CHAPTER 3

Modernity through Experimentation: Lu Xun and the Modern Chinese Woodcut Movement

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Print publications and their attendant imagery provided an unparalled space for the melding of global and local influences in Shanghai during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Woodcuts, with their inherent reproducibility, were critical in conveying information to the reading public, and were routinely reproduced in newspapers, books, journals, and magazines during the 1920s and 1930s. This was so not only in Shanghai, but throughout China, reflecting patterns of travel and information flow.

Capitalizing upon this wide circulation of periodicals and books, the well-known writer Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) published many examples of woodblock prints, both Chinese and foreign. Through his deliberate selection and presentation of woodcut images, and encouragement of students to experiment with different printing styles and subjects, Lu Xun tried to promote a socially-aware art form reflecting China’s modernity. The exchange of information and materials through Lu Xun’s personal network of students, friends, and colleagues, both inside and outside of China, was vitally important to the propagation of these modern prints, and books and periodical publications were equally essential to the dissemination of this artwork amongst the Chinese public.

Lu Xun not only provided funding and personal support to artist groups and individual artists, but also brought literature, ideas, and woodcuts from Europe, America, Russia, and Japan into China for translation and exhibition. As a leading figure of the May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun was active in the intellectual debates concerning China’s social and political future. In the 1920s and after, he developed his own theory of how China should achieve modernity through experimentation with foreign literary, artistic, and cultural theories.

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Rather than advocating a total rejection of Chinese traditional culture in favor of the adoption of Western modes of education and artistic practice, Lu Xun encouraged the study of Western theories (including Marxism) and their subsequent application as a tool for building a distinctly Chinese modern society. At the same time, Lu Xun identified areas of traditional Chinese cultural production for young Chinese artists and writers to exploit in their own work, for example the popular style known as New Year Pictures (nianhua 年畫) and traditional woodblock print illustrations such as those he published in 1933 and 1934.²

Through translations of Itagaki Takaho 板垣鷹穂 (1894–1966), Georgi Plekhanov (1857–1918), and Anatoly Lunarcharsky (1875–1933), as well as the exhibition and publication of specific types of woodblock prints, Lu Xun strove to provide examples of ideas and artworks for Chinese audiences as “an alternative socialist road to art.”³ He specifically chose images related to industrialization and the lives of the struggling proletariat—themes with which Chinese artists living in Shanghai could connect through personal experience. Caught up in China’s struggles over Communist and Capitalist versions of modernity, and the quasi-colonial presence of foreign concessions in Shanghai, Lu Xun attempted to promote his own alternative modernity, a socialist modernity, through his choices and translations of Western literature and theories, as well as the introduction of foreign woodcuts.⁴ Ultimately, Lu Xun’s concept

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⁴ I draw a line between Communist and socialist versions of modernity both temporally and spatially; Lu Xun’s concept of modernity was contextually grounded by his urban experience in Shanghai during the late 1920s and 1930s. Furthermore, the use of “socialist” rather than “Communist” acknowledges the liminal political space that Lu Xun occupied during this time. While sympathetic to the Communist political and social agenda, Lu Xun was critical of what he saw as reactionary work by Chinese writers and artists. In conceptualizing “socialist modernity,” I am drawing from Susan Greenhalgh. 2003. “Planned Births, Unplanned Persons: ‘Population’ in the Making of Chinese Modernity,” American Anthropologist 105.2 (May): 196–215, at p. 198, where Greenhalgh describes China’s planned socialist modernity as “indexed by a rapidly industrializing economy and an egalitarian socialist society.” See also the discussion of socialist modernization efforts by Aihwa Ong. 1996. “Anthropology, China and Modernities: The Geopolitics of Cultural Knowledge,” in Henrietta L. Moore, ed. The Future of Anthropological Knowledge. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 60–92, especially p. 65.