

Woodcuts Against Fascism from Shanghai to Mexico City

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✂ Listen to Song of the Guerrillas - He Luting

Listen to 'Song of the Guerrillas' (游击队之歌) composed by He Luting in 1937, popularised among Chinese guerrilla bands deployed behind Japanese lines.

While studying medicine in Sendai, Japan, between 1904 and 1906, Chinese intellectual and revolutionary Lu Xun saw a photograph in a lecture slide which shifted the course of his life. The image depicted a scene from the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) in which a Chinese man, accused of spying for the Russians, was bound and awaiting execution by Japanese soldiers. Instead of intervening or showing outrage or grief, a group of Chinese onlookers watched silently and passively. Lu Xun, who later became known as the father of modern Chinese literature, reflected that what horrified him about this scene was not the brutality of the impending execution itself, but the utter apathy of the Chinese bystanders.

‘The people of a weak and backward country’, Lu Xun **wrote** in the preface of his 1922 work *Na Han* (Call to Arms), ‘however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it doesn’t really matter how many of them die of illness’. For him, ‘the most important thing’ was to ‘change their spirit’ rather than to heal the body of the Chinese people, and ‘literature was the best means to this end’. With such reflections, Lu Xun decided to quit his medical studies to build a literary movement to save the nation. This necessity to awaken the national and anti-imperialist consciousness grew increasingly urgent as European and Japanese imperialist forces intensified their aggressions during the ‘century of humiliation’, bookended by the First Opium War (1839–1842) and the Fourteen Years’ War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931–1945).



Eighty years ago this month, the surrender of Japanese imperial forces brought an end to the Second World

War, or perhaps better named as the victory of the World Anti-Fascist War. Between 1931 and 1945, more than 24 million Chinese people **lost** their lives as the country became one of the central battlegrounds of the World Anti-Fascist War, alongside the Soviet Union, which sacrificed 27 million lives.

This resistance unfolded not only on the frontlines, but also on the cultural front. In the shadow of bombings and blockades, a generation of artists turned to a humble, ancient medium – the woodcut – and transformed it into a tool for mass education, agitation, and hope. This became known as the New Woodcut Movement, a current that grew from the avant-garde circles of Shanghai in the 1930s and later took root in the revolutionary base of Yan'an.

Though better known for his literary contributions in promoting a democratised vernacular form of written Chinese known as *baihua*, Lu Xun was also an important champion of the New Woodcut Movement. Believing that all artistic forms were necessary to awaken a numbed society, he saw the woodcut as a particularly important medium that was low-cost, reproducible, and accessible to the mostly illiterate population. In 1931 – around the time that the Japanese imperial forces launched a false flag operation in China that marked the beginning of the Japanese occupation in China – Lu Xun organised a six-day workshop in Shanghai taught by Japanese printmaker Uchiyama Kakichi (1900–1984). The workshop was attended by thirteen young artists and considered the launching point of the New Woodcut Movement.

From the Streets of Shanghai to the Caves of Yan'an



Käthe Kollwitz, *The Sacrifice*, 1922.

As the China Art Museum in Shanghai mounts the **exhibition** *Carving History – Shanghai and the New Woodcut Narratives of the War of Resistance (1931–1949)*, we revisit this movement’s history and its place in a broader international story of artists who carved new futures from the ruins of war. In the early 1930s, Shanghai’s cultural ferment became the first stage for the New Woodcut Movement. Small, radical art societies sprang up and published prints in leftist journals, pasted them on walls, and displayed them in improvised exhibitions, drawing influences from international political and artistic currents of the time.

Lu Xun personally translated theoretical and literary texts and collected and exhibited works from a range of artists, many of whom he brought before Chinese audiences for the first time. Among them were the German expressionist Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945), Belgian socialist graphic artist Frans Masereel (1889–1972), US printmaker and peace activist Rockwell Kent (1882–1971), and various Soviet printmakers. The bold black lines, emotional intensity, and focus on working-class lives of these artists offered a visual language for expressing China’s own suffering and resistance. Lu Xun called for ‘grabism’ (拿来主义), meaning to selectively take or learn from what was useful from other cultures and international artists in order to build a modern Chinese national art and culture rooted in the people.

The influence of these international artists can be seen in many works of Chinese printmakers of this period, notably Li Hua’s *Roar, China!* (1935), which depicts a muscular figure bound in ropes, blindfolded, and screaming. The ropes symbolise the twin oppressions of imperialism and feudalism, the roar a call for national liberation that was reproduced in different artistic forms, resonating with peoples across the colonised world. While Chinese printmaking dates back to the Tang Dynasty from the seventh to tenth centuries, these new woodcuts represented a radical departure from traditional Chinese prints, such as the decorative New Years prints known as *nianhua*, which were designed by ‘scholar-gentlemen’ elites and reproduced by artisans. In the new movement, artists were seen as politically committed creators and were involved in drawing, carving, and pulling the prints.



Li Hua, *Roar, China!*, 1935 and Hu Yichuan, *To the Front!*, 1932.

Another notable example is Hu Yichuan's *To the Front!* (1932), created in the aftermath of the Japanese bombing of Shanghai, which shows figures surging forward through jagged city walls, a rallying cry for mobilisation. Using only an image to evoke sympathy or rage, these woodcut prints were created to incite action and channel popular anger towards the front lines of the anti-imperialist struggle, fulfilling its agitprop function. When Japan's full-scale invasion erupted in 1937 in Northeast China, many leftist artists were mobilised into the anti-imperialist cause and left the occupied coastal cities such as Shanghai to regroup at the Communist Party's revolutionary base in Yan'an. During this period, what was a loose avant-garde network focused on the urban centres of Shanghai and Guangzhou became an institutionalised arm of the party's art and cultural theory and practice. In 1937, the Lu Xun Academy of Arts was founded in **Yan'an** as the training ground for a generation of artist-cadres.

This move from Shanghai to Yan'an marked a profound transformation. The expressionist angst of the 1930s gave way to the clarity and optimism of socialist realism, blended with the bright colours and familiar forms of rural folk prints. Art shifted from exposing suffering to celebrating peasant resilience, guerrilla victories, and collective reconstruction. No longer distant critics, the artists became artist-cadres living among the peasantry, depicting their lives, and helping forge a new revolutionary culture.

An Awakening of the Colonial World



Untitled works by Chittoprosad and Zainul Abedin c. 1943.

While the New Woodcut Movement grew from China's particular circumstances, it formed part of a broader continental and international response to the rise of fascism and colonial domination. In India, the Progressive Writers' Association (founded in 1936) and the Indian People's Theatre Association (founded in 1943) rallied writers and artists to depict the struggles of workers and peasants, most hauntingly the Bengal famine of 1943 through the works of Chittoprosad (1915–1978) and Zainul Abedin (1914–1976). In Vietnam, graduates of the French colonial art school used European techniques on local media like lacquer and silk to portray rural life and the emerging national identity to contest colonialism and imperialism. These cultural fronts shared a belief that art could be part of mass mobilisation and national survival, not merely aesthetic contemplation.

On the other side of the Pacific, a parallel current was emerging. In 1937, artists Leopoldo Méndez, Luis

Arenal, and Pablo O'Higgins founded the Taller de Gráfica Popular (the People's Graphic Workshop, or TGP) in Mexico City. The TGP revived the popular print traditions of José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913), producing thousands of linocuts and woodcuts that condemned the exploitation of peasants and workers, corrupt landowners, and the brutality of European fascism and US imperialism. Their most monumental anti-fascist project was the 1943 book *El libro negro del terror Nazi en Europa* (The Black Book of Nazi Terror in Europe), which combined eyewitness testimony with powerful prints including Méndez's 1942 *Deportación a la muerte* (Deportation to Death), one of the first visual portrayals of the Holocaust's death trains. Like the New Woodcut artists, the TGP used accessible media, collective production, and a clear social purpose, showing how art could serve as a tool for political education and solidarity.



Left: Miguel Covarrubias, *Las dos caras del General Franco* (The Two Faces of General Franco), 1950; Right: Cartoonist Ye Qianyu and air force soldier, Le Yiqin, at an exhibition of 'Cartoons for National Salvation', 1937.

Despite the vast physical and cultural distances between Mexico and China, by the early 1930s Lu Xun had already introduced Chinese readers to Mexican cultural and political currents. In 1931, he published Diego Rivera's mural *La noche de los pobres* (The Night of the Poor, 1928) in the Chinese literary magazine *Beidou*, praising its public, popular character. Meanwhile, the burgeoning modern cartoon tradition in China known as *manhua*, with figures such as Zhang Guangyu and Ye Qianyu, was influenced by Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias' visits to Shanghai in 1930 and 1933.

Though Chinese and Mexican printmakers had little direct contact at the time, these artists developed strikingly similar approaches. Both chose the inexpensive, reproducible, and emotionally direct woodcut as a 'people's medium'. Both rejected elite art forms in favour of bold black-and-white images of collective struggle and human dignity. Together, these developments and connections form part of the emerging internationalist, socialist visual languages of anti-imperialist and anti-fascist solidarity and resistance that arose independently across the colonised world in response to similar conditions.



Left: Colectivo Subterráneos, *Cucarachas fascistas* (Fascist Cockroaches), 2025; Right: Colectivo Subterráneos, *Los Nadies* (The Nobodies), 2023.

Our latest Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research **dossier**, *Mexico and the Fourth Transformation*, features artwork from **Colectivo Subterráneos**, a Mexican cultural group founded in Oaxaca in 2021 that draws directly on the traditions of the TGP and Mexican muralism. Their mural and print series *Los Nadies* honours indigenous and mestizo communities erased by colonialism and capitalism while *Cucarachas fascistas* satirises authoritarian elites as grotesque insects, inheriting the visual forms and practices of earlier Mexican political art traditions.

Eighty years after the world celebrated the defeat of fascism, we remember the young artists, from the woodcutters of Shanghai and the printmakers of Mexico City, who saw art not as an object but as a living practice of solidarity and memory and as an essential tool in the processes for revolutionary social transformation. As Lu Xun wisely **wrote** in the time of White Terror, heightened censorship, and ascending fascism: ‘Lies written in ink cannot hide a reality written in blood’. Today, eight decades after the international victory over fascism, may images and the written word help preserve the memory of this historic fight for generations to come.

Warmly,

Tings Chak

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