

# The Art of Chinese Traditional Woodblock Printing

## Introduction

Throughout its long history in China, woodblock printing has occupied an important position – as a handicraft manufacture, but also as a folk art that requires precision in tracing, carving and alignment in printing. Woodblock printing has made tremendous contributions to the spread of knowledge, insight and artistic inspiration.

The earliest woodblock printed illustration extant today was made in the year 868, at the time of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907). Discovered by a scholar named Aurel Stein in 1907 in *Dunhuang*, it is the title page of the *Diamond Sutra*.

Most of the woodblock prints of the Tang Dynasty depicted religious themes. In the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279), woodblock printing was extended to producing books on the classics, literature as well as illustrations. In terms of technique, process changed from one-colour to two-colour printing, with vermilion ink used side by side with black.

In the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), block-printing techniques became so advanced that full-colour effects could be achieved through the use of separate blocks for different colours. With further developments in printing and engraving during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, a large variety of woodblock prints appeared. The subject matter of these prints included operatic stories, as well as descriptions of people and places. The product of this time included Chinese New Year prints and paper offerings.

Lithography was introduced to China from the West in late 19th century. The mechanical process made volume production possible, and the printing effects were very appealing and of high quality. Lithographic printing became popular and became the industry standard for publishing books, magazines, newspapers and publicity materials. During the early 20th century, the civil wars destroyed many of the traditional workshops that led to a decline in woodblock production.

## The Printed Products

### Stationery and Entertainment

Block-printed stationery products include Chinese draft paper and copybooks. The draft paper comes in a choice of 9-squares, 400-grids and 500-grids, usually printed in green, black or red on white. The copybooks are for elementary school and advanced students. The 'red character copy books' are usually for the very young beginners to practice tracing of Chinese characters. Another type of copybook is for people who want to practice calligraphy by copying the styles of renowned scholars and calligraphers.

For entertainment, printed objects are of an even greater variety. There are printed-paper chessboards, prints depicting scenes from Chinese opera, and 'lantern prints' for lantern mounting.

The most popular paper chessboard game is called 'Rising to High Places'. The prints of Chinese opera, noted for their high aesthetic value, are inspired by stories from the theatre stage and folklore. Among them, *The Journey to the West* and excerpts from *Stories of The Three Kingdoms* were the most popular in the old days. Prints for lanterns are also highly appreciated, with traditional stories, figures from folklore and history, flowers and birds high on the list of popular designs.



*Titles and Territories Granting* (Section)

Foshan, Guangdong

Early 20th Century

21.5 (L) 67.5 (W) cm

The *Titles and Territories Granting* is one of popular folklores used for producing prints.

1995.114.128.1/ 1995.114.128.2



Woodblock and Print of Red Character Copy Book (Reprinted with an old woodblock)

Guangdong

1950s – 1970s

Woodblock 15 (L) 20.2 (W) 1.7 (H) cm

Print 15 (L) 20.2 (W) cm

1995.130.820



Lantern Picture – Rowing a Boat

Hong Kong

1950s – 1970s

15.8 (L) 16 (W) cm

1995.114.258

## New Year Prints

New Year prints are the festive decorations for Chinese people. To ring in the New Year, people would conduct a ‘winter cleaning’ and put up new decorations at home.

The Door Gods are the most common subject matter for New Year prints. They come in pairs that with two categories: the civil and the military. Military door gods are placed on the main door of the house while the civil door gods are placed on the bedroom door and on the door of the sitting room.

Among the numerous designs, some recurrent motifs are flowers and fish. The idea is to invoke blessings of peace and harmony for the New Year.



Harmony Brings Wealth

Foshan, Guangdong

Early 20th Century

57.8 (L)      33.2 (W) cm

The print is also named as “God of Harmony & God of Cooperation”, people worshipped these prints for a good marriage and success in business relationships.

1995.114.13



Woodblocks and Prints of Military Door Gods, *Da Lai Quan*

Foshan, Guangdong

Early 20th Century

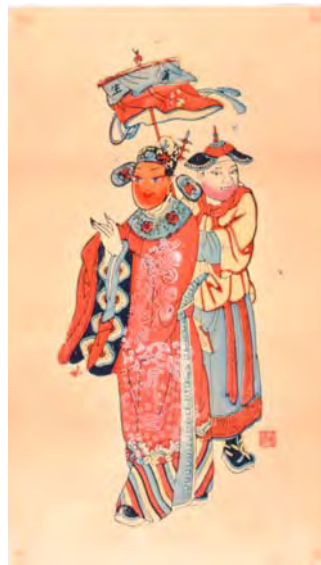
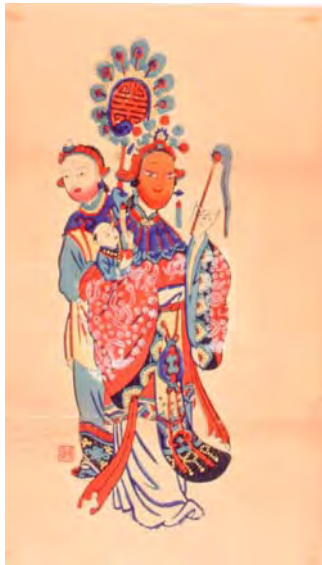
Woodblocks 58.4 (L) 40.6 (W) 1.3 (H) cm

Prints 67.2 (L) 53.4 (W) cm

The pairs of *Da Lai Quan* are military door gods that placed on the main door of the house. The design of this pair of life-like multi-coloured block-printed door gods was slightly exaggerated. The creativeness of the orange background was the major feature of door gods from Foshan. According to Foshan custom, the background would be white if a member of the family passed away during the new year's time. In such cases, the gods are called as *Bai-yu Men Shen* which named White Jade God of Doors.

1995.114.142





Ranked Number One in Imperial Examination and the Son-Sending Fairy  
Foshan, Guangdong  
Early 20th Century  
61.9 (L) 35.6 (W) cm

Drawings like this represented hope and a promising future. People usually displayed them on the doors of the room for newly married couples.

1995.114.103



Celebration of Lantern Festival  
Jiajiang, Sichuan  
1950s – 1960s  
25.5 (L) 45 (W) cm

The Lantern Festival was a traditional festival in Chinese society and famous for its lantern exhibition.

1995.114.99

## Rituals and Folklore Prints

Block-printing techniques were often applied to produce ritual offerings. The prints were used in rituals, for worship, as wall decorations and for burning to carry messages of the mortals to the other worlds.

The printed images for worship or wall decorations usually represent historical or fictitious figures. Their appearance was subject to the folk imagination. Another common item is shamanistic writings, which are supposed to ward off evil spirits. These printed images are usually placed at home or the work place to invoke blessings for the family and to smooth daily work easier.

The paper offerings for one's ancestors or for ghosts and spirits are burned in a ritual.



The Boundless Universe

Kunming, Yunnan

1950s – 1960s

36.5 (L)      30.7(W) cm

This paper charm was block-printed in a single colour and was displayed during the New Year's celebration.

1995.114.354



Good Deeds Illustrated on Paper

Foshan, Guangdong

1950s – 1970s

18.2(L) 21.5(W) cm

Good Deeds Illustrated on Paper is printed on yellow paper with sketches of mortals and red sheep.

1995.114.46



Empress of Heaven

Foshan, Guangdong

Early 20th Century

56(L) 35(W) cm

The Empress of Heaven was commonly worshipped by people along the coast of China and regarded as the protector of sailors and fishermen.

1995.114.116





Earth God

Foshan, Guangdong

1950s – 1960s

130.5 (L) 63.3 (W) cm

The Earth God is the patron of families and villages. This portrait was half-printed, half-drawn product.

1995.114.680



Old Mr Jiang

Foshan, Guangdong

1950s – 1960s

59 (L) 33.7 (W) cm

Old Mr Jiang was a figure in *Titles and Territories Gathering*. People liked to display his portrait in the living room as they believed Old Mr Jiang would protect their family.

1995.114.877

## Others

From the Song Dynasty onwards, woodblock printing became increasingly widespread in Chinese society. Used for official documents and in land sales, commercial activities and traditional customs, woodblock printing came to form an integral part of many government, business and social activities.

Block printing was used to produce official documents – land certificates, census records, revenue collection records and many others, which were then signed and chopped by the responsible departments, as well as land transfer certificates, which helped make the process of buying and selling land easier. Also during this time, as commerce began to develop to an unprecedented extent, account books, transaction receipts, trading rules, advertisements and product labels were all block-printed to facilitate business activities.



Demand Note for Agricultural Tax

Anhui

Late 19th Century

24 (L) 16.6 (W) cm

Agriculture was the major economic activity in China. Therefore, agricultural tax was a major source of revenue for the government and demand notes were evidence for having paid the tax.

1995.114.426



Land Transfer Certificate

Guangdong

The 29th year of *Guang Xu*, Qing Dynasty (1903)

68 (L) 57.5 (W) cm

The private selling of land was very common during the Qing Dynasty. After each transaction, the government would issue a certificate to certify ownership.

1995.114.704



Wedding Date Choosing Paper

Quanzhou, Fujian

Early 20th Century

29.6 (L) 28 (W) cm

This wedding date choosing paper belonged to *Hong Chao He*, a member of a famous family in Quanzhou City. It was printed in one colour on red paper that implied felicity and good luck.

1995.114.427



Woodblock for leaflet of *Liuwei Dihuang Pills*

Hong Kong

Early 20th Century

17.2 (L)      16.5 (W)      1.3 (H) cm

The product leaflets were commonly printed with woodblocks during the early period of Hong Kong. Here is one of the woodblocks from *Cheng Ji Tang*, a Chinese Medicine shop in Central.

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