Lu Xun’s Legacy: Printmaking in Modern China
Lu Xun’s Legacy

Prints tell the story of China’s twentieth-century wars, revolution and rejuvenation. The Legacy of Lu Xun in Modern Chinese Printmaking celebrates the extraordinary range and versatility of style, technique and aesthetic expression in modern Chinese prints—yet barely scratches the surface of the collection from which it is drawn, the Muban Educational Trust (MET).

This retrospective includes fifty-three prints, chosen from every decade since Lu Xun (1881-1936CE) founded the Modern Woodcut Movement in the 1930s, exploring artistic trends, political conflict and technical innovations. Its four sections aim to connect history with the contemporary, and message with style and technique.

Arguably the most important cultural figure of twentieth-century China, Lu Xun is still revered for his stories and essays condemning the nation’s backward social and political conditions. Outside China, Lu Xun is less well known, especially in the field of visual culture. He transformed the neglected art of woodblock printing, invented in China more than 1000 years earlier, making the woodblock print a weapon for social change and national resistance. At the same time, he encouraged the revitalization of China’s traditional arts.

The complex cross-currents of Lu Xun’s activities embody quintessential issues of Chinese culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: westernisation and modernisation, continuity and change, tradition and innovation. These are not firm dichotomies, but shifting points along a spectrum in a history marked by frequent changes in direction or emphasis. Such
tensions are apparent in printmaking during all of the time periods represented in the exhibition.

Cut Mark — Paying tribute to Anti-Japanese Woodblock Prints
By Wang Wei (b. 1942)
Screen print
2015

Muban Educational Trust registration number wanvw001

This colourful screen print commemorates the 70th anniversary of China's victory in the War of Resistance to Japan (1937-45). The print is full of imagery related to woodblock prints, especially those of the artist's father, Wang Qi (1918-2016), one of whose prints is recognizable in the top right corner. The importance of woodblock prints to China’s war effort was acknowledged in the foreign press, by sympathetic journalists such as Agnes Smedley (1892-1950) and author Pearl Buck (1892-1973).
Ode to Joy

By Chen Yuping (b. 1947)

Woodblock print
1996

Muban Educational Trust registration number cheyp046

Chen Yuping was trained and worked as a hydraulic engineer in the 1960s, before studying printmaking and turning professional in the 1980s. A native of rural Heilongjiang, he creates in order ‘to bring life to the beauty of my native land.’ His vibrant landscapes are recognizable by their strong opaque oil-bound colours. Chen’s prints are firmly located within the traditions of the Great Northern Wilderness School, developed in the 1950s by mostly-amateur artists transplanted to develop northeast China.
Portraits and Stories

It is a rite of passage for woodblock artists to design and cut a portrait print of Lu Xun. Many of the Modern Woodcut artists paid Lu Xun this honour in his lifetime. Li Qun’s small 1936 portrait was in Lu Xun’s collection when he died. From the time of his death until today, artists have invoked Lu Xun in portraiture to celebrate or criticise developments in China.

Artists also illustrate Lu Xun’s stories, with a single image or in a series of up to sixty prints. Lu Xun was highly critical of the narrow-minded spirit, inhumanity and political darkness of the later Imperial and early Republican China. Diary of a Madman (Kuangren riji 狂人日記) was the first modern story published in the vernacular, rather than in classical, Chinese. Lu’s best-known work is The True Story of Ah Q (Ah Q zheng zhuan 阿Q正傳). Zhao Yannian’s sixty-print masterpiece portrays every foible and psychological nuance of the novella’s hapless anti-hero.
Xie Ziwen had a long career in printmaking, best known for his patriotic works in the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-45). After the Revolution, he taught at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. This print commemorates the 50th anniversary of the six-day practical printmaking workshop Lu Xun sponsored, which is generally regarded as the birth of the Modern Woodcut Movement (top-left). It also illustrates his enthusiasm for China’s ancient arts and twentieth-century Expressionist prints.
Li Qun sent this portrait to Lu Xun, then finally met him just days before Lu died. On the upper right are two shelves of books. In the lower left, a hand grasps a nibbed pen, with a dog looking up at it. Li Qun was a founding member of the League of Left Wing Artists in 1933, and during the Second Sino-Japan War (War of Resistance) taught at the Lu Xun Academy of Art and Literature (LuYi) in Yan’an.
Illustrations to the Short Story Diary of a Madman by Lu Xun (2 of 40 works)

By Zhang Huaijiang (1922-1989)

Woodblock prints

1980

Muban Educational Trust registration number zhahj101,104

Diary of a Madman is often referred to as China’s first modern short story, written by Lu Xun in vernacular Chinese, rather than classical. Inspired by Nikolai Gogol’s (1809-52) story of the same name, it depicts a ‘madman’ who sees cannibalism everywhere. Zhang’s illustrations are as dark as the story’s rendering of China. Zhang began making revolutionary prints in the 1940s. He was condemned as a rightist in 1957, but was later rehabilitated and returned to an official position.
Illustrations to the Short Story The True Story of Ah Q by Lu Xun (2 of 60 works)

By Zhao Yannian (1924-2014)

Woodblock prints

1980

Muban Educational Trust registration number zhayn102,143

The True Story of Ah Q is Lu Xun’s best-known work. Written in the vernacular, it takes places during the Xinhai Revolution (1911), which ended the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The anti-hero, Ah Q, represented all that Lu Xun saw as backward, despicable and self-absorbed in traditional Chinese society. Using a foreign letter in Ah Q’s name may have referred to the May Fourth Movement, advocating western ideas, or may represent the (pigtail) required for all Chinese men under the Manchu rulers.
Many artists have portrayed the principal character of New Year’s Sacrifice, Lu Xun’s scathing indictment of female subordination in traditional Chinese society. She is not even referred to by name, only Xiang Lin’s wife. A young widow, she is kidnapped by her former in-laws and forced to re-marry for their financial benefit. Her husband and son by the second marriage both die, leaving her traumatized and unwelcome as an unlucky widow, and she herself dies on New Year’s Eve.
An Illustration Lu Xun’s Short Story Kong Yiji

By Yan Han (1916-2011)
Woodblock print
1973

Muban Educational Trust registration number yanhv015

In China’s traditional education system, advancement depended on passing official exams. Kong Yiji is a failed scholar, but refuses to do menial work and steals to avoid starvation. He drinks at a tavern in the fictional town of Luzhen, where Lu Xun’s set many stories. Kong Yiji is treated brutally by the other customers. The story expresses Lu Xun’s rejection of the imperial examinations, students’ time-wasting efforts to pass them, and people’s indifference to the sad plight of others.
Illustrations to the Play Tea House by Lao She

By Wu Duanduan (b. 1955)

Woodblock print

1996

Muban Educational Trust registration number wuvdd005

Lao She’s (1899-1966) play is set against the backdrop of a teahouse in old Beijing. It takes place in three acts: 1898, a year of reform and subsequent crackdown; 20 years later in the warlord era of the early Republic; and 30 years after that, near the end of the Civil War. The many characters mirror social turmoil and people’s desperate struggle for survival. The play ends with the teahouse manager’s suicide. Lao She himself committed suicide in 1966.
Generations

Modern and contemporary printmaking in China may be broadly divided into three periods: 1931-49, the Modern Print Movement, wartime and revolution; 1949-76, the Maoist era of socialist construction, through to the Cultural Revolution; and 1976 to the present, marked by China’s rapid domestic and international development.

As political and social conditions have changed, so has cultural production. The printmakers in this exhibition have worked in good times and bad, some with careers that began in the 1930s, and some in the early 21st century. Their determination and revolutionary loyalty are remarkable, and evident decade after decade, despite very dire circumstances.

The artists transformed their styles to match the times. This section shows works by six printmakers at different stages of their artistic lives. Five were essential to the Wars of Resistance and Liberation, while one worked from the 1950s through to the 1990s. The veterans are best known for their 1930s’ and 40s’ woodcuts. Prints from the Maoist years are harder to find and, as the Muban Educational Trust’s collection is especially rich in these works, more of them are included here.
Portrait of Lu Xun
By Zeng Jingchu (1918-2001)
Woodblock print
Undated

Muban Educational Trust registration number zenjc001

This print imagines Lu Xun in Yan’an, symbolised by the pagoda on the hill. Yan’an was the communist base area and Party headquarters, after the Long March ended in 1935, through the Civil War. Lu Xun never went to Yan’an, but sent Mao Zedong a congratulatory telegram and a canned ham when he learned of the Red Army’s safe arrival there. Many prints associate Lu Xun with revolutionary events, even if they occurred long after his lifetime.
The Long March
By Li Hua (1907-94)
Woodblock print
1940s

Li Hua, one of the earliest active woodcut artists, worked closely with Lu Xun, who thought him among the most promising of the young printmakers. Having studied painting in China and Japan, Li turned to printmaking, his work always dedicated to nationalist and socialist themes. His perceptive figural prints of the 1930s and 40s showed people’s struggles and anti-imperialist, revolutionary determination. This woodblock print shows a long line of high-spirited Red Army soldiers during the Long March from Jiangxi to Yan'an.
Building the Reservoir

By Li Hua (1907-94)

Woodblock print

1959

Muban Educational Trust registration number livhv025

This print shows the enthusiastic labour of masses constructing a reservoir. Since it is dated 1959, it is likely a revolutionary romantic view of the Three Gorges Project. An enormously complex undertaking, the dam was heavily promoted by Chairman Mao during the Great Leap Forward (1958-61), but engineering problems prevented its construction for forty years; it was finally completed in 2006. Compare the style of this propaganda imagery with Cat. no 36, a patriotic landscape also featuring the Three Gorges.
This print illustrates the Precious Sword and Military Book Gorge, part of the Xiling Gorge in Sichuan. This is more than just a landscape, however, for Li Hua’s gorge is a direct reference to Zhuge Liang (181-234), hero of the Three Kingdoms period (220-80) and still invoked in today’s China. Legend has it that Zhuge Liang hid his military book and treasured sword in the crevices of these rocks for brave men to find.
Burning the Title Deeds

By Gu Yuan (1919-96)
Woodblock print
1947

Muban Educational Trust registration number guvyv013

This is one of the best-known prints of the Civil War period (1946-49). It is a dramatic and highly-detailed scene of angry citizens burning the property deeds of a landlord. In Communist-controlled areas, land reform policies were enacted before the formal establishment of the People’s Republic. Gu Yuan had studied at the Lu Xun Academy of Arts, where the prescribed style was based on flat, colourful folk prints known as nianhua, and many of his surviving works are in that style.
Recalling Yan’an
By Gu Yuan (1919-96)
Woodblock print
1978

Muban Educational Trust registration number guvyv002

After the Revolution, Gu Yuan held numerous publishing, teaching and administrative posts, while continuing his artistic practice. His prints illustrated China’s progress in social and economic development, especially with communal village scenes. This print shows farmers bringing in the harvest, but its theme is Yan’an, the revolutionary-period communist base area and Party headquarters, symbolised by the ancient pagoda on the hill. Even today, Yan’an is invoked in glorification of the Communist establishment of New China.
Gu Yuan made this print in the last year of his life. There is no explicit political content in the image, though the message is a communal one: bring sweetness to the people. The dominant feature is a blossom-covered tree, with the bee-keeping work in the background. Like many artists, after the Cultural Revolution Gu Yuan made more landscapes and nature scenes—subjects of personal choice, rather than the propaganda art required from 1949 to the end of the 1970s.
Children Picking up Rubbish
By Li Qun (1912-2012)
Woodblock print
1936

Muban Educational Trust registration number livqv028

Strongly influenced by Lu Xun (see cat. no 4), Li Qun was one of the earliest revolutionary printmakers, and a founder of the Woodcut Research Association 1933. His prints showed the dark social and economic conditions of Republican China (1912-49). Diagonal lines and cross-hatching gave shape and depth to his images. A copy of this print was included in a 1937 exhibition in London, organized to raise funds and awareness for China against Japan’s imperialist aggression.
**An Image of the Well-clothed and Well-fed**

By Li Qun (1912-2012)

Woodblock print

1944

Muban Educational Trust registration number livqv032

In total contrast to Li Qun’s dark images of the 1930s (see cat. no. 45), this print epitomizes the folk-art style approved for communist propaganda at the 1942 Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art. The format is called nianhua (literally, New Year’s print), a popular art made for centuries with auspicious or protective imagery. The designs are characterized by thick black outlines and flat, bright colours. This print shows happy, secure living in the communist-controlled ‘liberated areas’, even in wartime.
Li Qun was still a leading printmaker in the 1950s and early 60s. His colourful imagery celebrated progress in New China. He worked in the two approved styles: folk art (see cat. no. 45) and socialist realism, inspired by Soviet propaganda art. Works from the mid-60s until after the Cultural Revolution are hard to find. In 1980, Li Qun reappeared, making apolitical prints with lively designs of animals, birds and flowers, as well as gentle rural landscapes such as this.
Sell Grain to the Country
By Wang Qi (1918-2016)
Woodblock print
1953

Muban Educational Trust registration number wanqv028

In the 1930s and 40s Wang Qi’s themes were wartime patriotism and people’s harsh living conditions, often in the folk-art style of simple outlines and little shading. After 1949, Wang Qi combined the roles of printmaker, teacher and editor of major art journals. His images celebrated New China in communal scenes of agricultural and industrial progress. This 1950s print is highly detailed, with shading and perspective. The newly-approved style was inspired by Soviet socialist realist prints.
Wang Qi was condemned during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and forbidden to work. In the 1970s, he and many other veteran artists were rehabilitated and re-installed in positions of authority in art academies and associations. This is a fine example of the heroic style of Wang Qi’s work in those years, with finely detailed motifs, powerful composition and dramatic perspective.
Ancient Tree, Old Rattan Vine
By Wang Qi (1918-2016)
Woodblock print
1987

Muban Educational Trust registration number wanqv007

Trees featured in Wang Qi’s prints as early as the 1940s, but usually not as the principal motif—rather fitted within scenes of village work, children outside school, or workers busy with construction. Wang’s later trees filled the page, celebrations of life and nature. According to the artist’s family, he called his favourite theme the “tree of life.” The gnarled branches and leaves of this ancient tree exemplify Wang Qi’s extraordinarily skilful cutting techniques.
Develop the Militia’s Activities with Explosives

By Yan Han (1916-2011)
Woodblock print
1948

Muban Educational Trust registration number yanhv069

Originally a painter, Yan Han studied woodblock printmaking at the Lu Xun Academy at Yan’an. He also spent time in the Taihang Mountain Liberated Area, and this print was inspired by that experience. Its theme is the mobilization of the masses in the War of Resistance to Japan (1937-5). It is in the format of a nianhua (literally ‘New Year print’), a traditional folk-art form that was very effective for propaganda among the rural masses in the 1940s.
Great Wall—A Link of Peace and Friendship
By Yan Han (1916-2011)
Woodblock print
1987

Muban Educational Trust registration number yanhv046

Yan Han made propaganda prints supporting China in the War of Resistance and fought with the communists in the Civil War. He was an important educator as well as artist in the new People’s Republic, but was condemned during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957-78. He was politically attacked again in the Cultural Revolution. Yan re-emerged in the 1980s, with works in a new, apolitical style—geometric and often abstract. He was thoroughly re-habilitated and much honoured in his last years.
This print shows the influence of Zhao’s Zongzao’s 1982 visit to Japan. The composition depicts, abstractly, silhouetted pine trees growing out of “boneless” mountain peaks (without outlines). Zhao used traditional water-soluble colours on damp paper, achieving a misty, painterly effect, and incorporated the woodblock’s grain to suggest the rocks’ textures. Huangshan (Yellow Mountain) is a range of peaks in southeast China’s Anhui province. Celestial Capital Peak and Three Island Penglai are two features of the scenic range.
New China

This section presents a highly-abbreviated summary of the styles and subject matter of Chinese printmaking since 1949. From the founding of the PRC until after the Cultural Revolution, nearly all art, whatever style or format, was produced in the service of the new society. Prints promoted the Party, the people, the revolution and a continual flow of specific political, social and economic campaigns.

Art in the post-Mao era has been much less explicitly political, both quantitatively and aesthetically. Personal expression has returned. The same types of subjects as before are depicted - landscapes, figures, village gatherings, work and leisure - but through individual eyes. Scenes are intimate and life-size, rather than grandiose. There is great interest in Chinese history and traditional culture, offered in newly-imagined ways. An important feature is the development of regional schools of printmaking with their distinctive styles, notably the Great Northern Wilderness and Yunnan Schools.

Not everyone is shown to be happy. The second part of this section offers some social and political commentary on contemporary China. Crowding, industrialization and consumerism are common and politically acceptable themes.
Liu Jing’s images of cultural masters are misty, mysterious and haunting. He insists that he is a printmaker, not an artist. Liu revels in his choice of techniques, uninterested in labels like ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary.’ He says, “Instead of trying to be a pioneer in the art world, I am more willing to get a block, take a knife, and easily sift a pile of sawdust. Or grind the stone, adjust some of the ink, and casually create some texture.”
Celebrating the Founding of the People’s Republic of China

By Gu Qun (b. 1928)
Woodblock print
Undated

Muban Educational Trust registration number guvqv001

There were comparatively few female artists in the communist-controlled ‘liberated areas’ in the 1940s. In printmaking, Gu Qun specialised in nianhua (new year pictures). Folk-art styles were particularly effective for propaganda in revolutionary and wartime China. This highly detailed woodblock print celebrates the founding of the PRC on 1 October 1949, illustrating the masses’ genuinely enthusiastic welcome of the new leadership and the end of the Civil War (1945-49). Gu Qun also worked in stained glass and ceramics.
Celebrating the Abundant Harvest

By Lin Ling (1918-2007)

Woodblock print

1958

Muban Educational Trust registration number linlv005

Lin Ling is less well known than many of his contemporaries, perhaps because he spent his artistic career in the military, serving in both creative and administrative roles. In the late 1930s and 40s, he produced propaganda for the Resistance against Japan, but also depicted the hardships of rural workers. This print celebrates agricultural abundance, in the style known as ‘Revolutionary Romanticism.” The huge flowers and vegetables belie the disastrous agricultural situation of the Great Leap Forward (1958-61).
Dancing—Highland Barley, No.2, in a series of three prints
By Zhao Zongzao (b. 1931)
Woodblock print
1961

Muban Educational Trust registration number zhazz019

Zhao Zongzao was known for his scenes of rural utopia. This lively, colourful print is from a series showing Tibetan village life and was inspired by his experiences there in the 1950s and 60s. Tibetan cultural traditions are reflected in the peasants’ costumes and background buildings, but this work also carries political significance: it shows agricultural abundance, which was an important propaganda theme during the disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958-61). Technically, the print is of exceptionally high quality.
Wu Fan studied both oil painting and guohua (national painting, using ink and brush) before turning to printmaking. Dandelion demonstrates his painterly style and mastery of traditional shuiyin techniques employing water-soluble colours. The print has no political content, which was very unusual for its time. With its universal appeal, spare design and tranquil air, Dandelion was an international prize winner. However, during the Cultural Revolution, it was singled out for symbolizing pacifism, surrender and revisionism, and so was destroyed.
The Evening of the Festival Day
By Liao Youkai (1932-2004)
Woodblock print
1972

Muban Educational Trust registration number liayk005

Liao Youkai was a self-taught artist. In 1958 the People’s Liberation Army Cultural Group sent him to the Great Northern Wilderness (Beidahuang), a huge tract of uncultivated land in Heilongjiang. There he worked on a newspaper for farmers and labourers, later joining the Bohai Oil Company as Head of the Art Group (most large work units had one). Liao specialised in panoramic prints. This large, colourful celebratory scene is in the heroic style of the later years of the Cultural Revolution.
While China recognizes 56 ethnic groups, the Han nationality constitutes more than 90% of the population. Kazaks comprise only about one-tenth of one percent, living mostly in Xinjiang, Gansu and Qinghai provinces. They are a nomadic people, raising herds of cattle and sheep. In the early 1980s, artists took a new interest in regional cultural elements, and the Kazaks’ exotic clothes and customs provided stimulating imagery. The woman in this print is making milk tea, in preparation for a large gathering.
The Red Sky
By He Kun (b. 1962)
Woodblock print
1987

Muban Educational Trust registration number hevkv005

The ‘Yunnan School’ developed in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, along with an interest in rustic habitats and local cultural features. The artists of this home-grown style are influenced by Buddhist cave paintings, tribal textiles and the colourful tattoo traditions of the region’s minority groups. He Kun’s prints are easily recognized by their vivid colours, stylized forms and complex textile patterns. The Red Sky was made using the waste-block technique, cutting and printing successive colours from a single block.
**Nostalgia**

By Hao Boyi (b. 1938 – d. 2019)

Woodblock print

1985

Muban Educational Trust registration number haoby014

In 1958, a hundred thousand demobilised soldiers were sent to develop the vast wilderness of Heilongjiang—an area known as the Great Northern Wilderness (Beidahuang). Artists were sent to publicize the achievements in agriculture and construction. Hao Boyi was the youngest of the leading artists from the first generation of Beidahuang printmakers, and he trained many of the second and third generation artists. Trees, seasonal landscapes, cranes and village life are his favourite themes, exemplified by this nostalgic, lyrical work.
Chao Mei was sent to Heilongjiang in 1958 and is the most influential of the Great Northern Wilderness (Beidahuang) artists. He uses strong, romantic colours to emphasize the beauty of the vast expanses of land and sky in Heilongjiang. Autumn Glory observes the turning colours of the season, the yellow and red trees distinct from the stylized stand of green trees behind them. From the 1990s onwards, Chao Mei’s work moved gradually from naturalistic detail to greater abstraction.
In the late 1970s, during the brief period of ‘Scar’ art--so named for the 1978 novella Scar (Shanghen) by Lu Xinhua—writers and artists felt able to express their feelings about the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Zhao Yannian has written openly about his terrible experiences during those years and made the hauntingly expressive Nightmare series on this theme. This print, however, is dated June, 1989, which is likely a reference to the events at Tian’anmen Square that month.
Bottoms Up
By Su Xinping (b. 1960)
Woodblock print
1998

Muban Educational Trust registration number xuvxp001

Su Xinping is unusually versatile, creating paintings, prints and videos. His prints employ etching, woodblock and lithographic techniques. Xu grew up in far-off Inner Mongolia, but has spent much of his career in Beijing, where he is the Deputy Director of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He laments China’s urbanisation and ecological decay in desolate landscape scenes. His portraits comment ironically on materialism and rapid social change, particularly the rituals of business and political relationships.
Building
By Zhang Minjie (b. 1959)
Woodblock print
1993

Muban Educational Trust registration number zhamj009

Zhang Minjie worked as a stage designer and actor in Hebei. He was badly injured in the 1976 Tangshan earthquake. Both experiences continue to influence his life and work, which includes painting, sculpture, lithography and woodblock printing. His surrealistic prints are stage spectacles with crowds of figures in motion—dancers and acrobats, farmers, workers and soldiers. Some march in stiff formation; others are unsynchronized, arriving nowhere, but few make it outside the walls. Dull colours add a sense of alienation.
Going to Market
By Guo Shuang (b. 1990)
Woodblock print
2014

Muban Educational Trust registration number guosv003

Guo Shuang cuts bold, panoramic street scenes from hardwood blocks printed with oil-bound colour. Her complex images of urban life show jostling crowds of workers, business dealers, eccentrics and people-watchers. Looked at closely, the variety of individual character types is remarkable. Guo Shuang won First Prize in the inaugural Muban Woodblock Printmaking Awards competition in 2015. She is now a post-graduate student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.
Techniques

In Lu Xun’s time, creative woodcuts were black and white, printed with oil-bound colour. Lu Xun also encouraged the revival of late-Ming multi-block techniques using water-soluble colours (shuiyin), but not to promote social and political reform. For his purposes - arousing and modernising China - black and white prints were the right approach. They could be produced quickly and cheaply in large quantities, without any special equipment: just a piece of wood, a knife, ink and paper. The resulting contrast of black and white was dramatic and immediate.

Black and white prints comprised a much smaller proportion of propaganda print production in post-1949 China. Prints with agricultural and industrial scenes produced in the 1950s were generally designed with only one or two colours, mostly oil-bound. In the late 1950s-early 60s, shuiyin techniques were revived, to promote ‘national’ forms. Following the Cultural Revolution, many artists practiced these techniques for aesthetic reasons.

Woodblock printmakers use various cutting methods to produce their images. The most common method is to cut the prints in reverse, or mirror image, but several other methods are displayed here.
An Unbending Branch of Winter Plum

By Zhang Xiaofeng (b. 1976)
Woodblock print
2011

Muban Educational Trust registration number zhafx001

This pale image of Lu Xun is a remarkably skilful work. The revival of shuiyin techniques—printing with water-soluble colours, rather than oil-bound—began in the late 1950s, but has been widespread and increasingly innovative since the 1980s. The plum blossom carries important symbolism in China, representing hope and the coming of Spring, as it is the first flower to bloom. It also stands for resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity, so is fittingly paired with Lu Xun.
The World Inside the Mountain

By Dong Jiansheng (b. 1936)
Woodblock print
1998

Dong Jiansheng originally taught himself printmaking. Because of a casual remark, he got caught up in the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957 and was sent to do hard agricultural labour for twenty-two years. During the Cultural Revolution, his only permitted art practice was creating propaganda posters. Rehabilitated when aged 45, Dong finally began formal study at CAFA. He works in black and white using a single block, cutting dramatic images of the architecture and mountain scenery of Taihang Mountain in Hebei.
Dream Magpie Girl

By Chen Haiyan (b. 1955)
Woodblock print
1998

Muban Educational Trust registration number chehy001

Chen Haiyan is one of China’s best-known printmakers in the West today. She sticks to monochrome images, making her prints from both woodblock and copper plates. Her woodblock printing technique is unusual in that she cuts the block with a right-reading image, rather than in reverse, then presses the back of the paper so it bleeds through, also showing the image right-reading. She records her dreams daily, transposing the images of her mind in prints, juxtaposing words with pictorial elements.
The Desk in Jiuli Studio
By Wang Chao (b. 1974)
Woodblock print
2003

Muban Educational Trust registration number wancv005

Wang Chao has revitalized the techniques of 17th century woodblock printing, generally considered to be the zenith of the art in China. He is an acknowledged expert in the cutting and printing of douban blocks. This print was made with 23 small blocks cut from fragments of pear wood—each block individually registered—then printed with water-soluble colours (shuiyin). In keeping with the archaistic flavour of his work, Wang adopted the studio name Jiuli fang (Hall of Nine Ancient Vessels).
Forbidden City
By Gao Rongsheng (b. 1952)
Woodblock print
1991

Muban Educational Trust registration number gaors002

Gao Rongsheng has used the intaglio printing technique here, printing the white gouache colour from the cut or incised area of the block. The composition combines the geometric shapes so effective in graphic art with the tonal quality of painting. The empty spaces are ambiguous—a quality much valued in Chinese art. In 1999, Gao Rongsheng won the Gold Medal in the Ninth National Art Exhibition for this print, but he is equally well-known for his story illustrations.
This is one of a series in which the artist wittily juxtaposes views and images of ancient and modern China. Here he contrasts modern technical innovation, represented by the jet aeroplane in a fan-format landscape, with scenes of traditional Suzhou, which was for centuries the heart of Chinese culture. This print also bears the pencilled name of his wife, Wang Jingping, who probably helped him with the print.
Fan No. 1
By Chen Qi (b. 1963)
Woodblock print
1991

Muban Educational Trust registration number cheqv007

This beautiful print contrasts the simple, painterly design of the fan with the background’s finely graded wood-grain. In his long career, Chen Qi has been a great experimenter and versatile innovator. His prints cover a wide range of subject matter, including landscape and urban scenes, and various series depicting single objects, such as instruments (Cat. no. 121), lotuses and furniture. He has also engaged in more spiritual and philosophical enquiries, with series of butterflies, waterscapes and abstract imagery.
Qin [Series] II
By Chen Qi (b. 1963)
Woodblock print
1991

Muban Educational Trust registration number cheqv008

The print’s title, “Qin II,” refers to its place in Chen Qi’s series of twenty-one musical instruments, each represented in isolation against a blank background. This print depicts an erhu, a two-stringed bowed lute, held vertically by the seated player. Chen’s instruments are extremely realistic, designed in the boneless manner (without outline). Although Chen prints from plywood blocks, the absence of any wood-grain suggests that he sanded the blocks before cutting and printing (compare with Cat. no 120).
He Weimin has worked in various media: painting in Chinese ink and oils, lithography and woodblock printing. He illustrates places, times and occasions, both in China and the UK, where he lives. His works exude energy and atmosphere. This bold, thickly-outlined monochrome print is one of many showing scenes of daily life in Harbin, capital of his native Heilongjiang province. He Weimin is a Trustee of the Muban Educational Trust, contributing to the curation and authorship of many Muban projects.
Reconstructed Landscape #10
By Cao Ou (b. 1987)
Woodblock print
2015

Muban Educational Trust registration number caoov003

This is the last in a series of landscapes inspired by the West Lake in Hangzhou. The flat, luminous forms are printed with water-soluble colours on rice paper. Cao Ou says he has always been attracted by the beauty of repetition and complex parallel patterns, choosing geometry as his linguistic symbol of expression. Other series by the artist, of landscapes, animals and fruits have a different language altogether-- intentionally witty and playful, but equally colourful and energizing.
Return to Nature No. 3 — Mirror Image

By Gu Xiuhua (b. 1988)
Wood engraving
2015

Muban Educational Trust registration number guvxh002

Gu Xiuhua employs the vocabulary of the wood engraving in the making of his woodblock prints. He gives clear references to books of engravings, often coloured, illustrating birds and insects which were popular in the growing interest in the natural world during the eighteenth-century. Gu’s images are extraordinarily skilful, highly detailed and symbolically complex. He was the First Prize Winner at the Muban Educational Trust’s Woodblock Printmaking Awards in 2016.
Neither Mountain Nor Water No. 1
By He Sanqing (b. 1988)
Woodblock print
2016

Muban Educational Trust registration number hevsq001

He Sanqing was a student of the unorthodox artist Chen Haiyan (cat. no. 108). This work has the appearance of a collage of pre-painted or pre-printed papers. He skilfully exploits the tonal range possible with Chinese ink, calling to mind the traditional Chinese principle that, “if you have ink, you have all the five colours”. He Sanqing was the First Prize Winner in the Muban Educational Trust Woodblock Printmaking Awards in 2018.
Acknowledgements

Lu Xun’s Legacy: Printmaking in Modern China is an exhibition of prints from the collection of The Muban Educational Trust.

The Oriental Museum would like to thank the Muban Educational Trust for inviting us to participate in this project. In particular, thanks go to exhibition curator Mary Ginsberg, to David Barker who compiled the accompanying catalogue, and to Haiyao Zheng for all of her work on the administration of the project.

This exhibition should have been displayed at the Main Library Gallery, University of Edinburgh from April to September 2020 and a joint events programme had been planned to span the Edinburgh and Durham shows. This sadly could not be delivered as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. Staff at the Oriental Museum would like to thank the team at Edinburgh University for their generosity in sharing a wide range of resources that they had prepared and were unable to use. The circumstances were difficult for all involved, but the exhibition in Durham has benefited enormously from the input of our colleagues in Edinburgh. We hope this collaboration will lead to further partnership working in the future.

The Muban Educational Trust received generous support for the exhibition from Cynthia and John Koh, Bernard Quaritch Ltd, antiquarian booksellers since 1847, and Wang Panian.

Additional support was generously provided by the Friends of the Oriental Museum.

All Chinese translations were prepared by students studying for the MA in Translation Studies at Durham University.