For more on the value of visual images as evidence, see Paret (1988: especially ch. 3).

styles, I will argue that behind each woodcut lies four converging lines: the political statement it makes, the aesthetic it displays, the artistic identity it evokes, and the audience it tries to solicit. What preoccupied Li Hua and Gu Yuan was not art as an expression of individual experience but as a powerful medium that could be used both to reflect people’s lives and to inspire the oppressed to take action. But the artists’ efforts to reach the public, especially the peasantry, through a largely Western-inspired art were not without problems. The black-and-white contrasts and the often solemn tones in woodcuts proved uncomfortable and even unacceptable to the villagers. Communist artists therefore turned to a colorful traditional woodblock medium for help: the New Year picture (nianhua). The subsequent blending of a Western art form and a folk medium constituted a distinct chapter in the Communists’ propaganda campaign to win the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. But in the end, it was an age-old native art form, not an imported foreign medium, that proved more effective in promoting Mao Zedong’s socialist dreams in the countryside.

BACKGROUND
The woodcut is a graphic art that relies on simple tools, concise forms, sharp lines, and exact execution to create a brief visual narrative with forceful impact. It is an influential communication tool because it allows the artist to reach a wide audience by producing multiple prints with the same block in the most economical way.

Chinese woodcut printing has a long history. The earliest known example of woodcut on paper is the Diamond Sutra printed in A.D. 868 in the Tang dynasty. Traditionally, besides appearing in religious texts, Chinese woodcuts were used as illustrations in classics and historical tales, adding a special visual and aesthetic appeal to the text. The art reached its peak of popularity in the Ming dynasty, when it was widely utilized as illustrations for popular novels. However, the art of modern Chinese woodcuts, as the writer, Ye Shengtao (1894–1988), correctly pointed out, was “not derived from native tradition. It was the result of foreign influence.”

The pivotal figure behind the modern Chinese woodcut movement was Lu Xun (1881–1936), one of China’s preeminent writers in this century. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Lu Xun showed early interest in unorthodox literature and art such as folktales, woodcuts, and cartoons. He believed that these materials, long ignored and ridiculed by the elites, were intrinsically valuable and extremely influential because of their wide popularity among the general public. In his view, these art forms could be used as a convenient tool.

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7 For a history of the Chinese woodcut, see Zheng Zhenduo (1940–47).
9 There is a vast literature on the role of Lu Xun in the Chinese modern woodcut movement. See, for example, Uchiyama and Nara (1981). See also Chen Yanqiao (1936:780–3).
to promote social and political changes. “In an age of revolution,” wrote Lu Xun, “woodcuts can be of widest possible use, for they can be produced even in a very short period of time.”

In the late 1920s, Lu Xun began to introduce modern Western woodcuts into China, among them the work of the German graphic artist, Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945); the Russian engraver, Vladimir A. Favorsky (1886–1964); and the Belgian woodcut artist, Frans Masereel (1889–1971). According to Lu Xun, these “creative woodcuts” (chuangzuo muke), as he called them, differed from their Chinese counterparts in a number of ways. While a traditional Chinese woodcut was the result of a combined effort of tracing, engraving, and printing, a modern woodcut was the work of a single artist. Western artists’ emphasis on linearity and sharp black-and-white contrasts also gave their art a distinctly serious look, bearing scant resemblance to the largely decorative nature of the traditional rich-colored Chinese woodcut. Above all, Lu Xun believed that the most important ingredient in this modern art was the close link between Western woodcuts and society, an element sorely missed in the Chinese tradition. It is true that Lu Xun was deeply impressed by the Western artists’ superior techniques, especially in the ability to evoke human emotions through gestures and facial expressions with great force and directness (as in the works of Kollwitz); but his decision to introduce their works was prompted more by his admiration of their role as fighters for social and political justice than by his interest in their craftsmanship. Kollwitz’s struggle against oppression in her native land and her sympathy for the suffering masses moved him deeply, as did Masereel’s outcry against economic oppression. Lu Xun also held Favorsky in high regard because of what he saw as the Soviet artist’s great ability to portray people with a rare sincerity. Like Kollwitz and Masereel, Lu Xun realized that woodcuts did not just communicate ideas; since they were what he called “a people’s art,” they could be used as an educational tool to reshape public consciousness. Lu Xun, wrote the left-wing writer, Guo Moruo (1892–1978), turned the woodcut, “hitherto a timid and compromised art,” into “a potentially poignant and powerful weapon of the people against imperialism and feudalism.”

Lu Xun, however, did not overlook the long and rich heritage of the Chinese woodcut. In fact, in the early 1930s, he studied ancient Chinese woodcuts with equal zeal. With the help of the literary historian, Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958), Lu Xun published Peiping Letter Papers (Beiping jianpu, 1933) and Ten Bamboo Studio Letter Papers (Shizhuzhai jianpu, 1934), two collections of fine, traditional, colored woodblock prints. An ideal print, according to

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17 Lu Xun (1989b, 7, 405–6); and Lu Xun (1989f, 8:455).
him, should not be purely a Western import nor derived exclusively from China’s own tradition but be “a fusion of the two.”

The reprinting of Chinese woodcut classics and the introduction of Western prints preoccupied Lu Xun in the final years of his life. He mounted exhibitions and organized classes to teach young artists the trade. As a result of his enthusiasm and encouragement woodcut associations mushroomed, among them Eighteenth Society (Yiba yishe, so named because it was formed in the eighteenth year of the Republic) founded in 1929 in Hangzhou (later moved to Shanghai) and the Wild Wind Painting Society (Yefeng huahui), founded in 1932 in Shanghai. For young woodcut artists, the new art became a statement of rebellion against tradition. In 1933 one young artist lamented, “In the eyes of the so-called master traditional painters, woodcut is nothing but an ‘insignificant art’ [diaochong xiaoji].” For them, therefore, embracing the woodcut was more than just taking a different artistic road; it also meant breaking away from the past.

Shanghai soon became the leading center of the woodcut movement in China. The increased activities in that city drew immediate suspicion from the GMD authorities, not because of the novelty of the art but because of its perceived subversive nature and its close ties to the League of Left-Wing Artists, as in the case of the Eighteenth Society. The government wasted no time in closing down woodcut exhibitions, banning magazines, and putting participants under arrest. “Mentioning the word woodcut,” fumed Lu Xun in 1935, “is tantamount to saying something like revolution and reactionary.” To avoid persecution, young artists fled Shanghai. Ironically, this ordeal offered a unique opportunity for them to spread the new art beyond the leading metropolis to other cities in China. By the time the Sino-Japanese War had broken out in July 1937, a year after Lu Xun’s death, China’s new woodcut movement had already traveled a short but treacherous path. It also had set a radical tone for what was to come in the war years.

LI HUA

Li Hua, considered by Lu Xun to be one of the most promising woodcut talents in his generation, was the founder of the Modern Engraving Society (Xiandai banhuahui) in Guangzhou established in 1934. He was noted for his forceful attacks against outside aggression on the one hand and a failed

19 For example, he edited Yinju ji (Attracting Jade Collection) in 1934 [see Lu Xun (1934)] and Sulian banhuaji (Selected Soviet Prints) in 1936 [see Lu Xun (1936)], two collections of Soviet artists’ works, including those of Vladimir Favorvsky and Andrei D. Goncharov (1903–79).
21 See Wu and Wang, eds. (1981); see also Kangzhan banian muke xuanji (1946, vii–xi).
22 Quoted in Qi (1991:19).
political system at home on the other. As a woodcut artist, Li excelled in bringing forth facial expressions and human anatomy, a technique he learned from the West, especially from Kollwitz. Li’s carefully controlled lines and compositions not only registered his sharp observation skills but also reflected a high degree of technical virtuosity. His work was highly emotional and full of combative energy. Through provocative images, he presented human agony and social ills with intensity and poignancy.

Although Li Hua did not officially join the CCP until 1953, his works had long been associated with the leftist cause. Born in Guangzhou in 1907, Li was educated in that city’s art school and later in Japan. Despite his training in Western art, especially oil painting, Li was increasingly drawn in the mid-1930s toward the woodcut, an art form that he believed was best suited to depicting human suffering and political struggles. Li attributed this change in direction to the influence of Lu Xun.26 Inspired by Lu Xun, Li recalled years later, “I abandoned Western bourgeois artistic methods and left oil painting for the woodcut.”27

Li Hua’s decision to embrace the woodcut was prompted both by an artistic urge to explore new territory and by his deep belief that this new art form was the best available means to portray social and political upheavals and to promote change and reform. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when he abandoned oil painting for woodcut, but Li’s style and focus clearly underwent a marked change from 1934 to 1935: The enchanting pictures of spring’s return to the land in his 1934 woodcut series, *Spring Suburb Scenes (Chunjiao xiaojing)* was quickly replaced in the following year by *Dawn (Liming)*, a sequence of works that depicted the rising tide of nationalism in China. In the latter piece, Li Hua undoubtedly saw himself not only as an artist but also a patriot who stood firmly against foreign encroachment and who intended to use his creative skill to instill nationalistic passion in the public.

By the mid-1930s, the Japanese military had penetrated deep into north China. Following the occupation of rich Manchuria in 1931 and the establishment in 1932 of the puppet state, Manchukuo, the Japanese Manchurian army forced the Nanjing government to sign a humiliating truce in Tanggu in May 1933 that gave Japan control of the territory north of the Great Wall. Jiang Jieshi’s obsession with suppressing Communism and his failure to mount an effective resistance against the Japanese incursion met with increasing disapproval and opposition. To Jiang’s critics, Nanjing’s continuing appeasement policy was tantamount to selling out China to an aggressor whose ambition knew no bounds.

26 See the letters from Lu Xun to Li Hua: for example, December 18, 1934, in Lu Xun (1989a, vol. 12, 607–9); and January 4, 1935 and February 4, 1935, in Lu Xun (1989a, vol. 13, 1–2, 44–45).

27 Li Hua, “Preface,” in Li Hua (1987); interview with Li Hua, October 12, 1989, Beijing [see Li Hua (1989)].
The worsening situation in the north could not but alarm many Chinese. As a patriotic youth, Li Hua reacted with great furor. In his early woodcuts he focused, not surprisingly, on China’s misfortune under the constant threat of foreign imperialist powers, especially Japan. He addressed the central issue of imperialist exploitation and oppression with urgency. To show the nation’s anger and pain, he paid particular attention to the human figure in its many expressions and physical attitudes. A prime example is his well-known 1935 allegorical piece, Roar, China! (Nuhou ba! Zhongguo; see Plate 1). A blindfolded man is bound tightly to a pole by ropes. This is a person being enslaved. But he is neither defenseless nor submissive. Instead, his gestures and pose evince struggle and strength. The man raises his head high, venting rage and bitterness. His naked body and muscular arms and legs show defiance and resistance: the determined right hand is reaching out to a sharp knife lying on the ground, ready to cut the ropes to gain freedom. Created at a time when Japanese invasion was imminent, this woodcut is a rallying cry for liberation from the yoke of oppression. Li Hua told us that the single, bound man was not alone but symbolized the nation’s suffering and its will to free itself from outside aggression. With its dynamic lines and bold strokes, Li Hua’s piece is simple in conception but rich in meaning. It is a remarkable picture because of its concise evocation of China’s frustration and humiliation under years of foreign domination and coercion.

To be sure, the image of a man (or woman) breaking free from the chains of servitude is a familiar motif in art. The famous cover by Soviet painter Boris Kustodiev (1876–1927) for the journal, Communist International on May 1, 1919, which depicts a worker breaking the chains of the earth with a heavy hammer, is a good example. But perhaps Li Hua’s piece was inspired less by any specific foreign model and more by the memorable conclusion of the Communist Manifesto, which declared that the workers had “nothing to lose but their chains.” “Woodcuts,” wrote Li, “must be used to fight for the liberation of the entire nation.”

Li put a similar idea into practice in his provocative piece, Forward (Qian- jingu, 1936; see Plate 2). In this print, a man holding a huge flag emblazoned with the slogan, “Down with Imperialism,” calls on his compatriots to rally behind a patriotic cause. Behind him a throng of passionate faces responds with a single voice. The caption reads: “The imperialists’ guns and swords are on our necks./The traitors put our hands and feet in shackles!/How detestable that some of our own people could turn into executioners for the enemy!/

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28 Li’s title was adopted from Sergei Tretyakov’s (1892–1939) play of the same name in 1926. The Soviet playwright’s anti-imperialist (especially anti-British) piece was staged in Shanghai in September 1933 to commemorate the second anniversary of the Manchurian Incident. See Ge (1990:112–3, 130).
29 Li Hua (1958:60).
Willingly falling on their knees before the barbaric imperialist force!/Forward! Forward!/Arise, you who refuse to be slave!” The last sentence was no doubt inspired by the extremely popular song, “The March of the Volunteers” (Yiyongjun jinxingqu), written by the Communist songwriter, Nie Er (1912–35) in 1935.

*Forward* is Li Hua’s vision of Chinese fortitude and determination. The flag, which serves as the focal backdrop, is an obvious symbol of unity. The surrounding crowd wear the determined looks often found in Li’s work. The juxtaposition of black and white in bold lines and high passion exudes a raw but formidable power. All in all, the aesthetic thus articulated adds a sober spirit to the meaning of popular protest. Li’s close attention to physiognomic details is an indication of the growing maturity of his work.

“Li Hua is a senior draftsman. His style is increasingly refined, displaying certain classical characteristics,” commented Xu Beihong in 1942. “Some of them bear a close resemblance to those of Dürer.”

To compare Li to the great German printmaker, however, is to emphasize their differences. True, like Dürer, Li paid special attention to delineating the contours of the face and body with superior technique and pointed articulation; but Dürer’s biblical narratives (as in the *Life of the Virgin* series) were ideologically unacceptable to the left-leaning Li. Li Hua’s designs were also less sophisticated than Dürer’s, and Li Hua’s lines and compositions were simpler and more direct, intending to serve not a religious order but a revolutionary cause.

In fact, as far as technique and subject matter are concerned, Li Hua was influenced more by Käthe Kollwitz than by any other Western artist. Li’s *Roar, China!*, with its wrath and didactic voice, shows the unmistakable influence of this female German artist. Many similarities between Li Hua and Kollwitz can be pointed out. Like Kollwitz, Li believed in the importance of popular art such as woodcut; and like her, Li showed deep concern for humble folks beset by hunger, sickness, and despair. Kollwitz’s lifelong examination of modern life through scenes of poverty and oppression found resonance in Li’s work. Her well-known cycle, *A Weaver’s Revolt*, which depicts the plight of workers and their struggle to better their life, had made a deep impression on Li and other Chinese artists. At the same time, however, distinct differences separated the two artists. While Li Hua focused on China’s determined will to resist and ultimately to repel the aggressor, Kollwitz’s work as a whole is an indictment of violence and destruction, especially her important seven-woodcut set, *War*. Kollwitz did not dwell on war’s savagery as Li did but presented painful details about the grief of survivors—widows, parents, and fatherless children, as in her piece, *The Mothers*. While Li Hua stressed press-

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30 Xu (1942). Dürer had quite a few admirers in China, among them Liu Xian (1915–90), a noted left-wing woodcut artist, who imitated his famous *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* in 1942. See Liu (1984:90).
ing social and political issues, often with sharp realism and an acid bite, Kollwitz addressed social issues with a sympathetic and humanitarian touch. In her later career, Kollwitz gradually abandoned the realism of particulars and minute detail, elevating her art to a level of abstract and universal conception. Turning her attention inward, she produced works that were often increasingly introspective and reflective. One of the best ways to recount human experience, in Kollwitz’s view, was through visual autobiographical art. Her numerous self-portraits (at least fifty of them in prints, drawings, and sculpture) documented her own psychological and spiritual journey in her tormented life. Kollwitz’s tragic outlook on life, which drove her to elaborate on the theme of death, was, of course, not acceptable to an activist like Li Hua.

When the Sino-Japanese War broke out in July 1937, the deafening roar of the call for national salvation soon devoured the entire nation. Li Hua became one of the many artists who roamed the unoccupied territories in interior China to galvanize public support for the war effort. He was a key figure in establishing the All China Woodcut Resistance Association (Zhonghua quanguo mukejie kangdi xiehui) in Wuhan in 1938; he went to Hunan to publicize woodcut in 1940 and, together with fellow artists Huang Xinbo (1916–80) and Lai Shaoqi (1915–), spent many months in Guilin, Guangxi province to promote the usefulness of this art in the propaganda war against the invader. The war years turned out to be the most productive period of his life. Not only did he write books such as *A Course in Woodcut* (*Muke jiaocheng*), designed to introduce basic woodcut techniques to newcomers, but also produced hundreds of works and mounted numerous shows generally entitled “Sketches on the Battlefield” (*Zhandi xiesheng huazhan*) to whip up patriotic fervor among viewers.31 Li’s wartime woodcut activities were “a truly remarkable achievement,” commented the poet, Ai Qing (1910–).32

Li’s wartime works predictably focused on resistance themes that delineated a country undergoing brutal invasion and the heroic resistance of the Chinese people. *The Resistance Heroes Behind Enemy Lines* (*Diren houfang de kangzhan yingxiong*), for example, shows people up in arms, preparing to defend their land against attack. *Two Generations* (*Liangdai*) introduces an approving peasant father who looks at his son in uniform with pride and encouragement. And *Painful Recollections* (*Chentong de huiyi*) reveals the deep psychological scars that war leaves on the survivors.33

Li was remarkably prolific, yet the large quantity of his works were propaganda pieces produced under difficult circumstances and the press of time. As a consequence, they were uneven in quality and presentation. A case in point

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31 For a brief account of Li Hua’s activities during the war, see Yang (1992:200) and Lu Di (1987:137–8).
32 Quoted in Wei, Zeng, and Qiu, eds. (1992:201).
33 See Quanguo kangzhan banhua, 31, 40 (1939); and Kangzhan banian muke xuanji, 20 (1946).
is Evacuation (Shusan; see Plate 3). In this piece, Li relates the familiar story of civilians escaping from the disasters of war. In the foreground is a refugee woman with small belongings on her back, who holds her two children’s hands and walks away from the troubled place; a few steps away is another family suffering a similar fate. In between is a well-to-do man wearing a tailored suit and a hat and sitting comfortably on a sedan chair carried by two coolies. As a refugee picture, this scene is too orderly to cause any strong emotion in the viewer. It lacks the confusion and violence commonly associated with the deadly consequences of war. The vast white area comprising the background conveys no sign of impending danger. The calm retreat, the well-clothed figures, and the largely undamaged houses on the right all combine to make this piece a poor candidate to communicate the horrors and deprivations of the Japanese invasion. Moreover, because the figures are viewed from behind—a presentation certainly not of the artist’s normal practice or strength—the viewer is deprived of seeing the sufferings of the people up front and up close. Li’s piece contrasts sharply with another evacuation scene created by Cai Dizhi (1918– ), who in his woodcut paints a picture of panic and disorder when thousands of refugees jammed the Guilin railway station desperately trying to reach a safe haven.34

In the summer of 1945 the War of Resistance ended with Japan’s unconditional surrender. The stage finally seemed set for the creation of a peaceful and unified country. Now, many hoped, China could begin its sorely needed and long-awaited plan of reconstruction. The atmosphere was jubilant and optimistic. By the fall of 1945 and early spring of 1946, however, the continuing rivalry between the GMD and the CCP, the looming shadow of civil war, increasing GMD political oppression, and worsening inflation had rapidly eroded whatever hopes there had been for peace.35 Li Hua’s 1946 sequence of four woodcuts, Raging Tide (Nuchao), was a sharp indictment of the newly restored Nanjing government for its repressive measures and mishandling of the economy.

Li Hua’s use of the woodcut cycle was not unprecedented. His prewar series, Dawn, is a prior example. Such an approach was perhaps inspired by Western artists like Max Klinger (1857–1920) and Kollwitz, who frequently used sequences to construct a coherent visual narrative. Klinger and Kollwitz were themselves following a format popular in German art since the nineteenth century. But Li Hua’s idea could also have come from China’s own tradition, where the long scroll painting, as Lu Xun observed, was a familiar way of recounting a narrative.36

Raging Tide is a powerful sequence both in its aesthetic and in the messages it conveys. The first image, Struggle (Zhengzha; see Plate 4), shows a depressing scene of drought. Natural calamities have again hit the countryside, turn-

34 See Kangzhan banian muke xuanji, 26 (1946).  
35 See discussion in Pepper (1978).  
ing it into a place of destitution and starvation. Farm animals are nowhere to be found; instead, three anguished men are being used to plow the field. The barren land, the leafless tree, and the struggling souls all tell a story of extreme poverty and misfortune.

Added to the misery of the peasants were man-made calamities. In the second plate, *Forcibly Conscripting the Able-Bodied Men* (*Zhuading*; see Plate 5), adult males are tied up and herded away like cattle by ferocious officers while their loved ones beg in vain to secure their return. The piece, a blistering attack on GMD policy, tells the familiar story of the government’s conscription of rural labor and the damage that it inflicted upon the poorest. The army’s exactions and its confiscation of the peasants’ carts and draft animals further alienated the people from the government. “China seethed from end to end at a recruiting drive that in brutality, callousness, and corruption matched the worst in her dark record,” observed Theodore White during the war. “So many bought their way out of the draft that village heads could not meet their quotas; in order to supply the requisite units of human flesh, organized bands of racketeers prowled the roads to kidnap wayfarers for sale to village chieftains. Army officials engaged in the traffic on their own.”

John Service witnessed even more gruesome scenes of conscripts along the route he traveled in Sichuan and Gansu provinces in the summer of 1943: “One was already dead and was being dragged to the side of the road (by his feet) as my truck passed. Another was breathing his last, lying head down in [a] ditch. Two men, themselves walking skeletons and apparently detailed to carry him, were watching impassively.”

But the people do not remain silent. When the authorities come to the village to levy additional grain tax in such a difficult time, the peasants—as the third plate, *Resisting the Delivery of Grain* (*Kangliang*; see plate 6), shows—react violently. One protester is down, knocked to the ground, but still holds a rock firmly in his hand. His fellow villagers rush forward, fists raised, to show their collective wrath.

The anger finally turns into an uprising as political and social disillusionment, economic dislocation, and military extortion drive the peasants into open rebellion. *Arise* (*Qilai*; see Plate 7) fittingly concludes the sequence with a roar. The intense rage that emanates from the print makes it not only the strongest in the series but also one of the most memorable in Li Hua’s oeuvre.

Li’s cycle has many strengths. He works with few elements, yet his compositions are exceedingly lucid and forceful. The story format nicely glues the plates together. What stands out, however, is his grim depiction of China’s countryside. Each print zeroes in on one specific issue, inviting viewers to feel the pain and to search for an answer. But as a whole, the repeated natural

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disasters, forced conscription, exorbitant taxes, and brutality on the part of local officials all point to an ominous future. The cycle’s psychologically disturbing pictures worked to further undermine the credibility of the GMD government.

Li Hua’s bleak delineation of rural life was in fact not the most dominant theme in his postwar work. He focused his energy more on urban failings and the government’s political oppression, especially as it affected intellectuals and students. *City’s Dark Corners (Dushi de anjiao, 1947)*, for example, shows an abandoned infant against a background of high rises and urban prosperity.39 *Under the Pressure of Life (Zai shenghuo de yapo xia, 1948)*, a despairing young man, the victim of rampant inflation, is about to end his life by taking poison.40 “No one can survive the ordeal [of a ruined economy],” lamented Li Hua.41

Yet the most terrifying menace, according to Li Hua, came not from the collapsing economy but from the government’s repressive measures against civilians who held a dissenting view, especially intellectuals. In 1946, Jiang Jieshi lashed out at the mounting criticism of the government’s ineptitude and its decision to reignite civil war against the Communists. He issued stern measures to silence his critics by closing down magazines that were critical to the government’s policies,42 instituting police surveillance, condoning harassment on the part of secret agents, and ordering campus crackdowns. The result was to create extreme fear in society. Li Hua’s 1947 piece, *The Terror at Night (Ye de kongbu)* was one response to Jiang’s actions. Depicting a middle-of-the-night arrest of dissenters by secret police, it was probably created with the assassination of the celebrated poet, Wen Yiduo (1899–1946) by GMD agents in mind.

*Quick, Bring Him In (Kuai ba ta fu qilai, 1947; see Plate 8)* shows Li’s support for the spreading student protests. This piece, which topped the “most popular” list in a nationwide woodcut exhibition in Beijing in 1948,43 epitomized the intellectuals’ and students’ growing discontent with Jiang Jieshi and his government, a most significant factor in the eventual demise of the GMD regime on the mainland in 1949. Many of Li’s post-1945 works were about the plight of intellectuals. He was at his best when he evoked their frustrations by the bold strokes and sharp contours of his woodcuts. “Li Hua expressed well the taste and subtle feelings of intellectuals,” commented one viewer at the Beijing woodcut show.44

Li Hua’s intellectuals were never passive observers; they were activists and

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39 Li Hua (1987:39, Figure 50).
40 Ibid., 42, Figure 54.
41 The quote is the theme of another woodcut by Li, *Chaopiao mantianfei, renren huobuliao!*, in Li Hua (1987:41, Figure 52).
42 Many magazines were closed down, among them *Zhoubao* (Weekly) in August 1946 and *Minzhu* (Democracy) in October of the same year.
43 See Li, Li, and Ma (1982:420).
44 Ibid.
vocal critics of the GMD regime. For opponents of the Nanjing government, Li was a forceful voice at a troubled time. For the Communists specifically, however, Li’s criticisms were but one component of a two-pronged assault against the GMD. To support and validate Li’s attacks, the Communists had to offer an alternative: the promise of a new society under socialism. Gu Yuan suggested such an alternative. His portrayals of an exuberant rural society under Communist rule formed an important transition from the failed world of the past to the promised land of the future.

GU YUAN

Unlike his senior friend and fellow Cantonese, Li Hua, who in his art was drawn more to rural misery and urban failings, Gu Yuan excelled in portraying a romantic picture of the rural landscape and country folk. And while Li had a knack for delineating the sufferings of intellectuals, Gu was most comfortable telling joyful peasant stories. If Li’s pieces play on human emotions, Gu’s rely on quiet persuasion, letting the pleasant rural scenes do the talking. He was noted for his graceful and buoyant depictions of village China, especially the Communist-ruled border regions. He developed a personal artistic vocabulary that made his prints unmistakably rustic in both spirit and tempo.

Max Klinger, who initiated the modern graphic art movement in Germany and exerted a considerable influence on Kollwitz, argued that painting and graphic art were not only artistically different but also philosophically miles apart. “Optimism speaks from the work of the painter, the enjoyment of the world,” opined Klinger, “[but] the draftsman cannot escape his more negative vision.” Gu Yuan did just the opposite: His prints present a picture of a Communist society undergoing vibrant transformation and optimistic construction.

Born into a peasant family in southern Guangdong, Gu Yuan arrived in Yan’an in 1939 to pursue a new socialist dream. Unlike Li Hua, he was a homegrown talent. He enrolled as a student at the Lu Xun Academy of Art (commonly known as Luyi), established in April 1938 to train a new generation of artists and writers for the Communist cause. After his graduation from Luyi in June 1940, Gu spent a few months working as an administrative assistant in a small village near Yan’an. This was an invaluable experience for the young artist, for it placed him squarely back into the life of rural China. Gu’s peasant background and humble demeanor brought him friendship and care; people found him an easygoing, gentle young man in whom they could easily confide.

The rural landscape held special charm for Gu Yuan. His countryside was not like that depicted in Mao Dun’s (1896–1981) story, “Spring Silkworms,”

45 Quoted in Born and D’Alessandro (1992:35).
the victim of urban evils and Western capitalists. Nor did he paint the peasants as a poverty-stricken lot eking out a precarious existence under constant threat of starvation and natural disasters, as in Li Hua’s work. Instead, Gu’s countryside was a land of hope and happiness, thriving under the rule of an enlightened CCP government. In *Transporting Hay* (*Yuncao*, 1940; see Plate 9), Gu quietly shows one type of routine work in the daily life of a peasant. In another piece, *A Flock of Sheep* (*Yangqun*, 1940; see Plate 10), he fills the countryside with not only fat livestock but also a sense of abundant vitality. Both pieces were executed with a high degree of technical and aesthetic sensitivity. They, together with such other rural scenes as *Carrying [Buckets of] Water [on a Shoulder Pole]* (*Tiaoshui*), *Cutting Hay* (*Chucao*), *Putting Grain into the Barn* (*Rucang*), and *Home* (*Jiayuan*), convey an image of a border region full of vibrancy and content—a direct contrast to the chaos and sufferings in the GMD-controlled territories shown in the pictures of Li Hua and others such as Yefu (Zheng Yefu, 1909–73) and Renfeng (Wang Renfeng, 1918– ).

Gu’s rural scenes won him wide admiration among his colleagues. “He has the ability to turn the yellow earth of northern Shaanxi into gold,” said his friend Li Qun. “Using his carving knife, he transforms the most ordinary things into handsome poetic pictures.”

Gu believed that he merely drew what was around him. “My works are displayed on peasants’ kang [brick beds warmed by a fire underneath]. Country folk are my audience as well as my teachers,” he once said. But Gu was not a reporter but a gifted storyteller who had a special political message to convey through a graphic medium. Instead of depicting the impoverishment and backwardness of China’s countryside, Gu Yuan romanticized the villages and sentimentalized the labors of the soil. What he presented was thus not life’s reality but what he thought it ought to be under Communism. The serene melody of green pastures and happy country life was a construction. The peasants of his woodcuts, rather than being observed from life, were exemplars of what Gu believed to be the perfect world. He could not find loneliness and dilapidation in the rural areas, as in the images created by the American wood-engraver, Thomas Nason (1889–1971), in *Back Country* and *Deserted Farm*. Instead, Gu’s prints reflected a fresh and seemingly problem-free Red territory and conveyed the optimism of the period. Gu clearly understood the essence of a good woodcut, using a combination of familiarity and simplicity while clearly expressing his quiet but exciting comments on the lifestyles and work of the laboring classes in Chinese society. His works were significant not so much because of what he drew but because of what the subjects implied.

47 See Gu (1952:3, 5); *Zhongguo banhuaji*, 22 (1948); *Muke xuanji*, 18 (1946).
48 See, for example, Yefu’s series on the depressing life of the refugees in Shanghai, in *Zhongguo xinandai mukexuan*, Figures 75–90 (1977); and Renfeng’s series, *Renmin de shounan* (The Sufferings of the People), which depicts poverty and death in the GMD-ruled areas, in Renfeng (1947:18–30).
50 Quoted in Cao (1989:37).
“Gu Yuan,” lauded Ai Qing, “is a singer of the border region.”51 The characters he depicted, “are [men and women] happily nurtured under the new sunshine.”52

Gu’s rural pictures received a strong political endorsement in May 1942 when Mao Zedong delivered his influential “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art.” Mao’s talks, which Gu attended, codified Communist literary policies by stipulating that art and literature should serve the masses and depict the peasant heroes. Mao called for characters that could be easily comprehensible to the unsophisticated masses. Gu must have found the Chairman’s instructions exhilarating and reassuring, for they reaffirmed and legitimized an artistic style that he had been practicing for at least two years. He no doubt believed that Mao’s advocacy of a language understandable to the masses had already found its visual realization in his own works.

It is clear that Gu’s idyllic pictures belie a strong political undercurrent, for they inevitably beg a fundamental question: How could these paradisiacal scenes be possible in times of such chaos and pain? Gu answered by juxtaposing his pictures of the border region with the depressing life under the GMD rule. In A Comparison (Duizhao zhi xia, 1943; see Plate 11), Gu used the disastrous Henan famine of 1943 that foreign journalists such as Theodore White have so graphically reported53 as an example of the Chongqing government’s neglect, corruption, and incompetence. The outcome was mass starvation and death. This was in contrast to the border region, where, Gu tells us, the inhabitants live a life of abundance and security. The differences between the two societies under two opposing systems could not be greater. This here-and-there motif was repeatedly exploited by the Communist artists to ridicule Jiang Jieshi and the GMD.54

The political nature of Gu’s woodcuts was even more apparent in his glowing portrayals of the Communist Party. A case in point is Ma Xiwu Mediating a Marriage Dispute Case (Ma Xiwu tiaojie susongan, 1944; see Plate 12).55 Based on a true story from 1940, it tells of a heartless father who, instead of marrying his daughter to a young man whom she dearly loves, unkindly betroths her to an avaricious merchant. Enraged and disappointed, the young man forcefully seizes the woman at her house one night and marries her. The incident becomes a sensational case. The angry father files a lawsuit against the young man, which results in the arrival of a Communist commissioner, Ma Xiwu, who attempts to settle the dispute. Ma finally convinces the old man that treating marriage as a commodity is a mistake. At the same time, 53 White and Jacoby (1946: ch. 11, “The Henan Famine.”)

54 A similar theme was presented by Zhang Wang (1915–) in his woodcut on two different worlds, Jiefang ribao, July 22, 1943, 4.

55 The woodcut was originally entitled, Comrade Ma Xiwu Mediating a Lawsuit (Ma Xiwu tongzhi tiaojie susong), see Jiefang ribao, October 9, 1944, 4.
he also criticizes the young man’s midnight raid as unacceptable. The case generated wide publicity and was later turned into a famous story, “The Reunion of Liu Qiao,” by the blind storyteller, Han Qixiang (1915–89).56

Gu Yuan’s print captures the mediating scene with clarity and high drama. It is a familiar country setting populated by numerous characters, each with a unique rustic air. The focal point, of course, is Ma Xiwu, who stands at the center of the picture attempting to resolve the thorny lawsuit. The arc of the village gate above his head illuminates his dominant presence. It is around this Communist official that things happen and evolve. Ma is depicted as speaking both with authority and righteousness, while the old man, frightened and ashamed, admits his wrongdoing. Standing behind the commissioner is the determined young couple in an optimistic mood. The scene takes place in the public square (suggesting openness), with the surrounding villagers nodding approvingly at the entire process (suggesting popular participation). The picture’s composition is complex yet clear, even though it involves a large number of people. Each figure, whether principal or subordinate, is interacting with the others to form a coherent whole. The dispute obviously ends on a happy note. The centrality of Ma, in both the suit and the print, not only demonstrates his ability to bring a difficult case to a satisfactory conclusion but also, and more important, implies the correctness of the Party that he represents.

In another piece, Elder Brother’s Leave (Gege de jiāqi, 1942; see Plate 13), Gu Yuan tells a different story, that of an Eighth Route Army soldier coming home on leave.57 Unlike Li Hua, who depicted intrepid troops marching to the battlefield, Gu again focused on village life. Like the Ma Xiwu piece, this is a picture full of activity and rich in associations. The house is filled with visitors, bustling with noise and excitement. Sitting on the brick bed, the neighbors are eagerly catching up with the newly returned hometown hero. The atmosphere is joyous and even playful, with children adding a delightful touch to the happy occasion. As one girl points to her brother’s “Eighth Route” armband with curiosity, a little boy, wearing his brother’s hat and belt, salutes. This innocent act draws smiles from an old man, who welcomes the “younger soldier” home with open arms as well. This refreshing propaganda picture shows more than a treasured moment of family reunion; it also delineates the intimate bond between the civilian population at home and the forces at the front. Communist art, of course, abounded with images of Red soldiers, assisting the peasants in their annual harvests and performing other chores.58

57 This is a later title. The original woodcut was entitled, The Elder Brother Is an Eighth Route Army Soldier, and the Younger Brother Is Dressed Up as a Small Eighth Route Soldier (Gege dang balu didi ban xiaobalu), Jiefang ribao, October 26, 1942, 4.
58 On this theme see, for example, Wo Zha’s woodcut in Quanguo kangzhan banhua, 28 (1939); and Li Qun’s piece in Muke xuanji, 11 (1946). Zhang Wang even depicted the Red troops
Gu Yuan’s piece is unusual in that it presents the party line not with tired slogans but with warmth and intimacy.

Contrary to the common image of villages responding sluggishly and passively to the changing times, Gu’s peasants happily embraced change. *The Winter School* (*Dongxue*, 1940; see Plate 14), which won first prize in Yan’an’s May Fourth Youth Festival Art Competition in May 1941, depicts a host of spirited peasants engaging in cultural pursuits—reading, writing, and discussing—during the slow winter season.59 Yes, peasants are tillers of the soil, but, Gu Yuan reminds us in this print, they are definitely not country bumpkins. Instead, peasants are eager learners, when given the opportunity and—a point not to be forgotten—under correct leadership.

Gu Yuan’s presentation of rural China saw the influence of two foreign artists: Jean-François Millet (1814–75) and Kollwitz. Indeed, Gu’s rural pictures bore the unmistakable artistic imprint of Millet, the French Barbizon School painter renowned for his scenes of rustic life—an artistic debt that Gu himself openly admitted.60 Millet’s depictions of peasants in moments of quiet dignity, as in *The Gleaners* and *The Sower*, had made a strong impression on Gu Yuan even before his Yan’an days.61 Like Millet, Gu was concerned principally with his peasant subjects and invested these ordinary people with self-respect and pride. When viewed more closely, however, the two artists have a very different orientation. Millet’s desire to capture a rapidly vanishing preindustrial way of life in his paintings was at variance with Gu’s intention to portray an exciting new life under the socialist system. The melancholic moods in Millet’s pieces were noticeably absent in Gu’s prints. Moreover, while Millet presents the labors of the French peasant as a private act, the farm work shown in Gu’s prints was a collective endeavor. Millet’s concern was aesthetic; Gu was preoccupied, however, with the political articulation of his art. And finally, whereas Millet advocated a return to nature to escape the ills of industrialization and urbanization, Gu viewed countryside as a base for revolution.

If Millet inspired Gu with rural subjects, Kollwitz taught the young Chinese artist the urgency of an engaged art and the importance of technical perfection. Following her initial introduction by Lu Xun, Kollwitz had by now become the mentor of many young Communist artists. In Yan’an, study sessions on her graphic art were often held.62 And the book, *Selected Woodcuts of Käthe Kollwitz*, published by Lu Xun in 1936, was one of the few art texts available extending their helping hands to the minority nationalities; see Zhang’s piece, *The Eighth Route Army Helps Our Compatriots the Mongolian Nationalities in Their Autum Harvest* (*Balujun bangzhu Mengzu tongbao qiushou*), in Zou and Li, eds. (1962: Figure 126).

59 On the Youth Festival prize, see Qi (1991:68). “The winter school” was another popular topic in the Communist art in this period. In addition to Gu Yuan’s piece, see Wang Liuqiu’s work on the same subject in *Beifang wenhua*, 6 (1947).


62 See Zhang (1959:56). When Kollwitz died in 1946, Yan’an’s *Jiefang ribao* paid her a high tribute; see July 2, 1945, 4.
in the small Luyi library. Gu Yuan was touched by Kollwitz’s advocacy of the downtrodden and shared her notion of art as a means of communicating everyday truths. He studied Kollwitz’s techniques and compositions assiduously. His 1939 prints are marked by a stark black-and-white language of signs typical of Kollwitz’s presentation.

Gu Yuan also found Kollwitz’s motifs and styles problematic. Like Li Hua, Gu was uncomfortable with Kollwitz’s themes of death and poverty. Through practice, he also came to realize that the solemn appearance and heavy shades (what the Chinese artists called yinying) in Kollwitz’s prints found little resonance among rural audiences. In 1939, when he posted his prints on the walls of villages near Yan’an for display, peasants’ responses were often critical: “How come the characters’ faces are so dark?” “Why is it the pictures are composed only of black and white lines?” “I simply can’t understand what they mean.” Such negative reactions pointed to a serious problem in Gu’s works in particular, and the Communist woodcut campaign in general: This new art was simply too foreign in appearance to be embraced by peasant viewers, who were accustomed to the lively and ornamental nature of traditional folk art. Gu responded by eliminating the solemn air in his prints. He introduced brighter backgrounds and simple designs and injected a spirit of gaiety into his new works.

Gu’s decision to move away from Kollwitz was not entirely artistic, of course; it was political and nationalistic as well. Such a move must be understood within the larger Maoist framework of sinification of foreign ideas for native use—a central theme in Mao’s Rectification Campaign in the early 1940s. On the issue of artistic borrowings, Mao would have argued that no matter how great an artist Kollwitz was, her work would be of little use if it could not be translated into a pictorial vocabulary comprehensible to the masses. In a report to the Sixth Plenum of the Sixth Central Committee in October 1938, Mao stressed that foreign ideas must be transformed to meet the needs of the “specific circumstances of China.” This sinification process was a manifestation and assertion of nationalism on the one hand and a pragmatic move on the part of the CCP to win the support of the peasantry on the other. The exigencies of time and the harsh realities of the border region compelled the Party to address rural issues with urgency. Mao’s Yan’an Talks four years later followed very much the same line but with a focus on art and literature. Socialism, he said, was the future of China; and this gospel must be

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64 See Gu (1958) and Cao (1989:191).
65 Chen Shuliang (1962: Appendix, 4).
67 See also my discussion of the two versions of Gu Yuan’s woodcut, A Divorce Suit, in Hung (1994:243–4).
widely disseminated and, if necessary, forcefully enforced. Gu Yuan’s woodcuts were but one of many tools used to promote that goal.69

In Gu Yuan we find a lyric artist who had committed to communism and adopted a definite rural orientation. He named his daughter born in Yan’an Ancun (literally, peaceful village); and he admired peasants’ arts and crafts, incorporating the popular folk design of papercuts (jianzhi) into his woodcuts.70 Echoing Mao, Gu Yuan believed that Western arts had to be planted in Chinese soil to bear fruit and, even more important, that they should be used to celebrate a new way of life under socialism. To slavishly follow a remote foreign model would be a major artistic error and, in the eyes of Mao, a grave political mistake, for it would mean disregarding China’s realities at a critical time.

NIANHUA: SEARCHING FOR A CHINESE FORMULA

Gu Yuan and Li Hua had much in common. Both were political artists in the sense that they used their art as a propaganda weapon to attain a calculated end; and they demonstrated their confidence in the woodcut as a new but legitimate artistic medium. Both had deep faith in communism, although Li had to advance his cause obliquely because he lived in Guomindang-controlled territories. Yet the two men were temperamentally and artistically apart. Li Hua was an enraged printmaker who wanted to shock people out of complacency by exposing heartless landlords and corrupt government officials. He denounced the evils in Guomindang society and was an unabashed supporter of the urban and rural poor. He needed passion and fury to produce his best work. Gu Yuan, in contrast, was more reflective and introspective. He displayed a quiet demeanor in his art and preferred a gentle approach to his subject matter, depicting a future socialist society of great abundance and brotherly love. Moreover, whereas Li Hua worked on both urban and rural scenes, Gu Yuan focused almost exclusively on the countryside. Gu Yuan’s foreign mentor was Millet, an artist whose work Li Hua considered placid and idyllic, too detached from the harsh reality of modern times, and lacked political bite. Li Hua was stylistically closer to Kollwitz, favoring a more combative posture. In brief, he was a realist. With the exception of a few symbolic pieces like Roar, China!, his works were largely a faithful chronicle of China’s contemporary social and economic ills. Gu Yuan, on the other hand, was a romantic idealist who sang unreservedly of the joy and promise of a communist society.

Did Li Hua’s realistic portrayals of Chinese society and Gu Yuan’s idealistic rendition of the peasantry appeal to their audiences? Could the peasants comprehend and eventually accept these Western-inspired images? Art histo-

69 For a discussion of the Communists’ use of various popular culture forms such as spoken drama and cartoons to disseminate their political goals, see Hung (1994: ch. 6).
70 See Gu (1946:44–45).
rians have long demonstrated the power of images to delight, astonish, or hold sway over the beholder. Imagery is considered more effective than text in drawing the attention of the viewer and in persuading or inducing belief. However, whether realistic or idealistic, images are modes of visual representation which depend on symbolic systems and rules of reference that people invent in order to communicate. In the Communist areas, Gu Yuans images of pastoral harmony and fat livestock were carefully conveyed through a symbolic system that the Communists created to depict Yan’an as “the home of the revolution, its moral center.” By means of mythmaking and storytelling, the Communists in the 1930s and 1940s turned the Red headquarters into what David Apter and Tony Saich call “a symbolic capital” for Chinas future. But how influential were Gu Yuans images? Although periodic Communist reports indicate that art exhibitions in the border regions—such as the Spring Festival Woodcut Show in Suide, northeast of Yan’an, in February 1942—had generated considerable interest among cadres and soldiers, few independent sources indicate how woodcut images were actually presented; and there is even less information on how these images operated on peasants and what their impact, if any, was on them. The few scattered facts, however, suggest that the peasants greeted woodcuts with great suspicion. Gu Yuan was not the only one to recognize this. The Luyi Woodcut Work Team (Luyi muke gongzuotuan) also encountered difficulties in their tours of northern China.

This work team, composed of Hu Yichuan (1910– ), Yan Han (1916– ), and others, was sent by the CCP from Yan’an in the winter of 1938 to conduct anti-Japanese propaganda work behind enemy lines in the Mt. Taihang area. The group mounted exhibitions, held art talks, and published magazines to attract followers in southeastern Shanxi. The results, however, were not encouraging, as Hu Yichuan recalled years later:

Party cadres applauded our shows; but some peasants confessed that they could not make any sense out of them. The foreign-inspired woodcuts, they said, were too unfamiliar to them, for these prints depicted things unrelated to the variegated life of struggle behind the enemy lines. Pieces that could touch the hearts of the people or serve as a catalyst to unite them to resist the enemy were rare, and very few good and easily comprehensible prints were available. The public preferred to see woodcuts with a complete story or with colors [taose muke]. All this clearly indicated to us that Chinese new woodcuts must be “popularized” [dazhonghua] and “nationalized” [minzuhua].

Another member of the group summed it up this way: “In the eyes of some peasants, the woodcuts were too Europeanized [Ouhua].” The peasants’ lukewarm response raised a general question of what kinds of, and how, images created by the elite should be channeled to rural inhabitants.

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71 See discussion in David Freedberg (1989).
72 See discussion in Roger Chartier (1987:6).
74 See Apter and Saich (1994:10).
75 Ibid., 5–6, 33–35, 70–71.
76 See Jiefang ribao, February 25, 1942, 4.
77 Hu (1961:45).
78 Luo (1960:39).
fundamentally, their response pointed to the serious problem of miscommunication between artists and peasants. The very attempt to reach the people through Western-inspired woodcuts no doubt reflected the fact that the artists were ignorant of the peasants’ preferences and ideals and underestimated the common people’s ability to deal with things unfamiliar to them. In his studies of the interactions between social groups, Michel de Certeau warns us against treating ordinary people as passive receivers. Ordinary people, he argues, often exercise intelligent choices in the process of what he calls “everyday creativity,” creating a sphere of autonomous action within which they may resist things imposed from above or appropriate them to meet their own needs. In introducing their prints to the countryside, Gu Yuan and the Luyi Woodcut Work Team certainly encountered rural viewers whose artistic tastes were different from theirs. The peasants’ unenthusiastic response prompted the artists to find a quick solution. They discovered a partial remedy in the traditional New Year picture (nianhua).

That the Communist artists found nianhua appealing is not surprising. As a woodblock art form that draws its imagery from Chinese mythology, folk beliefs, and the everyday life of the peasantry, nianhua had long enjoyed wide popularity in China. In the mid-Qing period, the town of Mianzhu alone (north of Chengdu in Sichuan), for example, had more than 300 workshops engaged in making nianhua, producing over 10 million copies (mainly pictures of door gods) every year. Although widely printed in a number of locales (notably Yangliuqing near Tianjin, Taohuawu in Suzhou, Yangjiabu in Shandong, and Mianzhu) and varied in content, the majority of nianhua concentrated on door gods, images of deities, auspicious emblems, and agricultural celebrations. They often appeared in pairs, creating a sense of balance and harmony, as in the case of door gods. Peasants were major designers of nianhua and paid special attention to bright coloring. The images they created largely reflect their daily activities. Yanjiabu’s Men’s Ten Busy Works (Nanshimang), for instance, shows male peasants tilling the land with great enthusiasm. A successful nianhua, according to Wang Shucun, a noted scholar on this art genre, must incorporate three basic ingredients: The picture must have a good story to tell, the caption must contain propitious language, and the people in the woodcut must be men and women of great distinction or moral example. These features obviously have little in common with the Western-inspired woodcuts that Gu Yuan and Li Hua tried to propagate.

80 Materials on New Year pictures are abundant. For a good collection of these traditional pictures, see Wang, ed. (1985).
81 Gao, Hou, and Ning, eds. (1990:4).
82 Shandong sheng Weifangshi bowuguan and Yanjiabu muban nianhua yanjiusuo (1990: Plate 52).
The rich colors and bright appearance of the nianhua are also at odds with the serious outlook of the Western woodcut.

Traditional nianhua were, of course, not entirely about religious blessings or celebratory events. In the late Qing, as repeated foreign incursions spurred the rise of nationalistic sentiment in China, Chinese artists had used this art form to express their anti-imperialist feelings. Nonetheless, such prints remained at the periphery of the nianhua art. A concerted effort to study and ultimately politicize this art form did not occur until during the Yan’an years.

Among Chinese Communist artists, Wo Zha (1905–74) and Jiang Feng (1910–82) were two of the earliest to experiment with nianhua. In early 1938 they created two color prints, *Bumper Harvest* (*Wugu fengdeng*) and *Defend Our Homeland* (*Baowei jiaxiang*), in Yan’an. Forty copies each were printed and distributed by Luyi members to the peasants for their door decoration during the Spring Festival. Such efforts, however, were sporadic and uncoordinated. A year later, the interest in nianhua was rekindled by the members of the Luyi Woodcut Work Team as they eagerly searched for a more effective means of communicating with the peasants. In December 1939, the accidental discovery that the Japanese army was using nianhua to help legitimize its rule in the occupied territories caused considerable alarm among the Chinese Communists. The following January, the CCP officially encouraged artists to produce nianhua. A New Year Picture Study Group (*Nianhua yanjiuzu*) was later established at Luyi, and the Party newspaper, *Liberation Daily*, also called attention to this art form by publishing a series of articles on the subject. It was important, suggested the Communist artists, however, that the new nianhua be rid of what they called “feudalistic, superstitious elements such as Zhong Kui [an exorcist who expelled evil spirits]” but depict instead only positive images of socialism.

In the 1940s, Communists’ nianhua began to appear in abundance. They focused on two subjects: resistance against the Japanese and the importance of production. The themes of “enlisting in the army” and “spring cultivation” figured especially prominently in the new nianhua. New prints of resistance door gods (*Kangzhan menshen*) also appeared, replacing their traditional precursors. These works were targeted mostly at rural audiences. Not surprisingly, the joyful spirit and propitious emblems common to the traditional

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84 For example, a series entitled, *Bombard the Japanese Devils* (*Paoda Ribengui*), was printed in Yanjiabu after the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 to condemn the Japanese aggression; see Zheng Jinlan *et al.* (1991:12). On the anti-imperialist themes in New Year pictures, see also Wang (1991:79–82).

85 Jiang (1979:2).


87 Hu (1961:2).

88 See Jiang (1979:2); also *Jiefang ribao*, March 22, 1945, 2; April 12, 1945, 4; May 18, 1945, 4. See also Shuliang (1957:36–37).

89 See Li Qun *et al.* (1945:4).


nianhua reappeared in the revised woodcuts. Li Qun’s *To Live in Abundance* (*Fengyi-zushi*, 1944; see Plate 15) says all there is to say about the good life in the Communist-ruled liberated areas. Like Gu Yuan’s *The Winter School*, Zhang Xiaofei’s *Learn a Thousand Characters* (*Shi yiqian zi*, 1944; see Plate 16) drives home the necessity of rural education. With its bright red color (representing prosperity), the rosy-cheeked children (representing health and wealth), and the rich costumes, Zhang’s print depicts celebration in the customary Chinese style. The decorativeness and splendor in Li’s and Zhang’s woodcuts are miles away from earlier Kollwitzian representations.

How well were these new prints received? A group member related better news this time: “We printed a number of new nianhua. The result was unbelievable. They were quickly snapped up by the peasants. And we do not have enough stock to meet the need!” The enthusiasm was contagious. Even Gu Yuan came out with his own version of nianhua, *Support Our Common People’s Own Troops* (*Yonghu zanmen laobaixing de jundui*, 1944; see Plate 17), which reiterates the notion that the soldiers and the people are just one big family. This kind of nianhua continued to be produced unabated after 1949. Li Hua’s well-known piece, *Lei Feng* (1963; see Plate 18), about a model Communist soldier who devoted his life to serving the people according to the Maoist line, is a continuation of this mode of representation.

The blending of Western woodcuts and the traditional Chinese nianhua can be interpreted as a successful exercise in the Maoist policy of sinification. In addition, it showed clear evidence of Chinese peasants’ resistance to foreign influence. Villagers preferred bright and lucid colors to the Western woodcut’s solemn black and white, favoring decorative pairings (as in door gods) over single prints and pictures of propitious events and auspicious religious emblems over those of depressing scenes. Above all, they viewed the woodcut as a celebratory device, not a negative portrayal of life. The Communist artists’ reshaping of traditional nianhua, therefore, can be seen to have been driven less by ideological concerns than by practical necessity. The importance of Mao’s Yan’an Talks lies not only in redefining the role of writers and artists in the socialist revolution but also—and perhaps even more significantly—in proposing a theory of practice which stipulated that writers and artists should seriously study the needs of the rural masses. The Communists understood that solutions, if any, had to be grounded in China’s rural setting. Nianhua provided one of the answers in conveying Communist messages to the villagers. It was a popular rustic art with equal appeal among urbanites. Deriving

92 The original woodcut first appeared as a black-and-white print in *Jiefang ribao*, February 13, 1945, 2. A similar work was Gu Yuan’s *Emulate Wu Manyou* (*Xiang Wu Manyou kanqi*, 1943), which portrays a model peasant surrounded by fat livestock, in *Jiefang ribao*, February 10, 1943, 4. See also my discussion in Hung (1994:263–6).

93 Luo (1960:305).
its inspiration and sources from China’s long tradition, it was, in the words of the writer, A. Ying (1900–77), “rich in national characteristics.”

The revolutionary messages of modern Chinese woodcuts were now being realized through the familiar form of an indigenous visual art. Such an interaction, of course, was common in other countries as well. For instance, Dmitri Moor’s graphic designs applauding the achievements of the new Soviet government showed the strong influence of the old Russian lubok (illustrated broadside). The Chinese woodblock form, however, had a distinctly rural ring, for the heavy ornamentation and benevolent wishes of nianhua are deeply rooted in the Chinese countryside. In the nianhua campaign, socialist ideas were being repackaged in the name of the people and channeled through a medium comfortable to the country folk. Practical nationalistic considerations had now taken precedence over abstract Western-introduced Marxist ideals in advancing Maoist goals of socialist revolution.


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