

The Art of Replacing Pen with Knife—Ye Li, the pioneer of the new woodcut movement

Jia Song

School of Art, Tianjin Polytechnic University, Tianjin 300387, China

350711669@qq.com

Abstract

In the twentieth century, China has always dared to transform the old society, to shout for the nation, to fight and to face up to the bloody Xun Lu, With a strong sense of national responsibility and excellent vision of art, Xun Lu has supported and nurtured China's new woodcut movement and launched a realistic woodcut movement. China's new woodcut art, led by Yuan Gu, Ye Li and other woodcut artists, has stepped onto the stage of history, and has since been closely linked with China's revolutionary cause, sharing honor and disgrace. This article takes Ye Li, the representative of the emerging woodcut movement, as the theme, briefly describes Ye Li 's woodcut works in different periods and Mr. Xun Lu's evaluation of Ye Li, to understand how artists saved China with their own direction in that turbulent era.

Keywords

New woodcut movement; Ye Li; Xun Lu; modern printmaking.

1. Introduction

When we look back and forth from today's perspective, we will always ponder over the age of heavy suffering, and we will also be heartened by the full revolutionary spirit and the pride of building a new look of our motherland. Nowadays, in this complex era, the most exciting and emotional thing that can make people feel about that era is the creation devoted wholeheartedly by the previous artists with their revolutionary feelings. In this respect, the works of a large number of printmakers represented by Ye Li are particularly prominent. Members of Modern Printmaking associations almost all start from scratch, and seldom copy or create meticulous techniques. The creative method is usually to observe and experience life first, then conceive the drawings from observation and experience and sculpt with a carving knife. It is almost a kind of creative printmaking directly into the creative level.

Ye Li clearly defined the meaning of "modern printmaking" and the value, function and pursuit of this organization in the first volume of "Modern Printing" in December 1934: "Woodcut essentially retains the enthusiasm of a psychological organization, with her unique strong contrast of light and shade, can express more profound feelings than any art. Wood carving has more abundant skills, and can freely express various social and life items. Woodcut is a kind of mechanical production, which can meet the needs of the public. Wood engraving can accomplish the mission of general art from all angles of modern society. Although printmaking has only a short history in China, it continues to develop at a pleasant pace, which shows the urgent need for objective needs. In just over a hundred words, there are vivid words such as "enthusiasm", "deep feelings", "popular demands" and "mission of art". This may be a declaration, which shows that he has a deep and strong understanding of the new woodcut movement under the sense of social responsibility of "the rise and fall of the country and the responsibility of the man".

2. The Giant in the Moving - Ye Li

In Ye Li 's early woodcut works, there are traces of imitating western prints in form, with fine lines, emphasizing the relationship between light and shade of characters or scenery. Many of his works are somewhat empty in content, such as *Interior Characters* in the first episode of *Modern Printing*, and

so on. However, with the deepening of the thinking of people in the real society and the further establishment of the concept of "art for society", Ye Li has a strong need to seek new ways of expression.

In 1935, when the "North China Incident" broke out and Japan further invaded China, Ye Li called this period a "national crisis". In his article *The Evaluation of Wood Carving in the National Crisis Period* published in the inaugural issue of *Wood Carving Circle*, he clarified that the woodcut movement was inevitable because of the needs of the times, and encouraged young artists to recognize the importance and function of woodcut because of the needs of turbulent times. For great art to exist, people in troubled societies also need spiritual comfort, stimulation and inspiration. "We need the most realistic, the most realistic, the most powerful, and the simplest art. Therefore, art should be liberated from the individual to become the public, from Lyric content to reality. Art, in this era, has become a tool to adjust people's tension. Art, in this era, has a historical mission."



He practiced his artistic view with powerful creative action. During the Anti-Japanese War, Ye Li's prints were mainly against imperialism and feudalism. His first peak of artistic creation was also in that period. *Roar, China!* is his representative work, and also the voice of Ye Li on behalf of the masses at the critical moment of national crisis. And then *Who gave the destiny*, *Get up*, *Dawn* and so on are landmark works of art. Among them, *Roar, China!* (Right photo) is one of the new woodcut works in the 1930s. With rough and powerful lines and symbolic sketches, he vividly depicts a man's body with his back tied, blindfolded and struggling in every part of his body. Rigorous lines, strong visual effects, full of emotions shouted out the dangerous situation of the Chinese nation. It is not only a simple creation full of social functions, but also the natural flow of Ye Li's creative desire. In fact, only by creating with full passion can woodcut surpass the utilitarian color of preaching, possess the indispensable human power of art, and truly become a powerful weapon in the struggle against Japan and salvation of the nation. This work was widely reproduced by young patriotic students in December 1935 during the "12.9" movement. As a propaganda picture in the procession and demonstration, it fulfilled the "historical mission" entrusted to it by Ye Li.

During the War of Liberation, Ye Li firmly opposed civil war, persecution, oppression and hunger. His works in this period mainly reflect the dark, ugly old society. His main works include *After the Food Ding Goes*, *On the Hunger Line*, *Paintings of the Angry Tide*, *Underhand Intercourse in the City* and other realistic works reflecting the dark, ugly and corrupt society. *The Group of Raging tide* is composed of four works: *Struggle*, *Catching Ding*, *Resisting Grain* and *Rising*. The first three are the origin of *The Group of Raging tide*, and the second one is the result.

In terms of content, Ye Li, with his rigorous modelling, skillfully combines characters with shadows, characters and stories, and expresses the difficulties suffered by ordinary people at that time in the form of narration.



The Group of Raging tide

3. Ye Li in Xun Lu's eyes

Mr. Xun Lu was the leader of the times in the 20th century. He raised the two flags of literature and printmaking. Today, we have begun to feel the power of his literature from the middle school age, and many people have not known that Mr. Xun Lu is the father of the new print.

Perhaps Xun Lu had never thought that the most unswerving commitment to his practice and promotion of woodcut was Ye Li, a "student" whom he had never met. Ye Li joined the Western Painting Department of Guangzhou National School of Fine Arts in 1923 and studied painting in Japan in 1930. After the September 18th Incident, she returned to China to teach. Before he studied printmaking, he received an orthodox oil painting education, and was very fascinated by Matisse of the "Beast School". But after reading Xun Lu 's art theory, Ye Li began to think about "where should Chinese art go?" After 1933, Ye Li began to devote himself to learning woodcut. In 1934, he and his students established the first woodcut Association in Guangzhou Province, Modern Printing Association. He did not publish the handprinted woodcut magazine *Modern Printing* periodically. Ye Li would send the magazine and his works to Xun Lu for guidance. It was under Xun Lu 's meticulous guidance that Xun Lu 's artistic concept and spirit were in Ye Li 's woodcut. It has been thoroughly implemented and developed in creation. In the seven letters Xun Lu wrote to Ye Li, there were five letters directly evaluating Ye Li 's works. In the first letter of December 18, 1934, Xun Lu said, "Mr. Xun Lu 's woodcut achievements, I think they are excellent." In the second letter of January 4, 1935, " I hope Mr. Ye Li will produce such works from time to time and invades the literati's study with the beauty of the East." For Ye Li 's woodcut works, Xun Lu also made practical suggestions in terms of skills, printing and themes. In terms of skills, Xun Lu advocated that content and skills should go hand in hand; in terms of printing, Xun Lu advocated that printmaking authors should print their own prints; in terms of themes, Xun Lu did not urge artists to express the hardships and struggles of the nation, and if they did not have their own personal feelings, they would express what they saw. It's just the usual thing.

In more than a year, Xun Lu wrote seven letters to Ye Li, each of which was carefully taught and instructed by his elders to his younger generation. After Xun Lu 's death, Ye Li has always remembered and followed Xun Lu 's teachings and worked tirelessly on the road of new wood carving.

4. The creation of realism runs through the whole process

Ye Li 's printmaking practice lasted for more than 50 years. Throughout his more than 50 years of creative career, we can see clearly that he always pursued realism, mainly expressed the people's

suffering in subject matter, and had a rigorous structure in artistic expression, exquisite black and white layout, full of emotion and strong appeal. Generally speaking, Ye Li is a very serious artist. "He always criticizes frankly and never tolerates formalistic tendencies that are divorced from real life, empty in content and tricky in technique." He always kept in mind Mr. Xun Lu 's teaching: "Wood carving has been objectively supported, but at this time, we must guard against its degeneration and decline, especially moths, which can reduce the interest of wood carving, such as the new play into a joke of "civilized drama". From a certain point of view, it is precisely because of adhering to the principle of realism, grasping the creative intentions generated in life practice, and integrating his own thoughts and observations and perceptions of life into his creation that Ye Li can create such impressive and shocking prints. He stressed: "In art, we should follow the path of revolutionary realism serving the people and socialism, and not the path of imitating bourgeois art of Western modernism." It is based on this world outlook and artistic outlook that Ye Li has unswerving creative principles in his artistic creation, and can fully reflect the reality and ideals of that era and the whole nation. He is a symbol of the times, a embodiment of a nation, and a brave fighter eager for brightness.

For decades, he has guided students through the mountains and rivers of the motherland, enabling them to grow their talents in practice and increase their patriotic feelings from reality. While instructing students, he also created *The First Floor Begins on the First Floor*, *The Morning of the Capital*, *Conquering the Yellow River*, *Summer Day*, *Mountain Production* and so on. He also created illustrations for literary works such as Xun Lu 's *Novels*, *Great Changes in Mountain Township*, and compiled *Selected Collections of Ye Li Wood Carvings*, *Collections of Ye Li Paintings*, and so on. Ye Li devoted all his efforts to the cause of Chinese printmaking. He always remembered the prophecy and aphorism of Mr. Xun Lu: "Wood engraving has been objectively supported, but at this time we must guard against its degeneration and decline, especially borers." In commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of "Speech at Yan'an Literature and Art Symposium", Ye Li wrote: "Our generation, even generations, is the backbone of building a new socialist literature and art with Chinese characteristics in this great era. We must not live up to the great expectations of the times, the country, the nation and the people. We must take the Renaissance era which created socialism in China seriously and earnestly.

References

- [1] Ye Li: *Modern Printing* is a periodical published by Modern Printing Association. From its publication on December 17, 1934 to May 1, 1936, it published 18 volumes.
- [2] Yuan Fang: *A Preliminary Study on the Teaching Thought of Ye Li 's Print Creation: Big Premise and Small Premise* [D]. Central Academy of Fine Arts.
- [3] Ye Li: *The Valuation of Woodcarving in National Disaster Period*, *Literature of Twentieth Century Printing*, P. 17.
- [4] A small quotation of *Selected New Russian Paintings* in the seventh volume of Xun Lu 's *Complete Works*, *Collection of Collections and Remains*.
- [5] Xun Lu: *To Ye Li*, Volume 13 of the *Complete Works of Xun Lu*, People's Literature Publishing House, 2005.
- [6] Zuoming Zhang, Art Educator Li Hua [J], *Art Research*, April 1983, P. 13.
- [7] Xun Lu: *To Ye Li*, Dec. 18, 1934. See *Complete Works of Xun Lu*, Vol. 12, People's Literature Publishing House, 1981, P. 159.
- [8] Ye Li: *China Print Yearbook 1986 in My Change*, China Print Yearbook Editorial Board, Liaoning Fine Arts Publishing House, 1987, P. 89.