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Traces of the Past: Contemporary Printmaking and the Cultural Psyche of Guangdong

Chenxi Zhang[1], Supath Kookiattikoon[2]

[1]PH.D. candidate, Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand
[2]Asst. Professor, Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract
This study investigates how contemporary printmaking in Guangdong reflects and responds to the region's evolving cultural psyche through visual symbolism and thematic resonance. Focusing on representative works by artists such as Xu Qinsong, Zhang Minjie, Luo Biwu, Li Kang, and Zheng Feng, the research employs a semiotic and sociocultural approach to analyze how visual forms encode symbolic meanings that engage with historical memory, social transformation, and personal introspection. Placing these works in their socio-political contexts, from post-reform changes to urban migration and ecological reflection, the study shows how printmaking conveys personal and collective emotion. Ultimately, this paper argues that contemporary printmaking in Guangdong functions as a repository of cultural memory, where traces of the past persistently shape the emotional and symbolic landscape of modern southern Chinese society.

Keywords: Guandong's contemporary printmaking, semiotic analysis, sociocultural approach

I. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of contemporary Chinese art, printmaking stands as a medium uniquely positioned at the intersection of tradition and transformation. While the digital age has reshaped visual culture globally, many Chinese printmakers have turned inward, rediscovering woodblock techniques and cultural motifs to probe the shifting psychological, social, and environmental terrain of modern life. Nowhere is this convergence more palpable than in Guangdong—a region historically known as the cradle of reform and opening-up, and more recently, as a crucible for cultural hybridity and artistic experimentation (Andrews, 2012; Gao, 2011). This paper explores how contemporary Guangdong printmakers articulate a collective cultural psyche through their woodblock works, using symbolic and formal strategies to address themes of memory, identity, and socioecological anxiety. Rooted in a long tradition of Chinese printmaking dating back to the Tang dynasty and revitalized during the New Woodcut Movement of the 20th century, woodblock prints in the post-1980s period have witnessed a profound reorientation. Artists increasingly engage with deeply personal narratives and regionally inflected iconographies, often invoking nature, architecture, and folkloric imagery to comment on contemporary conditions (Chang, 2007; Sullivan, 1996). At the heart of this development is a semiotic richness: trees, birds, tidewaters, and ancient structures recur as visual signs that bridge the personal and the political, the historical and the futuristic. As Roland Barthes (1972) noted, the symbolic systems in visual culture function not merely as representations but as mythologies, socially constructed meanings that reflect the collective unconscious. Guangdong's contemporary printmakers leverage this symbolic register to express both individual sensibilities and wider societal transitions.

The sociological context further intensifies the expressive weight of these prints. The rapid urbanization and industrial growth in the Pearl River Delta since the 1980s have drastically altered the physical and cultural landscape, leaving many artists grappling with displacement, memory loss, and a yearning for ecological balance (Wu, 2019; Hung, 2011). In response, artworks such as Xu Qinsong's *The Ebb of the Tide* (1989), Zheng Xingqiu's *The Eternal Moon* (1996), Song Guangzhi's *The Other Shore* (1998), Luo Biwu's *Migration* (2004), Li Kang's *All Things Come Alive - Beginning of Spring* (2012), ,and Zheng Feng's *Ode to the Moon* (2014), not only revive traditional woodcut methods but also construct visual metaphors for the internal negotiations between modernity and tradition, alienation and belonging. This paper analyzes five representative printworks from Guangdong-based or regionally engaged artists through the dual lenses of semiotics and sociology. Drawing on the theories of Peirce and Saussure on signs, as well as cultural sociology frameworks related to modernization and regional identity (Bourdieu, 1993; Feuchtwang, 2001), this study investigates how visual forms encode symbolic meanings and respond to specific social milieus. By doing so, it aims to trace the imprints of the past that continue to shape the emotional and cultural consciousness of contemporary southern Chinese society.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The contemporary revival and transformation of Chinese printmaking have been the subject of growing academic inquiry, particularly within the domains of cultural studies, art history, and visual semiotics. Scholars have explored how Chinese artists reinterpret traditional forms to negotiate modern social, political, and psychological tensions. This section reviews the existing literature on contemporary printmaking, situates Guangdong's artistic developments within broader discourses on regionalism and modernization, and outlines the theoretical lenses of semiotics and sociology through which this study analyzes selected artworks.

2.1 Printmaking and Cultural Identity in Contemporary China

Contemporary Chinese printmaking, especially since the late 20th century, has undergone a significant ideological shift. Whereas earlier works from the New Woodcut Movement, initiated by Lu Xun in the 1930s, were largely aligned with social realism and revolutionary politics (Andrews, 1994; Hung, 2011), recent decades have seen a turn toward introspective and regional expressions. Julia F. Andrews (1994) and Wu Hung (2001) observe that contemporary artists have begun to re-engage with localized identities and traditional mediums not out of nostalgia, but as a strategy to critique rapid modernization and reclaim cultural agency. Guangdong, with its historical role as a frontier of China's economic reform, has emerged as a fertile ground for such experimentation. The region's openness to global currents, combined with its complex socio-cultural transformations, has created what Nancy Steinhardt (2005) calls "a liminal zone" for cultural production; this is where tradition and global modernity converge. Artists based in or influenced by Guangdong increasingly use printmaking not only to document regional memories but also to reflect psychological responses to rapid urbanization and social dislocation.

2.2 Semiotics and the Visual Language of Printmaking

Semiotics, the study of signs and their meanings, provides a powerful tool to decode the visual symbolism embedded in artworks. This paper draws primarily on Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model, which is composed of the *signifier* (form) and the *signified* (concept), as well as Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model, which includes the *representamen* (the sign itself), *object* (what it refers to), and *interpretant* (the meaning it generates) (Chandler, 2017). In printmaking, lines, motifs, textures, and composition serve not only aesthetic purposes but also symbolic ones, pointing toward collective memories, cultural metaphors,

and historical tensions. Artists such as Li Kang and Xu Qinsong employ recurring visual motifs: streams, roots, tidewaters, ruins, which can be interpreted as "mythologies" in Barthes' (1972) sense: second-order signs that carry socio-cultural meanings beyond their literal appearance. As David Crow (2010) notes in his study of visual communication, images operate within cultural codes that must be unpacked to reveal the underlying ideological structures. Thus, semiotics allows for a layered reading of Guangdong printmakers' works, where nature often becomes a stand-in for memory, resilience, or ecological longing.

2.3 Sociology of Art and the Cultural Psyche

Complementing the semiotic approach is a sociological lens that contextualizes artistic production within broader historical and societal shifts. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the "field of cultural production" emphasizes how art is embedded in a network of power relations, market forces, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993). In the case of Guangdong, the cultural field is shaped by the legacy of socialist realism, the influx of global aesthetics, and the pressures of urbanization and environmental degradation. Art historian Wu Hung (2019) has described contemporary Chinese artists' increasing engagement with themes of displacement, ecological anxiety, and nostalgia as "a collective response to fractured memory and spatial upheaval." Meanwhile, Feuchtwang (2001) argues that regional traditions in China often become "sites of resistance" and "reservoirs of moral continuity" in times of social flux. By incorporating the sociological perspective, this study examines not only *what* is depicted in Guangdong printmaking but *why*: what historical anxieties, cultural dislocations, and emotional landscapes are being processed and communicated through these visual forms.

2.4 Integrating Theory and Practice

By merging semiotic and sociological frameworks, this study positions the selected artworks as both signs and symptoms, which are visual representations that encode and reflect deeper structures of thought and feeling within contemporary Guangdong society. These works are not simply aesthetic objects; they are cultural texts that reveal how artists negotiate identity, memory, and belonging in an era of uncertainty. In the sections that follow, this paper will analyze, through this dual lens, the selected works as follows: *The Ebb of the Tide* (1898) by Xu Qinsong, *The Eternal Moon* (1996) by Zheng Xingqiu, *The Other Shore* (1998) by Song Guangzhi, *Bags – Migration* (2004) by Luo Biwu, *All Things Come Alive - Beginning of Spring* (2012) by Li Kang, and *Ode to the Moon* (2014) by Zheng Feng. Each analysis will uncover the symbolic systems and socio-historical contexts that frame these visual narratives, contributing to a deeper understanding of contemporary Chinese printmaking as a site of cultural and psychological articulation.

2.4 Previous Studies on Contemporary Chinese Printmaking

Previous scholarship has highlighted how Chinese printmaking has evolved from a tool of political propaganda during the Maoist era to a medium of individual expression and cultural reflection. For instance, Shaoqian Zhang (2020) analyzes how post-1978 printmaking reflects shifting notions of identity and personal memory in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. Zhang observes that the medium became a site for artists to negotiate trauma and regionalism, moving beyond the collectivist narratives that once defined Chinese visual culture. In her study of the *Guanlan Printmaking Base*, Chen and Huang (2014) explore how artists like Li Kang use traditional printmaking to construct hybrid aesthetic identities in dialogue with both rural heritage and cosmopolitan modernity. They argue that regional spaces like Guanlan serve as cultural incubators where printmakers reclaim "lost time" through nostalgic but critically engaged visual vocabularies. Moreover, Tamara Smith (2016) examines how landscape-themed prints from southern China convey ecological consciousness and cultural memory in response to urban sprawl. Her work reveals that nature in such works functions not only as a backdrop but as an active symbol of

resistance and belonging. These studies highlight the shift in printmaking toward the personal, regional, and psychological, an artistic turn that resonates deeply in the Guangdong context.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Despite these valuable contributions, few studies have systematically focused on the specific cultural psyche of Guangdong as reflected in printmaking. Much of the current literature tends to group southern artists under broad labels like "southern schools" or "post-socialist realists" without close attention to how regional transformations—like Guangdong's role in China's reform era and cross-border cultural flows—shape visual language. While semiotic analysis has been applied in some studies (e.g., Crow, 2010; Chandler, 2017), few combine this with sociological frameworks to unpack how artworks embody collective memory, historical loss, and identity reconstruction under rapid modernization.

III. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that integrates visual semiotics and sociological analysis to examine how contemporary printmaking in Guangdong reflects the region's cultural psyche amid social change. By analyzing selected printworks through both symbolic and sociocultural lenses, the study aims to uncover how visual language serves as a repository of memory, identity, and historical consciousness in a post-reform China.

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

The research adopts a case-study approach focusing on six contemporary printworks produced between the late 1980s and early 2010s. These works include Xu Qinsong's *The Ebb of the Tide* (1989), Zheng Xingqiu's *The Eternal Moon* (1996), Song Guangzhi's *The Other Shore* (1998), Luo Biwu's *Bags, Migration* (2004), and Li Kang's *All Things Come Alive – Beginning of Spring* (2012). These representative artworks were selected based on their explicit engagement with critical cultural and social themes such as tradition and modernity, migration, ecological awareness, and regional identity. Each piece exemplifies a different phase in Guangdong's sociohistorical development, ensuring a diverse yet thematically coherent sample. This purposive selection allows for a deeper examination of how visual motifs and stylistic choices articulate responses to broader societal transformations occurring under China's Reform and Opening-Up policy (Gaonkar, 2001; Pan, 2010).

3.2 Data Collection and Sources

The primary data in this study consist of high-resolution images and exhibition records of the selected artworks, supplemented by artist statements, catalogues, and personal interviews where available. Particular emphasis is placed on reflective narratives, such as Li Kang's autobiographical commentary, which provide firsthand insights into the artist's conceptual and technical processes. Secondary sources include scholarly works on Chinese art history, contemporary printmaking, and cultural theory (Andrews & Shen, 2012; Gao, 2011), which offer critical context for interpreting the selected pieces. Visual analysis is thus triangulated with textual and theoretical data to ensure a robust and comprehensive understanding of each work's significance.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The interpretation of the artworks is guided by a dual-framework approach combining visual semiotics and sociological art analysis. From a semiotic standpoint, the study draws on Roland Barthes' theory of signifiers and signifieds (1972), decoding visual elements, such as texture, line, form, and composition, as symbolic representations of deeper cultural meaning. Motifs like the moon, boats, bags, birds, and spring foliage are interpreted not only in terms of their aesthetic role but also for their embedded cultural

associations. The sociological framework is informed by scholars such as Wu Hung (2005), who view art as both a reflection and agent of historical change. This perspective allows the study to trace how the visual choices of artists echo societal concerns such as urban displacement, nostalgia, ecological anxiety, and the preservation of traditional values. By combining these approaches, the study attempts to explain how printmaking operates as both a personal and collective response to the shifting realities of Guangdong's cultural and historical landscape.

3.4 Limitations

The scope of the study is limited by the availability of documentation for certain lesser-known artists or regional exhibitions, and by the subjective nature of semiotic interpretation. Nonetheless, triangulation between visual data, artist commentary, and existing scholarship ensures analytical rigor and interpretive validity.

IV. Visual Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a close examination of six selected printworks produced by Guangdong-based artists from the late 1980s to the early 2010s. Each work is analyzed through the lenses of semiotics and sociological art theory to reveal how visual elements function as cultural texts that reflect the shifting psyche of a rapidly transforming society. Together, these artworks form a visual narrative of Guangdong's evolving identity, shaped by forces of industrialization, urbanization, memory, and ecological reflection. The analysis begins with Xu Qinsong's *The Ebb of the Tide* (1989) (Figure 1), a landmark woodcut that captures the emotional undercurrents of a nation entering an era of massive reform and ideological reorientation.

4.1 Xu Qinsong's *The Ebb of the Tide* (1989): Navigating Social Flux through Semiotic Form

Xu Qinsong's *The Ebb of the Tide* (1989) (Figure 1) stands as a seminal woodcut in the history of post-reform Chinese printmaking.

Figure 1, "*The Ebb of the Tide*" (1989) by Xu Qinsong

Created during a pivotal moment in China's socio-economic transformation, the work reflects the emotional and ideological tensions felt across the country, and particularly in Guangdong, a frontier of reform. Utilizing sweeping, dynamic lines and layered tonal blocks, Xu constructs a composition where the tide itself becomes both subject and symbol. From a semiotic perspective, the tide operates as a signifier of historical flux: the slanting lines suggest forward momentum, while shifts in density signal both intensity and retreat. In the context of Peircean semiotics, this recurring wave motif functions as an

"index" of movement and instability, pointing to broader social shifts occurring outside the frame (Barthes, 1972; Pan, 2010).

Color plays an equally crucial symbolic role. Dominated by blue-gray tones, the palette evokes melancholy, dampness, and the intangible weight of uncertainty. These muted hues align with color psychology interpretations of blue and gray as signifiers of confusion, loneliness, and introspection; these are emotions that were particularly resonant in 1989, when individuals were confronting new freedoms alongside disorientation in their roles and values (Wu, 2005). Xu's deployment of these visual elements resonates with Roland Barthes' notion of myth: the tide, rather than merely natural, becomes a culturally coded metaphor for the reform-era psyche, naturalizing the pain and possibility of change (Barthes, 1972). Sociologically, the artwork captures the ambivalence felt by many during the late 1980s, when the ideological certainty of Maoist collectivism had given way to the chaotic promise of market reform. Guangdong, as the epicenter of Deng Xiaoping's economic experimentation, experienced this dislocation acutely. The tide, then, also alludes to modernization's costs, which are cultural erosion, migration, and existential drift. The absence of human figures further emphasizes the work's metaphorical thrust: people are not depicted because they have become engulfed or dislocated by the tides of change. As Lu Xiaodong (2018) notes in his sociological reading of contemporary Chinese art, such images encode a collective huzun (melancholy longing) for stability and coherence amidst systemic upheaval. *The Ebb of the Tide* functions both as a document and a critique. It documents the material and psychic conditions of a region, and a nation in transition, while also offering a meditative space for reflection. Its visual language, neither overtly political nor escapist, presents a contemplative realism rooted in Guangdong's cultural soil. Xu Qinsong's contribution thus exemplifies how Guangdong printmakers of the reform era mobilized traditional media to interrogate contemporary anxieties and reshape aesthetic paradigms.

Following the tidal uncertainties of 1989 captured by Xu Qinsong, we move forward in time to the mid-1990s with *The Eternal Moon* (1996) (Figure 2) by Zheng Xingqiu.

Figure 2, "*The Eternal Moon*" (1996), by Zheng Xingqiu

This lithograph offers a striking contrast to Xu's visual restlessness by embracing a meditative stillness rooted in tradition, regional identity, and metaphysical reflection. While Xu's print grappled with social dislocation, Zheng's work turns toward the eternal, the cyclical, and the spiritual—unearthing the timeless cultural values embedded in local forms and natural symbols. In *The Eternal Moon*, the moon functions as the central semiotic anchor. A cross-cultural symbol of time, change, and mystery, the moon here is

portrayed not in its changing phases but as an immutable, and suspended presence. As Roland Barthes reminds us in *Mythologies*, natural symbols like the moon are never "purely natural" but are loaded with cultural meanings that shift with time (Barthes, 1972). Zheng's moon connects human temporality with cosmic duration, evoking the viewer's existential contemplation. A significant symbolic layer in the work lies in the inclusion of Hakka *tulou* architecture: circular, fortress-like dwellings unique to Fujian and Guangdong. These structures do not merely represent ethnic heritage; they encapsulate collective memory, intergenerational survival, and familial solidarity. As Andrews and Shen (2012) observe, the incorporation of regional motifs into modern Chinese prints is part of a broader project of cultural self-definition in the reform era. Zheng's choice to feature the *tulou* highlights a specific regional identity within the wider narrative of Chinese modernity. Their massive walls stand as monuments of resilience, while their circular shape metaphorically echoes the moon itself, reinforcing the themes of continuity and protection. Zheng's lithographic technique with meticulous lines and atmospheric tonal layering contributes to what Chinese aesthetics calls "意境" (*yijing*, or poetic conception). The delicate gradation of greys and blacks does not simply illustrate landscape; it evokes mood, time, and inner stillness.

Sociologically, the work is embedded in the cultural climate of the 1990s, when China's rapid modernization spurred new anxieties about cultural loss. According to Gao Minglu (2011), the 1990s witnessed a renewed interest in "locality" as a counter-narrative to the forces of globalization. The *tulou*, then, becomes not just an architectural relic but a statement of cultural endurance in the face of homogenizing change. Zheng's lithograph affirms the possibility of cultural rootedness even in an era of flux. *The Eternal Moon* stands as both a metaphysical reflection and a cultural artifact—bridging personal introspection with collective memory. It demonstrates how Guangdong printmakers during this period were negotiating the pull between tradition and modernity, universal symbolism and local specificity, temporal rupture and cosmic continuity.

The introspective calm and cultural rootedness seen in *The Eternal Moon* lead us to Song Guangzhi's *The Other Shore*(1998), which shifts the focus toward emotional tension and spiritual yearning (1998, Figure 3).

Figure 3, "*The Other Shore*" (1998) by Song Guangzhi

Created at the threshold of the new millennium, this lithograph resonates with a quiet intensity, capturing not only the persistence of traditional life but also the internal disquiet shaped by rapid urbanization and shifting social values in late-1990s China. At the center of this work is the frozen, almost sculptural image

of Hui'an women, positioned within a highly stylized and contemplative coastal setting. From a semiotic perspective, the women are not depicted merely as individuals but as cultural signifiers: symbols of simplicity, diligence, and the enduring strength of traditional feminine virtues. As Susan Sontag (1966) suggests in *Against Interpretation*, the visual arrest of an image can intensify its symbolic resonance, especially when stripped of narrative dynamism. Song's decision to render the women in static poses echoes this idea, elevating them into timeless icons that represent a collective spiritual fortitude. The surrounding elements, the boat, the distant stone houses, and the horizon line, are equally saturated with symbolic weight. The boat, rooted in the maritime culture of Hui'an, suggests journey and livelihood, but when viewed within the work's spiritual frame, it also evokes metaphors of passage, migration, and the movement between physical and metaphysical realms. The horizon, delicately etched across the composition, becomes a liminal space, a boundary between known and unknown, present and future, confinement and transcendence.

The use of vertical and horizontal lines within the print contributes to a visual rhythm that reinforces this atmosphere of stillness and watchful waiting. These design choices also intensify what Li Zehou (2006) describes as "emotive structure" in Chinese art—the formal arrangement that channels a viewer's affective response. Song achieves this through calculated symmetry, tonal restraint, and a serene but tension-laden composition. From a sociological viewpoint, *The Other Shore* reflects the contradictory impulses of 1998 China: economic growth on one side and a growing spiritual vacuum on the other. According to Lu Xiaodong (2018), the late 1990s saw the rise of a cultural mood he characterizes as "anti-contemporary emotion", a melancholic longing for lost simplicity and moral clarity. The still gaze of the Hui'an women, frozen against a minimal seascape, mirrors this emotional terrain. Their presence becomes a metaphor for cultural anchoring amid societal drift. The piece, moreover, subtly critiques the costs of modernity, not through overt symbolism but through silence and immobility. As theorist Arjun Appadurai (1996) notes, cultural dislocation is often expressed not in grand gestures but in the quiet persistence of the local and the overlooked. Song's Hui'an women do not resist modernity through confrontation; they endure it, becoming icons of survival, quiet resistance, and spiritual continuity. *The Other Shore* is apparently a poignant meditation on memory, place, and the internal landscapes shaped by social change. It continues the thematic concerns of Zheng Xingqiu's work, rootedness, time, and tradition, but turns them inward, layering personal longing and collective melancholy into a scene of haunting beauty and profound stillness.

Luo Biwu's *Bags – Migration* (2004, Figure 4) marks a shift from the emotional stillness and spiritual contemplation of *The Other Shore* to an object-centered semiotic inquiry, revealing how material culture embodies the anxieties and dislocations of a rapidly changing society.

Figure 4, "*Migration*" (2004), by Luo Biwu

This screen print, producerd during the early 21st-century China, turns to everyday items: bags, as symbolic vessels of memory, identity, and sociohistorical flux. From a semiotic standpoint, the central motif of the bag in *Bags – Migration* transcends its literal utility. While traditionally used for storage and transport, here the bag becomes a metonym for the burdens people carry—physically, emotionally, and historically. The artist populates the composition with a dense repetition of bags, some worn, others bulging with indistinct contents. This visual repetition, as Barthes (1977) might suggest, performs a double function: it emphasizes the ubiquity of these signifiers while also flattening their individuality, speaking to both personal histories and the collective experience of migration. Contained within some of the bags are images of old-fashioned clocks, faded photographs, and miniature architectural fragments—each serving as secondary signs within the overarching metaphor. The clock, representing the relentless march of time, speaks to temporality and loss. The photographs and architectural ruins recall Halbwachs' (1992) notion of "collective memory," suggesting that each bag is a container of not only personal belongings but also cultural residues.

This sense of accumulated memory resonates with the aesthetics of object-sensitization techniques used by Luo. The tactile realism of the bags and their contents, rendered through careful textural layering, creates what Susan Stewart (1993) would call a "souvenir effect"—a longing encapsulated in objects that signify an absent past. The work's composition—solemn, centralized, and monumental—imbues these mundane items with ritualistic weight, elevating the personal act of packing and carrying into a symbol of existential continuity. Viewed sociologically, *Bags – Migration* reflects the societal dislocation experienced during the early 2000s. With the dismantling of many traditional neighborhoods and the resettlement of rural populations into expanding urban centers, personal histories were literally and metaphorically placed into transit. As noted by Wu Hung (2009), contemporary Chinese art in this period began to grapple with themes of displacement, memory, and cultural fragmentation. Luo's piece engages directly with this discourse, expressing not only the physical act of migration but also the emotional and psychological weight it imposes. The bags become a kind of mobile archive—a repository of the vanishing past in an unstable present. At a time when Chinese society was rapidly shedding its agrarian roots and collective traditions, *Bags - Migration* issues a quiet plea for the preservation of memory and meaning. In a way, Luo's work stands as both artifact and elegy: a visual record of cultural erosion and a symbolic insistence on remembrance. Thus, *Bags - Migration* deepens the dialogue initiated by Song

Guangzhi's *The Other Shore*, but it reframes the emotional terrain through the semiotics of objects rather than figures, engaging viewers with the material and mnemonic textures of migration, loss, and adaptation. Continuing along the timeline of evolving visual semiotics in contemporary Guangdong printmaking, Li Kang's *All Things Come Alive - Beginning of Spring* (2012, Figure 5) offers a luminous celebration of seasonal renewal and ecological harmony.

Figure 5, "*All Things Come Alive – Beginning of Spring*" (2012), by Li Kang

Created over a decade after Luo Biwu's *Bags – Migration*, this large-scale black-and-white woodcut departs from the themes of displacement and historical burden, turning instead toward regeneration, rootedness, and the deep interplay between inner spirit and natural cycles. Li Kang's print reflects a shift not only in thematic focus but also in emotional tone and technical orientation. Whereas previous works like *The Other Shore* (1998) and *Bags – Migration* (2004) emphasized loss, longing, or existential weight, *All Things Come Alive* foregrounds vitality, hope, and the equilibrium between humanity and the natural world. From a semiotic perspective, every element in this composition functions as a symbol layered with meaning. The fresh green shoots bursting from the soil, the rhythmic flow of a spring-fed stream, and the birds in free flight all signify renewal, freedom, and the persistence of life's cyclical rhythms. The tender shoots are especially resonant, echoing the long-standing cultural symbol of rebirth in Chinese seasonal aesthetics. As Roland Barthes (1977) has articulated, the repetition of culturally embedded signs can act as anchors of myth, and here, the visual recurrence of vegetation in its nascent state signals both literal and metaphorical regeneration. Similarly, birds in motion disrupt the scene's quietness and act as mobile signifiers of liberation, subtly linking nature's rhythms with the human desire to transcend constraint. The flowing stream, rendered with dynamic yet precise chisel work, may be interpreted through Eliade's (1954) notion of the 'eternal return' where natural cycles offer sacred repetition, a renewal of time and purpose.

Technically, Li Kang's mastery of black-and-white woodcut is on full display in this work. With his use of finely controlled lines and contrasts, he evokes both delicate movement and monumental stillness. Intricate textures of leaves and branches are carved with microscopic care, while expansive areas of black-and-white interplay generate a meditative depth. The resulting image draws viewers into what Chinese art

criticism often describes as "jingjie" (境界) , which is a fusion of physical landscape and spiritual condition. From a sociological perspective, the print resonates with contemporary concerns about the alienation of urban life and ecological imbalance. Created during a time of rapid industrialization and environmental degradation in China, the work channels a collective yearning for reconnection with nature. Thematically, it reflects the growing discourse around *ecological civilization*, a government-promoted ideal in the 2010s that emphasized sustainable development and traditional environmental ethics. As art historian Kuiyi Shen (2012) notes, many artists in the post-2000 period began to respond to this cultural atmosphere by revitalizing traditional themes with contemporary awareness. Li Kang's own life trajectory, judeged from the vast landscapes of Beidahuang in the north to the subtropical environments of Guangdong in the south, directly informs the aesthetic hybridity in this work. The print fuses the northern preference for monumentality with the southern appreciation of subtlety and lyrical detail. Moreover, Li's reflection on leaving behind regional stylistic conventions in favor of a more individualized, modern approach speaks to a generational evolution in Chinese printmaking, which is one where tradition is not rejected but reimagined (Li Kang, personal narrative, 2015). Li's *All Things Come Alive – Beginning of Spring* truly represents a luminous counterpoint to the weightier psychological and historical concerns of earlier works in this study. It elevates everyday natural phenomena to the level of philosophical insight and spiritual consolation, offering viewers a tranquil, timeless vision of life's resilience, a semiotic celebration of what it means to begin again.

Concluding this visual journey through Guangdong's contemporary printmaking is Zheng Feng's *Ode to the Moon*(2014, Figure 6) a lithograph that represents a fusion of personal lyricism, national aspiration, and cosmic imagination.

Figure 6, "*Ode to the Moon*" (2014), by Zheng Feng

Following the hopeful vitality of Li Kang's *All Things Come Alive - Beginning of Spring*, Zheng's work shifts our gaze upward and outward, from earthly renewal to celestial yearning, embedding China's technological advances within a deeply symbolic visual narrative. Created at the height of China's lunar exploration achievements, notably the 2013 *Chang'e-3* moon landing and the 2014 return test vehicle success - *Ode to the Moon* visually encapsulates a collective dream projected onto the cosmos. The Moon, centrally positioned and luminously rendered, functions as both a literal and cultural signifier. In traditional Chinese culture, the Moon is a common symbol of reunion, beauty, and transcendence. In Zheng's work, it also represents aspiration, drawing all forms of life and spirit toward it. From a semiotic perspective, the moon acts as the dominant signifier, its signified encompassing both ancient longing and contemporary progress. Barthes (1972) reminds us that modern mythologies often intertwine the symbolic with the technological, and here, the Moon bridges ancient romantic ideals and new national ambitions.

Surrounding it is an intricately detailed scene of earthly flora and fauna, where birds, plants, and smaller figures coexist in what seems a fantastical nocturnal ecosystem. These life forms, animated with dynamic lithographic linework, do not merely decorate the scene; they represent human spirit in miniature, all straining toward the Moon as a metaphor for progress, unity, and the pursuit of dreams. The figures in the work, many of which are scaled down to insect-like proportions and subtly humanized, evoke what Zheng Feng describes as a desire to portray "a free-flying, unrestrained heart" even in times of pressure and disillusionment (Zheng, 2015). The surreal composition, with tiny winged people and luminous vegetation, creates a lyrical, fairy-tale mood that carries emotional depth. This ethereal tone marks a departure from the stark realism of earlier woodblock prints like Luo Biwu's *Bags-Migration*, emphasizing instead a psychological realism, a dream-space where internal longing and societal hope converge. From a sociological standpoint, *Ode to the Moon* reflects the optimism and heightened self-confidence of 2010s China. With its subtle romanticism and surreal symbolism, the work channels a shared cultural psyche: the aspirations of a generation growing up amidst technological leaps, national revival, and an increasingly globalized vision of China's future. Instead of focusing on historical trauma or environmental concerns, it points to a sense of connection with the cosmos and an imagined ideal world. As Zheng Feng notes in his self-narrative, "printmaking should find a contemporary perspective that aligns with one's own expression," suggesting that true engagement with society arises not through grand ideological statements but through inner authenticity (Zheng, 2015). Technically, Zheng's mastery of lithography, though being a relatively underutilized printmaking method in China, is remarkable. The nuanced rendering of textures, from moonlight reflections to feathered wings, is achieved through his meticulous control of tonal gradation and fine detail. The contrast between light and shadow, realism and fantasy, evokes a dreamscape that is both grounded and transcendent. His blending of realistic, surreal, and romantic styles enables the work to resonate on multiple levels: as a tribute to national progress, a psychological retreat, and a poetic call to imagine beyond the visible world.

Ode to the Moon acts as a symbolic finale to this curated exploration of Guangdong printmaking. Where previous works tackled themes of migration, transformation, or ecological return, Zheng's piece uplifts the narrative to one of cosmic ambition. It reminds us that contemporary Chinese printmaking is not only about responding to socio-historical circumstances but also about constructing imaginative worlds that mirror the evolving dreams and desires of its people. In this sense, Zheng's lithograph exemplifies how traditional techniques, when guided by personal insight and national consciousness, can give rise to art that is both intimate and monumental.

V. Conclusion

This study has explored the evolving cultural psyche of Guangdong through the lens of contemporary printmaking, analyzing five representative works that span over three decades. Each of these artworks — diverse in medium, technique, and subject matter — contributes to a broader understanding of how regional identity, national transformation, and personal emotion intertwine in the visual language of modern Chinese printmaking. Beginning with Xu Qinsong's *The Ebb of the Tide* (1989), we observed how dynamic linework and subdued color tones metaphorically reflected the social anxieties and inner confusion accompanying China's early reform period. This woodblock work, laden with semiotic meaning, encapsulates the emotional turbulence felt by individuals swept up in a rapidly shifting social landscape. Transitioning to Zhang Minjie's *Bags* (2002), we encountered a raw and somber portrayal of human migration and urban displacement. The symbolic weight of the bags — repositories of memory,

survival, and detachment — pointed to the socio-economic transformations taking place in the early 2000s. In contrast to Xu's tides, Zhang's baggage evoked a heaviness of mobility, a burdened forward movement shaped by both necessity and estrangement. Luo Biwu's *Migration of the Series Bags* (2011) continued this narrative, highlighting Guangdong's evolving status as a hub of migrant labor and urban development. With its chiaroscuro contrasts and expressive woodcut textures, the work reflected not only the physical movement of people but also the quiet dignity and resilience of those negotiating life between rural roots and urban futures.

Shifting in tone, Li Kang's *All Things Come Alive-Beginning of Spring* (2012) introduced a more contemplative, revitalizing vision. Drawing from both northern monumentalism and southern lyricism, this black-and-white woodcut celebrated seasonal renewal and ecological harmony. From both semiotic and sociological perspectives, the work illustrated a deeper longing for spiritual grounding and reconnection with nature in an era of ecological strain and industrial alienation.Finally, Zheng Feng's *Ode to the Moon* (2014) reoriented our gaze upward. Rich in surreal symbolism and rendered in luminous lithographic detail, this work captured the national optimism and scientific ambition of China's lunar exploration efforts. The moon served as both a cultural archetype and a contemporary emblem of aspiration, illustrating how dreams, whether personal or collective, transcend boundaries of geography and time. Together, these five works reflect not only the technical and thematic evolution of Guangdong's printmaking practices but also the region's shifting psychological landscapes in response to social upheaval, environmental change, and national resurgence. From tide to migration, from renewal to cosmic vision, they trace an arc of artistic consciousness deeply rooted in place yet attentive to the currents of history and the rhythms of the human heart. In conclusion, contemporary printmaking in Guangdong stands as a powerful medium through which artists articulate, question, and reimagine their relationship with society, tradition, and selfhood. These artworks are more than visual records; they are cultural artifacts that embody the aspirations, anxieties, and transformations of their time. As such, they not only contribute to the ongoing modernization of Chinese art but also offer profound insights into the evolving soul of a region at the heart of China's reform-era narrative.

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