

# *The development of China Sichuan folk woodcut motifs using reduction cutting print*

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**Abstract:** Sichuan folk woodcut motifs are a kind of culture derived from the combination of the nature of human farming, aesthetics and instincts during the period of developed farming culture in China, with the characteristics of simplicity, conciseness, vividness and innocence. This article focuses on the Sichuan folk woodcut explore to combine the traditional folk art form and the contemporary art. Woodcut prints, as a category of printmaking, have a long history, with the earliest woodblock prints dating back to the Sui and Tang dynasties in China. Using reduction cutting print, the more plates the richer the colour and level, but never the more the better, a reasonable plate not only can save the board, but also for the back of the printing to bring convenience, improve efficiency.

## 1. Introduction

Sichuan folk woodcut motifs are a part of Chinese country's folk culture, which has a long history and is commonly found in Chinese folk lore. Nowadays, many places in Sichuan province have the custom of pasting folk woodcut motif like New Year paintings with special symbols in the New Year. Folk woodcuts motifs are a kind of culture derived from the combination of the simple nature of human farming, aesthetics and instincts during the period of developed farming culture, with the characteristics of simplicity, conciseness, vividness and innocence. The origin of folk woodcut motif is closely related to the people's beliefs of avoiding evil spirits and keeping the house in safe, and the theme of the motif is closely related to the real life, and has the characteristic of vivid expression.

## 2. Sichuan folk woodcut motifs

Sichuan folk woodcut most contain three important parts, the Mianzhu part, the Jiajiang, and the Liangping. There places are located nearly also in the southwestern of China.

The colours of Jiajiang image are gorgeous and harmonious, with the features of solemnity and high quality. The colours are natural paints, such as orange-red, Buddha green, purple-red, etc. Through the matching of light and dark, black and white, the effect of mixing colours and space is obtained. In modelling, it adopts virtual expression, highlighting and even exaggerating the

character's image characteristics, with a strong infectious force. Facing different styles and subjects, the creators use different lines, applying smooth, delicate and strong, rough lines to make the images of the woodcut paintings more vivid. In terms of spatial layout, they adopt the form of expression in which the real and the imaginary are intertwined, and often use the way of leaving white space to form the contrast between the top and bottom, the size, the curvature and the straightness, etc., so as to make the picture empty, but not unreality. The common themes of Jiajiang folk woodcut are six categories: drama, dolls, figures, scenery, flowers and birds, symbolism, and door keeper, the new year picture.[1]

The expression of Mianzhu folk woodcut is closely related to the local economy and folklore, which contains the customs and spirit of Mianzhu. “Zhu” in Chinese is the meaning of the bamboo. The unique geographical environment of Mianzhu is suitable for the growth of bamboo, and the paper used in Mianzhu woodcut printing has a special powder paper, together with the special white clay, which forms the biggest characteristic of Mianzhu items. The composition of Mianzhu printing is mainly simple, and mostly adopts the expression of leaving the background white, thus obtaining the effect of simple composition and rich content, and also highlighting the theme and leaving space for imagination. In modelling, exaggerated and abstract expressions are used to create a romantic style. In colouring, strong and bright colours are used to highlight the characteristics of light and darkness to make the image fuller. Therefore, according to the main colour of the printings, Mianzhu can be divided into two categories: "black goods" and "red goods". Most of the subjects of Mianzhu paintings are derived from Taoist stories and characters, such as "The keeper of door" "Gong Xi Fa Cai", "The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea", "Zhao Gong Zhen Zhai" (as shown in Figure 1) and other traditional folk stories. [1]



Figure 1: Mianzhu folk woodcut motifs ("The keeper of door" "Gong Xi Fa Cai" "Zhao Gong Zhen Zhai" "The ridding bike girl" etc.)

Liangping folk woodcut paintings have the advantages of printmaking, fused the characteristics of printmaking that adopts slanting lines, cross lines and parallel lines to engrave scenes, and formed a real, rich and three-dimensional line expression. The modelling is general but programmed and abstract, and Liangping folk woodcut paintings are simple and gorgeous, rough and delicate, solemn and mysterious. There are roughly four kinds of subject contents in Liangping paintings, namely, the category of door keeper, folk stories, opera stories and landscapes. [1]

### 3. Importance of Reduction Cutting Print Technology in Chinese Woodcut

Woodblock prints, as a category of printmaking, have a long history, with the earliest woodblock prints dating back to the Sui and Tang dynasties in China.<sup>[5]</sup>

As an important category in the art of printmaking, woodblock prints came into being along with engraving and printing, and in the early days, they were used as a tool for transmitting information and did not have their own independent artistic language. In the early days, woodblock prints were painted, engraved and printed by different craftsmen. The prints of this period are collectively called reproduction prints.

The functionality that printmaking from the printing press was accomplished by the 15th-century master artist Albrecht Dürer. Since then, printmaking has shifted to a creative phase in which the

artist is directly involved in the engraving and printing process. In the 19th century, the art of European woodblock printing was widely spread throughout the world.<sup>[5]</sup>

The art of creating woodblock prints in China began in the early 1930s with the new woodcut movement advocated by LuXun. He advocated the beginning of the new woodcut movement, which is fundamentally different from the ancient reproduction prints in China. Until today, there have been nearly 90 years of development.<sup>[5]</sup>

During the Jiaqing period of the Qing Dynasty, due to the prosperity of the commodity economy, Mianzhu New Year Picture woodcut entered its heyday and became famous all over the country. In 2002, Mianzhu New Year Picture selected as one of the intangible cultural heritage projects in China. It is the heritage of the Chinese country's folk culture.<sup>[6]</sup>

#### 4. Exploring the development of Chinese folk woodcut patterns in reduction cutting print

The colourful reduction woodcut in printmaking is relative to black and white woodblock printmaking. It is a printmaking technique that uses multiple colour plates, superimposed on each other plate colour for artistic expression (as shown in Figure 2).



Figure 2: "The keeper of door" using reduction cutting print

According to the nature of pigments used in printing, it can be divided into oil printing (using oil-based pigments) and water printing (using water-based pigments). Watermark overlay woodcut is widely existed in the art of woodblock prints in the world, which is famous for its unique art form, such as Yangliuqing folk woodcut in Tianjin, also the Sichuan ones in China, and Ukiyo-e in Japan, etc. While oil overlay woodcut is more common than watermark overlay woodcut. Compared with watermark overlay woodcut, oil printing overlay woodcut has not formed a relatively clustered art collective. The oil overprint woodcut is divided more according to the nature of the pigment used rather than the artistic characteristics. It accompanied the development of creative printmaking, which began in Europe in the 15th century and spread throughout the world.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### 5. Reduction cutting print

The reduction cut, a method of colour printing in which you use the same block over and over, carving more away with each new layer of colour.<sup>[3]</sup>

The material often uses the three-ply or five-ply boards made of wood such as basswood, poplar and ash for carving. Among them, basswood and poplar are moderately hard and suitable for carving. Basswood is mild, fine grain, easy to process, wear-resistant, corrosion-resistant, with fine and even grain and fuzzy straight grain. Ash wood is tough and has beautiful wood grain, and its natural wood grain texture can be used in overprinting to enrich the picture. Creators can make the choice of boards according to the demand for picture effects.<sup>[2]</sup>

Different types of colourful reduction cut print are chosen depend on the needs of the pattern, and layer separation is the key to clarifying the relationship of the many colours and woodcut in the whole. Split layer is a concept in woodcut printmaking that visually separates viewings in slices,

where graphic parts can intersect and overlap, and layers of overprints are applied to get the final picture.

In the creation of reduction cutting print, each step of the process drawing, layer making, copying, engraving, printing is indispensable, and the process of platemaking is integrated into the creation of the print and becomes an important part of it. The drawing connects the viewing and the layer platemaking, and then how to realise a meaningful viewing through the language of painting through platemaking.

Subplates should not be confined to the mind, or marked n ① and n ②, n ③, or even more, on your drawing, which will only make the already chaotic brain still not be able to make sense of it, need to treat drawings as well as honestly draw the subplates, and make some hints to the engraved notes, such as to make the order of the printing, the direction of the engraved lines, the position of the blocks cut, the use of colour.<sup>[6]</sup> The use of gradation and so on, so as to facilitate the copying, engraving and printing, in this coherent process of correction of the rationality of plate division, in the overlapping layers of space to find the fit between different plate, the colour and the line of the complementary.<sup>[6]</sup>

According to the creator's habit, one can draw all the layer subplates, become the basis for engraving and printing, and then all the layout engraving is completed and then test printing adjustments; another can be roughly drawn subplates step by step, while engraving and printing side of the creation of adjustments, typically a reduction in the method, in the creation of a set of plates can be engraved out of the first version, will be printed out first, to the existing visual effect and then engraved the next version of the flexible layout of the picture. Using reduction cutting print, the number of plates, although the more plates the richer the colour and level, but never the more the better, a reasonable plate not only can save the board, but also for the back of the printing to bring convenience, improve efficiency, in accordance with the viewing and drawing, through the plate to complete the creation of another.

In the reduction cut the sub printing each colour is both a term of art and an important step in the creation of prints, in the sense that it has a certain production quality, inextricably linked to a technique that points to logic, spatiality and the anticipation of the future. This technique points to logic, spatiality and the anticipation of the unknown. Of course, there are rules to follow when dividing a plate, the same colour can be divided into one plate, and the non-adjacent graphics can be divided into one plate are the two most basic principles of dividing a plate, the same colour can be divided into one plate, and the non-adjacent graphics can be divided into one plate, though the colours are different, because they have a certain amount of colour (as shown in Figure 3).



Figure 3: The reduction cutting print steps each colour of platemaking

Depending on the drawing, there is more than one way to divide a plate, as if from a starting point to an end point, there must be more than one path to choose from, but we will certainly choose the optimal route to save time and improve efficiency, the same is true for sub-panels, it can be more than a few sets of drawings, analyse and compare its reasonableness, which graphic combinations in a version of more convenient to print, and in the number of plates as much as possible to enrich the picture make it clearly.

It is worth mentioning that the order of the sub-plates (as shown in Figure 3), which plate is in the first, which plate is in the back, printed out there will be a subtle difference, so there is no need to adhere to the principle of large blocks, light colours must be in the first place, should be arranged

according to the actual needs of the picture and to adjust the order of the line surface, shades, warm and cold, in order to achieve the best results.

## 6. Advantages and challenges of using reduction cut print

With reduction prints will only ever be able to do a single, limited-edition run. Because you use the same piece of substrate for each block, you essentially destroy the first block in order to make the second and then destroy the second in order to make the third, and so on.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the process of creation, it is necessary to operate on the same wooden board, printing a plate and engraving a plate, engraving off the colour of the previous plate and then printing the colour of the next plate to complete the work. When the work is finally completed, only the last plate remains on the board. The disadvantage of this method is that after the last version of the printing is completed, the previous version cannot be carved off due to repeated printing works. The advantage is that compared with the split-plate overlay woodcut can save the board, compared with the split-plate overlay woodcut is more time saving, the plate is also simpler.

## 7. Conclusion

And in as few as possible under the number of plates reduction cutting print as rich as possible picture, these are worth thinking about. With the accumulation of experience in platemaking, the creator's ability to manage colours and each plate and then the whole will also improve, and a relatively inherent thinking and thinking about platemaking will be formed. The creator's ability to master space and the whole will also increase, and a relatively inherent way of thinking and approaching plate separation will be formed, which needs to practice through creation. Try to instead of the traditional method to print woodblock, the reduction cutting printing to bring convenience, improve efficiency.

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