

# A Comparison of Folk Printmaking in China and the West

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**Abstract:** Chinese and Western popular printmaking art share common roots in primitive art. Deeply ingrained in the daily lives of the masses, Chinese and Western folk printmaking art, with its vibrant artistic energy, has become an integral part of people's lives. This paper presents a comprehensive overview of popular printmaking in both regions, encompassing its history, representative works, and materials. The development of Chinese art can be broadly categorized into official art and folk art. Chinese popular printmaking art, as an art form directly derived from the people, possesses the characteristics of originality and authenticity. However, throughout Chinese art history, class status and artistic status were intertwined, leading to popular art being often as low-level and vulgar, rather than being recognized as art. In contrast, Western folk printmaking art did not harbor such hierarchical distinctions, instead directly acknowledging the originality and origins of art.

## 1. Introduction

In China, research on the development of world printmaking is still in its infancy, with only a handful of books dedicated to the subject. Among these, "World Printmaking History" and "Western Printmaking History" are notable contributions, yet they do not provide a comprehensive overview of the development of popular printmaking worldwide [1]. Moreover, there is a lack of scholarly discourse on popular printmaking in China, and most studies on ancient printmaking focus on works intended for the elite rather than the masses.

The decline of traditional forms of popular art in both the East and the West is a holistic phenomenon, and popular printmaking is no exception. The constantly evolving society is increasingly altering the "primitive ecological environment," which has shaken the practical foundation for the inheritance of ancient public printmaking art, leading to its decline today. Fortunately, many ancient folk traditions and simple laboring communities still exist in modern China [2]. The life of traditional woodcut printmaking art stubbornly persists and continues within these folk customs, presenting a diverse and complex developmental landscape. It is, therefore, meaningful to return to the original source and infuse our contemporary printmaking content with this vital energy.

A comparative study of the originality of Chinese and Western popular printmaking is, on the one hand, a process of organizing and supplementing the integrity of printmaking. On the other hand, it involves reflecting on the specific existence and value of popular printmaking, which cannot be ignored in the development of printmaking. By comparing Chinese and Western popular printmaking, we can discover and illuminate more characteristics of originality. This is highly significant and pressing,

as it allows us to reflect on the aesthetic form, technical form, and lifestyle of popular printmaking. In seeking a connection between the public and printmaking, we must not allow them to become disconnected. In the current context, we should focus on cultivating the art market for printmaking and consider strategies to transform the current state of printmaking art, enabling it to truly become the art of the people [3].

This study conducted a comparative analysis of Chinese and Western popular printmaking using representative figures from the time period, such as Du Le and Chen Hongshou, as examples. First, it compared the originality of Suzhou printmaking with Western printmaking. Second, it compared the printmaking themes and styles of Chinese and Western popular printmaking by analyzing the works themselves. The study explored the characteristics of originality in these works and presented them intuitively in charts, which further enriched the content of the paper. The results provide a deeper understanding of the concept and art of popular printmaking. Popular printmaking art not only has its own unique artistic form but also embodies the cultural and spiritual connotations of the people's lives. By analyzing the primary artistic beauty of popular printmaking art from cultural and daily perspectives, this study explores the rich cultural heritage of Chinese folk printmaking art and delves into the essence of local popular printmaking.

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## 2. Comparison of Chinese and Western Popular Printmaking Art

### 2.1. Regional differences in popular printmaking art between the East and the West

Throughout the long history of Chinese and Western painting, distinct characteristics have emerged in each tradition due to varying influences, such as painting concepts, tools and materials, political and cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, local philosophy, and aesthetic tastes. These factors have contributed to the formation of two distinct painting systems. Numerous works have analyzed and interpreted the differences between Chinese and Western painting from various perspectives. Among these, the differences between Chinese painting and oil painting have been extensively discussed, while systematic and rigorous comparative studies of woodblock painting between the East and the West remain scarce [4].

The production of woodblock prints involves plate making and printing, emphasizing the aesthetics of material language and the direct expression of the painting process. These characteristics distinguish woodblock prints from direct painting methods. Traditional painting theory and practice encompass various aspects, but they generally maintain the stability and directness of materials and production. Art forms with strong production and high craftsmanship requirements have not gained acceptance among mainstream aesthetic elites. Traditional Chinese sculpture has largely developed in a folk and anonymous state, contrasting with the status of Western sculptors and the recognition accorded to art history. The close relationship between Western painting, printmaking, and sculpture stems from the artist's preference for production. Consequently, the lack of true printmakers in ancient China can be attributed to regional and cognitive differences between the East and the West.

### 2.2. The Historical Background of the Development of Popular Printmaking in the East and West

Religious painting, an integral component of Western traditional art, has consistently enjoyed widespread acceptance among people from all walks of life, from commoners to nobles. Early European woodblock prints, which emerged over 700 years after their Chinese counterparts, exhibit striking similarities in terms of composition and form. The earliest extant "Proto Woodblock Paintings" clearly demonstrate the influence of traditional Chinese woodblock prints, evident in the line-drawn and sun-engraved depiction of Christ. In both the East and the West, early woodblock prints served as vehicles for religious dissemination. From a formal perspective, traditional Chinese woodblock prints emphasized the use of lines to capture the characteristics of objects, prioritizing the aesthetic expression of the lines themselves. In contrast, traditional Western woodblock prints employed lines to construct dignified compositions, placing greater emphasis on the physical perception of objective objects [5].

In Western art, printmaking has traditionally been used as a means of book illustration. However, as printmaking gained popularity, artists began to explore its potential beyond book illustration. Many painters began using printmaking techniques to replicate their oil paintings, which they would then print and sell, thus establishing a new artistic practice. The emergence and establishment of independent printmaking workshops further contributed to the recognition of printmaking as an independent art form, with its own unique aesthetic value. This development was closely linked to the growing cultural needs of the urban middle class during that period. In China, during the Ming dynasty, painters such as Chen Hongshou primarily used their paintings as illustrations for books, rarely exhibiting them as independent works of art. However, in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the flourishing economy and cultural development led to a golden age for the printmaking industry. Various types of prints emerged, including comic strips, traditional Chinese opera prints, novel illustrations, New Year prints, and literary works (Figure. 1).

(a) Flower Museum



(b) The expression of Louis XVI



Fig. 1. Comparison of Expressions in Print Flower Museum and Louis XVI.

### 2.3. The Primary Differences in Popular Printmaking Art between the East and the West

Religious culture holds an extremely important position in Western society, serving as both the overarching backdrop and a profound influence on Western culture. As a prominent component of Western culture, religion exerts a strong theological influence, which is evident in artistic works. Many artistic materials relate to religious genres, and there are numerous works that praise God. In contrast, China is a nation with multiple religious beliefs, lacking the singular religious faith found in the West. In Chinese religion, human talent takes center stage, and the ultimate goal is human happiness rather than divine dignity. This is particularly apparent in Suzhou printmaking, where most works revolve around people's lives, expressing their prayers for peace and happiness, and reflecting their daily experiences. For the Chinese people, religion is seen as a blessing that enhances human life, rather than being the central focus of existence. This difference between Chinese and Western ideological systems is clearly reflected in their respective works of art (Table 1).

Examining the originality of popular printmaking art in both Eastern and Western cultures reveals shared characteristics of authenticity. Despite regional and cultural variations, these art forms fundamentally transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, following a common trajectory. They are rooted in the people, closely connected to

the masses, and fulfill practical functions derived from basic life needs. This foundation allows for the integration of local characteristics and the spiritual essence of the masses, combining practicality and aesthetics to create numerous unique artistic images. This fusion serves as an infinite source of inspiration and an artistic treasure for future artistic development (Figure. 2).

**Table 1.** Comparison of the Originality of Chinese and Western Popular Printmaking Art

Country	Types	Aims	Primary characteristics	Background
China	Chinese opera novels, literary works, New Year paintings, woodcut comics, pictorial posters	The emergence of popular prints with independent aesthetic functions.	The spontaneity of the masses; The themes are mostly selected from the daily life of the general public The popularity of the content being expressed; Regional and Amateur Characteristics	Social prosperity, diplomatic envoys (missionaries) from Western European countries came to China, the flourishing of woodblock craftsmanship, and the strong demand of citizens for popular literature
West	Comics, letters and documents, illustrated posters	-	The production method is simple, the practicality, regional and amateur nature of the work, and the content is popular	Rapid social development, humorous attitude towards life, and the public's demand for popular literature

(a) Water Margin Leaves



(b) The Revelation



**Fig. 2.** Comparison between Chen Hongshou's Water Margin Leaves and Doule's Revelation.

#### 2.4. The Influence of European Popular Printmaking on Chinese Woodblock Printmaking

In the past, research on Western missionary painters who came to China has primarily focused on the imperial painters serving in the palace during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. However, insufficient attention has been given to the influence of Western painting and printmaking on popular woodblock prints [7]. In reality, there is a significant number of woodcuts in folk art that replicate Western copperplate paintings or incorporate Western printmaking styles into popular woodblock prints. A prime example of this can be seen in the fusion of Chinese and Western elements in the Suzhou Taohuawu Wooden New Year paintings during the Qing Dynasty. During the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods, Suzhou's woodblock New Year paintings extensively adopted the European copperplate painting technique, with many large landscape

woodblock New Year paintings utilizing woodblock coloring to emulate the effect of copperplate painting. Such artistic forms and expressive techniques are rare in traditional woodblock New Year paintings.

Suzhou printmaking incorporates the forms and perspectives of Western printmaking, utilizing traditional Chinese architecture, characters, and landscapes as subjects of expression. This approach results in a more realistic, three-dimensional, and visually captivating art form that appeals to the public with its natural effect. The presented images are unprecedented, combining traditional Chinese decorative qualities with a more realistic and delicate expression. During this time, Suzhou printmaking required exceptional painting skills. The shapes of buildings, characters, and plants were meticulously portrayed, with great attention to detail. The pursuit of perspective in depicting distance and proximity gave the works a high degree of completion [8]. The original works are rarely found in China, with some printmaking pieces still preserved in Japan and Europe, serving as crucial resources for international research on cultural exchanges between the East and the West.

Suzhou printmaking primarily utilizes wooden boards and relief plates to print outline lines, often accompanied by a lightly colored ink plate to depict shadows and other details. The colors are frequently applied directly with a brush using the hand coloring method. In the later stages of Suzhou printmaking, the size of the works even exceeded one meter, growing increasingly large. Some were single pieces, while others consisted of two pieces that could be joined together. For instance, in the painting "The Changmen Gate of Gusu," a vast scene was divided into two parts, each capable of functioning as a complete picture when separated. The European-style Suzhou printmaking, spanning from the Yongzheng to Qianlong period, showcased the flourishing society, culture, and commerce in Suzhou, as well as the people's fascination with Western painting. This unique style of expression in popular printmaking at the time contributed to a stable and prosperous society, a growing freedom in artistic expression, and a heightened aesthetic appreciation among the public.

From the perspective of regional characteristics, there is a significant time gap between Chinese and Western printmaking, with the latter emerging more than 700 years after the former. However, this delay has not affected the original interpretation of printmaking works, as their mass appeal and popular nature determine their uniqueness. While the comparison of works reveals different appearances, they also incorporate and integrate local cultural characteristics, showcasing an inherent trait. In terms of creative objects, both Chinese and Western printmaking were influenced by the social background and the needs of the common people, characterized by spontaneity and amateurism. The production methods for both involved woodblock engraving, followed by printing and publishing, showcasing strong handmade craftsmanship and simplicity. In terms of genre, both types of printmaking focused on the lives and social conditions of the lower classes, demonstrating popularity and universality. From this, it can be concluded that popular printmaking in both the East and the West reflects the primary characteristics of



popular art in their works. They integrate the primary characteristics of the people into printmaking creation, imbuing it with historical significance and collectible value.

From the 17th century AD, printmaking began to symbolize urban populations' taste and identity. For a long time, watermark woodcut has been an important medium in Chinese printmaking, showcasing its unique style and form in different historical periods. Suzhou printmaking, including Taohuawu woodblock New Year paintings, was significantly influenced by Western copperplate prints from the 17th to 18th centuries, giving rise to special content and form over the following 100 years. However, these works are seldom encountered today. On one hand, the rapid changes in the content of New Year paintings led to their inadequate preservation. On the other hand, Chinese literati at that time considered New Year paintings as folk customs and did not give them much attention, resulting in a lack of understanding of this area today.

### 3. Conclusion

This article provides a comprehensive overview of the materials used in popular printmaking in both the East and the West, including folk stories, legends, folk printmaking, satirical comics, and more. It offers a detailed history, showcases notable works, and provides explanations to better understand the art form. Throughout history, printmaking has played a significant role in disseminating images, starting with the invention of woodblock printing by the Chinese in the 7th century AD. Countless images created through reproduction have been widely spread and preserved as books or images. These images cover a diverse range of subjects, from religious, historical, and political themes to everyday life and the activities of the common people, reflecting the broad appeal and popularity of printed artwork. From the perspective of Suzhou printmaking, it becomes apparent that popular printmaking works from both China and the West possess distinct regional and local characteristics. They share inherent similarities in terms of subject matter selection, expressive content, and technique style to varying degrees. I refer to this convergence as the concept of "originality" discussed in this article.

While most of the public prints we currently observe come from overseas collections, they offer a glimpse into the historical style of that era. It's worth considering whether the influence of Western painting styles in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties not only impacted the artistic forms of Chinese court and folk painters at that time, but also potentially influenced the visual perception habits and needs of the Chinese people. For instance, the emergence of painters deeply influenced by Western painting under the tutelage of foreign painters appointed by the court, such as Leng Mei, Shen Yuan, Tang Dai, and Qiu Ying, could reflect this influence. Similarly, many folk painters, including Ding Yunpeng, Wu Tingyu, and Chen Hongshou, were also influenced by Western painting. They incorporated Western painting concepts and methods into their visual painting languages, which consequently affected the aesthetic perspective and appreciation interests of the people.

The profound influence of Western copperplate painting on Chinese printmaking reveals that Chinese painters studied and absorbed Western painting methods during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, integrating them with the artistic forms of Chinese painting. The extensive and deep communication between these two traditions over an extended period of time exceeded our expectations. By analyzing this, we can explore the original and historical value behind the developmental trajectory of popular printmaking art. This understanding can then be incorporated into contemporary printmaking creation, contributing to the advancement of the printmaking industry.

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