

# Multiple Impressions: Contemporary Chinese Woodblock Prints

In the course of the twentieth century, the woodblock print evolved from a native art form long associated with religious scripture, book illustration, and folk rituals into a vital part of modern China's artistic language. When the first public exhibition of modern-style woodcuts took place in Shanghai in 1931, it heralded a dynamic art movement that helped shape the course of Chinese social, political, and cultural history. *Multiple Impressions* showcases this superbly evocative and expressive art form in the twenty-first century, presenting 114 woodblock prints created by forty-one Chinese artists; it is the first large-scale exhibition of such prints in the United States. The title *Multiple Impressions* refers first to the process of repeatedly inking and printing a block to make copies—the essence of printmaking; it also points to the array of styles, techniques, and innovations transforming the art of printmaking in China today. The diverse works are presented here in dialogue with one another, so that we may appreciate them with an ear for intersecting conversations and an eye for resonances and divergent visions.

The proliferation of styles and the spirit of exploration in contemporary Chinese printmaking testify both to the maturity of the art form and to the cultural conditions that make the works possible. In a 2009 interview, Xu Bing, perhaps the best-known artist in the exhibition to Western viewers, likened Chinese society today to a gigantic laboratory highly conducive to artistic innovation. Indeed, pragmatic experimentalism has been the guiding principle of the reform era, which over the last three decades has brought forth profound changes in Chinese politics, culture, social life, the economy, landscape, and, of course, art. The prints collected in *Multiple Impressions* are part of this grand, ongoing, and multidimensional experiment. It is my hope that they will help us gain a closer view of a changing and complex society.

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## Landscapes Old and New

The landscapes in this section evidence many different artistic visions and sensibilities. The variety in visual idioms results in part from the many methods of woodblock printing, including black-and-white woodcuts printed with oil-based ink, multi-block woodcuts printed with water-soluble pigments, and reduction printing that allows the artist to apply a vibrant palette of colors with considerable freedom as the block itself is progressively cut away with each imprint. While some artists readily incorporate into their work elements from the native landscape tradition, in particular the expressive effects of literati ink painting, others have a clear aesthetic affinity for Western-influenced realist oil painting and even photography. In addition, many distinct regional sceneries and topographies are reflected—from the yellow earth of northwestern China to the land of rivers and lakes in the fertile Yangtze Delta to the open Tibetan highland.

In keeping with a long intellectual tradition, many printmakers turn to nature or rural scenery in search of a spiritual homeland, an imaginary oasis away from society's hustle and bustle. Other artists offer direct cultural critique and reflection by zeroing in on current human geography or by juxtaposing scenes from different historical moments. The gaze that permeates these images is a contemplative one, deeply personal, and often nostalgic; it stands in sharp contrast to the jubilant celebrations of the human conquest of nature that animated much of the printmaking of the mid-twentieth century. These contemporary landscapes invite us to imagine anew our world and our relation to it, while reminding us of the many cultural resources available for such an adventure.

### **Fellow Beings**

From the beginning of the modern woodcut movement in the early 1930s, human subjects in a social setting have been a main concern for Chinese printmakers. Under the trying conditions of war and social turmoil in the 1940s, hardly any other visual medium could claim the same epic scale or complexity in representing contemporary events and collective action as woodblock prints. In the following decades, woodcut artists continued to portray human subjects in response to changing political and social imperatives. Indeed, a visual record of life in twentieth-century China would be at best incomplete without these telling depictions.

The artists in this exhibition adopt a wide range of viewpoints with regard to their subjects and employ many styles and techniques to capture the emotional and historical aspects of the human form. Just as landscapes by contemporary printmakers are more poignant when viewed against images of crowded cityscapes or previous celebrations of industrialization, the human subjects portrayed here reveal great depth when viewed against commercial or promotional imagery circulated in the mass media. Our viewing experience is enriched when we approach the images comparatively, as is illustrated in the four markedly different representations of families in this section. In each of these images we see a meaningful moment or a searching vision, with vivid individual impressions constituting an intricate mosaic—an apt metaphor of contemporary Chinese society.

### **Layered Abstractions**

The concept of abstraction in this section is a fluid one. In some cases it refers to an evident departure from representational depiction; in others, the artist is primarily interested in giving visual expression to private reveries, in recording fleeting reflections, or in exploring conceptual or metaphysical notions. Many prints foreground the visual appeal and formal properties of the medium itself, drawing attention to textured surfaces with many layers. These works constitute some of the most intriguing experiments in woodblock printing today and underscore the contributions that Chinese printmakers continue to make to global contemporary art.

Modern Chinese printmakers have long identified four distinct elements of a woodblock print. First is the mark left by the knife or gouge cutting into the block: lines, shading, and even empty spaces should recall rather than efface the carving process, just as a gestural painting retains a sense of the movement of the artist's brush. Equally important is conveying the grain and texture of the wood itself, as different kinds of wood are used for different effects. A third element is the trace or imprint resulting from the printing process, which usually consists of the printmaker's rubbing with a tool on the reverse side of a sheet of paper. The choice of paper is another key element since its fiber or tactility may help accentuate the overall aesthetic and character of the finished work. Such formal properties may be unique to woodblock prints, but they are by no means culturally specific. As Chinese printmakers continue to develop and experiment with this ancient medium, they also extend its vocabulary and relevance for a broader audience.