

FINE 4002 Final Paper

A New Perspective in Reviewing the Modern Woodcut Movement

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With the rising tides of modernization in China during the early twentieth-century, Chinese intellectuals contentiously reevaluated the role of art in reform and modernization. Scholars struggled in the art and literary worlds between modernism and traditionalism while they were re-thinking about arts in their country. Woodcut prints, which became the "official art" of the Chinese Communist Party by the late 1940s, was one of the revolutionary media in art arising during the turbulent 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Internally, power struggle between Nationalists and Communists made China's political conditions extremely unstable. Externally, China was also under threat from the aggressive Japanese imperialism. During this turbulent era, Lu Xun (1881-1936) advocated for a new form of art and inaugurated the Modern Woodcut Movement, which was inspired by western art forms, to motivate people to fight for China's future.

In this research paper, I will examine the impact of an art historian, Tang Xiaobing, to our understanding of the Modern Woodcut Movement. I would like to address the issues of how Tang's publication *Origins of the Avant-garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement* expands our understanding of woodcut as an art form and provides a new perspective in constructing Chinese art history. The research paper will first look into the discourse of the Modern Woodcut Movement in English-language scholarship. The paper will then examine how Tang has appropriated the idea of "avant-garde" to discuss the movement. The research paper will conclude with an evaluation of his argument and impact to the study of the early twentieth-century Chinese art history.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia F. Andrews, and Shen Kuiyi, *A Century in Crisis* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1998), 213.

## **An Overview of Studies on the Modern Woodcut Movement**

In the present English-language scholarship, prominent scholars such as Michael Sullivan, Shen Kuiyi, Julia F. Andrews, and Ellen Johnston Laing have recognized the importance of the Modern Woodcut Movement.<sup>2</sup> Their works shed light on the historical significance of the movement.

In general, current scholarship focuses on the personal achievement of Lu Xun, who is recognized as the "Father of the Modern Chinese Woodcut Movement."<sup>3</sup> Mao Zedong (1893 – 1976) has praised Lu Xun as "the greatest and most courageous leader" who helped to advance China's cultural revolution, showing the crucial role played by Lu Xun in modern Chinese art.<sup>4</sup> Shirley Sun's work "Lu Shun and the Chinese Woodcut Movement: 1929-1936" in 1974 demonstrates her recognition of the significance of Lu Xun by providing an in-depth investigation on his life and a detailed explanation of how he promoted the movement. In his lifetime, Lu Xun endeavored to introduce western graphic art to Chinese artists and promote foreign-inspired engravings throughout China. As one of the earliest English work on the Chinese woodcut movement, Sun represented groundbreaking development in the discourse of the movement by studying primary sources of Lu Xun's writings.

The rise of the Modern Woodcut Movement was not simply one person's effort. In recognition of this, art historians Shen Kuiyi, Michael Sullivan, and Julia F. Andrews published their findings in the late 1980s and 1990s. In common, they devoted a chapter in their books to acknowledge the importance of woodcut prints in modern China. These scholars traced the historical development of the woodcut movement by emphasizing not

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<sup>2</sup> See Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Julia F. Andrews, and Shen Kuiyi, *A Century in Crisis* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1998); Ellen Johnston, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988);

<sup>3</sup> Sun Shirley Hsiao-ling, "Lu Hsun and the Chinese Woodcut Movement: 1929-1935." (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1974), 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

only the role of Lu Xun, but also the contribution of other practitioners and institutions. For instance, Li Shutong (1880-1942) was one of the earliest modern artists promoting woodcuts by exhibiting European prints in Shanghai during the 1910s.<sup>5</sup> In demonstrating other artists and organizations' contributions, these researches have unearthed and traced the history of the movement in a more complete picture to the European readers.

Turning to Tang Xiaobing's publication *Origins of the Avant-garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement*, one can see that it provides an intact account of China's modern art before 1937, when the Sino-Japanese War broke out. The book begins from the modernization of art education in the early twentieth-century China, such as the reform of aesthetic education advocated by Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940) in the 1910s. Also, Tang incorporates the discussion about the impact of the Chinese woodcut exhibition in China and Europe in his book.

More importantly, Tang uses the term "avant-garde" to describe the Chinese woodcut movement as suggested by his book's title. But it is important to note that Tang was not the first one to use "avant-garde" in the discussion of the Modern Woodcut Movement. Art historian Shen Kuiyi has claimed that the movement owned an "avant-garde origins" in his earlier study.<sup>6</sup> However, Shen has not explicitly explained the reason why the movement is considered as avant-garde in his work. In contrast, Tang presents that the modern woodcut prints in 1930s was indeed part of an international avant-garde movement in which is compatible with the West by appropriating the western term "avant-garde". While previous scholars merely revolve around the chronicle of the movement and overlook the visual importance of woodcut prints, Tang's book complements their shortcoming. He emphasizes

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<sup>5</sup> Shen Kuiyi, "The Modernist Woodcut Movement in 1930s China," in *Shanghai Modern: 1919-1945*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum and Zheng Shengtian, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 266.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

the artistic achievement of the Chinese modern woodcuts in 1930s by presenting formal analysis of those early woodblock prints.

In comparison with the previous scholarships, Tang was innovative in utilizing the theory of "avant-garde" to provide a new mode of interpretation towards the Modern Woodcut Movement. He argues that the movement was nationalistically inspired and clarifies the artistic nature of the woodcut prints. In the following part, I further explain Tang's argument for the avant-garde nature of the movement.

### **The Modern Woodcut Movement as an Avant-garde**

In *Origins of the Chinese Avant-garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement*, Tang Xiaobing's intention is obvious as suggested by his book title. He has claimed that the Modern Woodcut Movement that emerged in Republican China in the 1920s and 30s was the Chinese avant-garde. His book aims at describing the historical development of this Chinese avant-garde. Tang argues that the woodcut movement was truly avant-garde because the woodcut artists "not only challenged the existing institution of art, the prevalent visual order, and aesthetic tastes", but also established the woodcut print as "an incomparably expedient and politically relevant visual Esperanto" in modern China.<sup>7</sup> Literally, Esperanto refers to an international auxiliary language without geographical boundary. Tang implies that woodcut is a kind of universal language which is understandable for all people in the world regardless of nationality and cultural background. As a common language, Tang views that the Modern Woodcut Movement had avant-garde nature of anti-institutional disposition, innovative visual expression and political driving force. The movement challenged the institutionalized

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<sup>7</sup> Tang Xiaobing, *Origins of the Avant-garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008). 218.

conventions of artistic production, circulation, and reception by bringing art closer to sociopolitical action.

Before Tang Xiaobing explained the avant-garde nature of the woodcut movement, he reviews the scholar Peter BURger's view of avant-garde as illustrated in his book *Theory of the Avant-garde*. As BURger observes, the growth of aestheticism in the nineteenth century European bourgeois society had detached itself from the "praxis of life", which means the social practice.<sup>8</sup> Aestheticism emphasizes aesthetic aspect of art rather than social and political themes. The avant-garde intends to abolish the notion of art as institution and autonomous social substructure by integrating art into everyday life. For instance, Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) used readymade material urinal to challenge the aestheticism in bourgeois society as shown in his *Fountain* (1917) (fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> Thus, the western avant-garde art rebelled against the bourgeois society.

In response to BURger's theory, Tang points out that the Chinese avant-garde in the early twentieth century shared the same challenging avant-garde quality. The Modern Woodcut Movement attempted to remain attached to the life of people. More importantly, he noted that the modern woodcut artists need to be discussed from the perspective of Chinese social context. The woodprints confronted modern system of artistic values and practices, and "the looming national crisis" has crucially defined the woodcut movement as an avant-garde.<sup>10</sup> During the 1930s and 40s, China was in political and social chaos. The 1931 Manchurian Incident demonstrated the helplessness of China in the face of Japanese aggressions. Also, the decaying Nationalist government failed to protect China against Japanese invasion and led to massive destruction and sufferings in the society. Chinese regard the Japanese bombing of Shanghai as the national trauma.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Peter BURger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 52-53.

<sup>10</sup> Tang, *Modern Woodcut Movement*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 116.

Under this context, Tang argues that the Modern woodcut print is avant-garde in the sense that it became the art for the life of the masses and forged a nationalistic identity. Tang discusses the remarkable shift during the 1920s toward left-wing cultural politics in the art world of China in his chapter two. A series of radical essays published by members of the Creation Society between 1927 and 1930 cultivated the theoretical foundation for a proletarian art movement. Inspired by Marxist theories during their studies in Japan, Guo Moruo(1892-1978), Cheng Fangwu(1897-1984), and Feng Naichao(1901-1983), among others, consistently argued that the mission of an avant-garde cultural movement was to 'join forces with the political movement" of the left."<sup>12</sup>

Woodcut artists' avant-garde subjectivity was rooted in the Creation Society's advocacy of a revolutionary proletarian art that could erase the bourgeois distinction between art and social activism.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the left-wing artists became self-conscious and recognize themselves as avant-garde.<sup>14</sup> In responding to this revolutionary demand in China, Chinese artists used woodcut to express their feelings and viewpoints towards political states of affairs. Woodcut was the ideal media among the Chinese artists because it was economical and accessible. When compared to other mediums like oil painting, woodblock prints were easily reproduced at moderate cost and lent itself to mass production.<sup>15</sup> The technique in creating woodblock prints was simple and convenient. Lu Xun was also conscious of China's treasure in traditional woodcuts which dated in Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). He appreciated the simple line drawing and the humble origins of woodblock print that it was an art belonged to the common people.<sup>16</sup> Thus, artists can spread art to the masses with a higher speed of circulation through woodcut print, instead of the conventional artistic media. It is

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>13</sup> Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-garde in Twentieth-century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, in Association with China Art Foundation, 2011), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Tang, *Modern Woodcut Movement*, 135.

<sup>16</sup> Sun, "Lu Hsun," 147.

important to note that woodcuts aimed at addressing a new public, the laboring and suffering populations, who were the major victim to the Japanese aggressions and had never been fully considered as a suitable audience for avant-garde art before.<sup>17</sup> Hence, woodprint artists intended to awaken the national consciousness of the Chinese for a collective resistance to the Nationalist government and Japanese aggressors. According to Lu Xun, although woodprints became a political tool to mobilize the masses, woodcut was still an art.<sup>18</sup> The question on whether woodcut is an art form or not will be discussed in the next part.

### **Modern Woodcut Print is Art**

Historically, woodblock was not a new medium to China, but a part of this country's national heritage. Woodcuts has existed for more than a thousand years since the Tang dynasty, and was also a common medium for mass-producing books and illustrations.<sup>19</sup> In the production of traditional Chinese prints, engraving and printing were separate processes performed by different people in a workshop. They did not express their own ideas and thoughts on the woodprints that was merely serve the purpose of mass production for the royal patron and scholars. Thus, the creators of traditional prints were perceived as craftsman, not artists.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the new woodblock prints in the Modern Woodcut Movement were European-inspired and emphasized the artist's originality in creation. The new prints followed the use of European oil-based printing inks, rather than traditional water-based inks. Thus, Lu Xun introduced the term creative woodcuts (*chuangzuo muke* 创作木刻) to differentiate the modern woodblock prints from the traditional Chinese prints.<sup>21</sup> This term, creative woodcuts,

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<sup>17</sup> Tang, *Modern Woodcut Movement*. 162.

<sup>18</sup> Sun, "Lu Hsun," 140.

<sup>19</sup> Iris Wachs, *Half a Century of Chinese Woodblock Prints: from the Communist Revolution to the Open-door Policy and Beyond, 1945-1998* (Israel: Museum of Art Ein Harod, 1999), IS.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Tang, *Modern Woodcut Movement*, 82.

implies that the printmaker was a modern artist with his own artistic vision, not an artisan who faithfully reproduced drawings by other people.

The creative prints were new in content and style. According to Lu Xun, they focused on observations of everyday life, especially labors of the lower social class, the subject having "harness and difficulty," "revolting conditions," and "shouts of protest."<sup>22</sup> Stylistically, they were simple and used the contrast of black and white only, and possessed "vigor" and "sprightly spirit."<sup>23</sup> Based on Lu Xun's viewpoint, Tang Xiaobing argues that the modern woodcuts of the 1930s are perceived as art with innovative visuality and artist's originality.

The innovative expression of creative woodcuts are the realist and expressionistic techniques in communicating the artist's strong emotion with the viewers. Lu Xun borrowed foreign aesthetic, mainly Soviet and German artists' works, to inspire artistic style in the Chinese context. Both countries were chosen because they shared a similar social context with modern China. For Soviet artists such as Alexei Kravchenko (1889-1940), they were also inspired by the Marxist politics and depicted labour and social construction as subject matter.<sup>24</sup> Lu Xun largely endorsed the woodprints from German artist Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945) because they had similar experience of suffering from the loss of friends or students purged by their governments.<sup>25</sup> Stemming from Lu Xun's nationalistic interest and emotion, both social realist and German expressionist techniques were promoted in creative woodprints. The use of social realism in depicting the subject matter facilitated the viewers to recognize the cognitive subject matter.<sup>26</sup> Thus, they easily grasped the motif of woodblock

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<sup>22</sup> Wachs, *Chinese Woodblock Prints*. 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Emrich, "Modernity through Experimentation: Lu Xun and the Modern Chinese Woodcut Movement," in *Print, Profit, and Perception: Ideas, Information and Knowledge in Chinese Societies, 1895-1949*, ed. Pei-yin Lin and Weipin Tsai (Boston: Brill, 2014), 77.

<sup>25</sup> Lu Xun, "Written in the Deep of the Night: On Kathe Kollwitz," in *Shanghai Modern: 1919-1945*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum and Zheng Shengtian, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 291.

<sup>26</sup> Tang, *Modern Woodcut Movement*, 214.

prints. Also, the advocacy on the use of visual style and vocabulary of the German expressionism which brings out exuberant individual emotion.<sup>27</sup>

To illustrate his argument, Tang presents a formal analysis and appreciation of a famous artwork of Li Hua, *Roar, China!* (fig. 2). He argues that this print articulates the creative aspirations of the woodcut movement and encapsulate the new artistic expression exists in the content and style.<sup>28</sup> The subject matter- a naked, bound and blindfolded male body- represents the artist's nationalistic intention in depicting the distressed individual during the Japanese invasion to China in the 1930s. The black lines render the constrained body and the artist has paid attention to the proportion of the human body to unite directly from the reality. The open mouth of the man suggests he is screaming due to his eagerness to free himself from his predicament. This generated emotion appeal to the viewers who might be illiterate masses or have no previous training in art appreciation in the modern China. The man is trying to reach the knife which is a tool help him to escape. According to Tang, the man is not simply a representation of China but articulates the nation's presence by calling for multiple human voices and aware there is a hope (the knife) for the Chinese.<sup>29</sup> Hence, this woodcut print can achieve mass understanding. Tang's emphasis on the visual approach provides new visual evidence to his argument of the artistic value of the modern woodcuts.

Furthermore, he claims creative woodcut's avant-garde status originated from tactility. By exploiting the visual properties of the woodcut, tactility conveys the artist's bodily exertion, even suffering, and shares it with the viewer. Similar to Clement Greenberg's argument on Modernism, modern art should address the intrinsic quality of the medium such as painting should emphasize the flatness of the canvas.<sup>30</sup> Tang Xiaobing had similar argument on the modern woodcuts. He has highlighted its unique tactility that it cannot be

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>30</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Forum Lectures* (Washington, D.C.: Voice of America, 1960), 2

exerted in other mediums. Lu Xun identified the vigorous aesthetic in the modern woodcut was essential to showcase the tactility of woodcut. The "aesthetic of vigor" (*lizhi mei* 力质美).<sup>31</sup> *5IV* was indexed through the creative woodcuts as the artist directly use the engraving knife on the woodblock.<sup>31</sup> In *China, Roar!*, the jagged black lines visualize the artist's vigor aesthetic. It then enables the viewers to visualize the artist's bodily exertion and impact on the viewers. Thus, the creative woodprints was a form of art and the movement was an avant-garde with its new visuality. More importantly, Tang calls attention to the visual study of creative woodcuts. He reminds scholars and readers that when writing or studying art history is not simply about the chronological sequence of the art subject, but also the formal artistic quality of woodcut print.

### **Impact on the Discourse of Avant-garde Art**

In the canon of art history, avant-garde is usually a term associating with Western art. The term, "avant-garde", is originated from France, meaning "vanguard" which describes an action or movement in the forefront or ahead of its time. Later, artist or art historian utilized this term to describe works pushing the boundaries of accepted norms or status quo.<sup>32</sup> Art historians regarded the European art movement such as Dadaism, Futurism and Surrealism as avant-garde.<sup>33</sup> In non-Asian art historians' discussion of the avant-garde, they focus on the European avant-garde only and mentioned nothing about Chinese artist. In China, the English term "avant-garde" has been translated into Chinese as *xianfeng* 先锋 or *qianwei* 前卫. In 1930s, the term has employed in artistic sense in China, for instance, a magazine of the Left-Wing Writers Association was named *Xianfeng*.<sup>34</sup> However, as Tang reveals, there is a lack

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>32</sup> Burger, *Avant-garde*, vii.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Gao, *Total Modernity*, 36.

of English scholarship on the discourse of avant-garde in China when compared to the large amount of Chinese publications.<sup>35</sup> This shows the subject, the Modern Woodcut Movement, is an incomplete picture outside China. In light of this, the discourse of Chinese woodcut requires Chinese contribution.

The Modern Woodcut Movement emerged in the 1930s, the time when other European avant-garde movements were also active in the art field. Tang Xiaobing is aware of this and endeavors in mapping non-Western avant-garde practices on to the woodcut movement. His book represents a valuable attempt to intervene in global debates on avant-garde theory and criticism. His appropriation of the term, "avant-garde," analyzes the nature and development of the woodcut movement in modern China and demonstrates his attempts of reclaiming the movement in canon of art history. With respect to both international and later domestic developments, Tang underscores the distinctive qualities of modern Chinese experience of the avant-garde in order to highlight both its intracultural relevance and global avant-garde movement.

When woodcut became a propaganda tool under the Chinese Communist Party, it comes to a question of whether the woodcut movement still constituted an avant-garde or not. The Chinese Communist Party became the new and major patron of woodcut. The woodcut artists lost their nationalistic intention and originality in creating woodcuts, and woodcut prints became a tool to serve the party, rather the people. Tang Xiaobing was conscious of the timeline for his argument of the origins of this Chinese avant-garde. He concentrates on the rise of woodcut movement from 1928 to 1937. The year 1928 was one critical moment when the fine arts became state-sponsored projects of the Nanjing government. The year 1937 was the time when the Sino-Japanese War broke out and was considered as the turning point of woodcut prints in which came under the conventional art of the Communist Party. The

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<sup>35</sup> Tang, *Modern Woodcut Movement*, 6.

modern woodcuts merged with Mao's revolutionary art in late 1940s.<sup>36</sup> Coming under the Communist Party orthodoxy, the content and the style of the new prints changed and woodprints became to serve the Communist Party. Tang does not go as far to argue that the new woodprints of the Communist Party are avant-garde or not because he is conscious about the relationship between avant-garde art and the state. He has carefully chosen a time period in favor of his argument.

Tang Xiaobing formulates an overarching definition of this elusive term "avant-garde" in his book, and its key features and implications in the context of modern China. This potentially assists the non-specialist reader in comprehending the woodcut movement. Also, he calls for a change from textual to visual approach to analyze modern woodcut prints. Readers would thus be able to appreciate the maturing of the woodcut movement as "artistic and political avant-garde" at its culminating stage in the second half of the 1930s.<sup>37</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Tang Xiaobing in his book *Origins of the Avant-garde : The Modern Woodcut Movement* perceives the movement as an originator of a power media. Rooted in Chinese traditions, modern woodcut prints are new and innovative expression of art instead of craftsmanship. Lu Xun introduced the realist and expressionistic techniques into the woodcut medium in order to communicate the social and political unrest in China. The old art form was reshaped into creative woodcuts to serve nationalistic purposes. The Modern Woodcut Movement was an avant-garde because of its innovative aesthetics and nationalistic essence. Tang's appropriation of the term "avant-garde" expands our understanding of the movement. He also attempts to reclaim the movement from the canon of art history that is dominated by the

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<sup>36</sup> Gao, *Total Modernity*. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Tang, *Modern Woodcut Movement*. 72.

West. This book serves a foundation for the discourse of Chinese avant-garde art that may inspire future writings on this understudied academic field. His work is significant to unravel the intricate trajectories of the Chinese avant-gardes in the twentieth century and beyond. Tang's approach in his book has successfully expanded the scope of vision of the early twentieth-century Chinese art that is compatible to the western avant-garde movement.

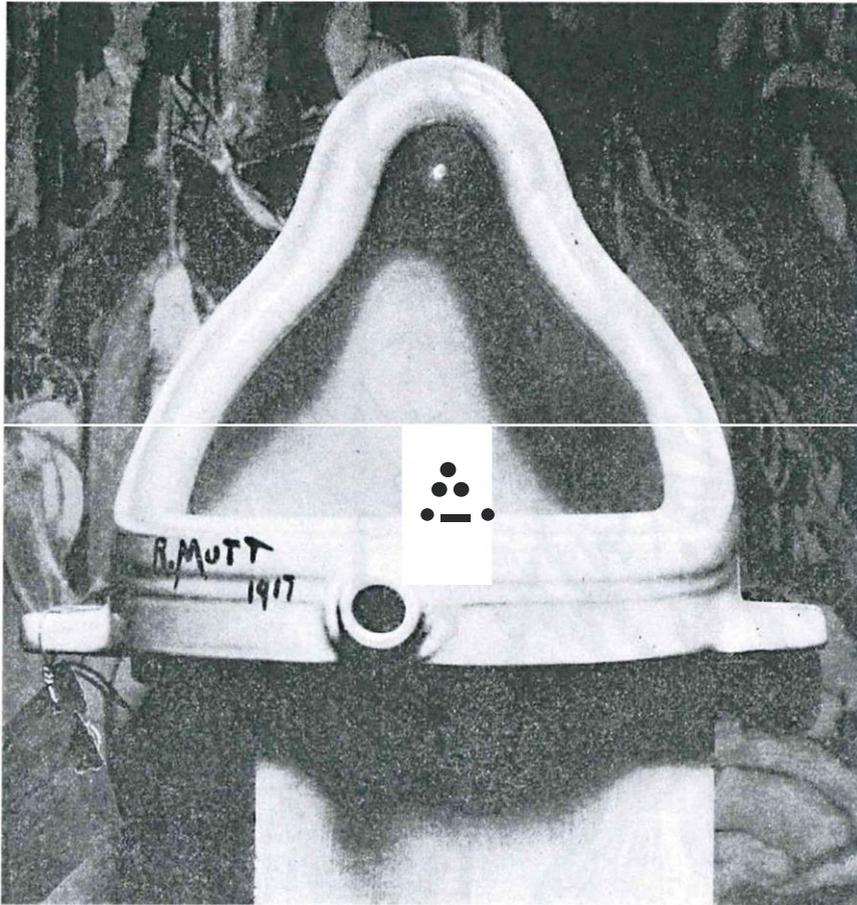


Fig. 1 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917.



Fig. 2 Li **Hua**, *Roar' China*, woodcut, 1935.

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