Sinologists working on modern China tend to view woodcuts and printmaking for their role in the development of artistic style or their societal value. Starting points—among others—can be the woodblock printing movement initiated by the famous writer Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) in the early thirties of the twentieth century, or the employment of woodcuts as a propaganda tool during the war against Japan. The technical development of woodcut printmaking in pre-modern times seldom features in research as one of the roots of modern artistic practice.¹ The title of the book presented here seems to fill this gap and to explore the usage of traditional technical skills in the contemporary art scene.

Barker is Professor for printmaking at the School of Art and Design at the University of Ulster, and his small book appears as one of a series of printmaking handbooks aimed at students and others interested in the practical techniques of printmaking.² This is important to note, since it is not the goal of the publication to present all aspects of printmaking in China over the period of the last 2200 years. The emphasis is on practical information on “how to do” to motivate students and printmakers exploring new techniques.

As an introduction to the topic he gives a short historical overview of the development of printmaking in China. Mentioning seals, stone rubbings and book printing, Barker situates the field of printmaking in the broad context of the reproduction of images and texts. Like the rest of the book, this part is illustrated with many examples, some of them repro-

¹ An exception to this might be Flath’s work on New Year Pictures (nianhua 年画) which traces the development of this printed material from late Qing dynasty up to the 1950’s. He focuses on social and artistic construction of New Year Pictures leaving the technical aspect mostly untouched. James A. Flath, The Cult of Happiness – Nianhua, Art, and History in Rural North China (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 2004.

² Other titles in this series include Japanese Woodblock Printing (Rebecca Salter, 2001) and Printmaking for Beginners (Jane Stobart, 2005).
ductions, some focusing on technical aspects. All figures are in close connection to the text and chosen to illustrate a specific method of printing. The emphasis on the practical aspect of printing already starts in this chapter and Chinese history is reduced to a rough timeline. For example, one might feel frustrated in only reading about an increase in printed materials during the Ming dynasty without any comment on the reason for this, but, again, this is not the objective of the author. Reducing the explanations of the societal or dynastic context of the development of printing leaves room for describing technical innovations made during a particular time.

Departing from these introductory notes, Barker divides his text according to the printing techniques used, starting with printing with water-soluble colour, followed by printing with poster-colour and stencil prints and ending with dabbed print techniques. Attached are a small bibliography, a glossary, an index and a list of suppliers (mainly in the US or UK).

The chapter on techniques of printing with water-soluble colours touches on the main feature of Chinese woodblock printing and describes tools and basic techniques used in China for woodblock printing in general. The use of water-soluble colours enables the artist to experiment with shades and colour gradation. The controlled “bleeding” can be seen as a speciality of Chinese printing that allows the final result to look like a real Chinese painting. This reminds us that woodblock printing is used for the reproduction of paintings done in traditional style (guohua 国画). The chapter is structured according to typical processes of printing: the selection of wood for the block to be printed, tracing from the drawing, cutting the block, the selection of printing ink and paper, and finally the printing itself. All steps are described in detail and are easy to follow. Tools and materials are explained and illustrated. Useful hints are given on how to handle problems or how to achieve specific visual effects. The following chapter is on printing with poster-colour and adds only minor information to the preceding section by giving additional hints for handling the more solid and less transparent colours.

Stencil printing deals with a wide variety of printing with different techniques on different materials. However, the introduction given by Barker in chapter four fails to explain more than the principal technique. Stencils have long been used in China for various purposes, such as fabric or wall decoration, and are widely associated with folk art. Barker describes stencil printing with regard only to printing on paper. Stencils can be used to print an image directly onto the paper, or in reverse to apply a colour resist onto it, which has to be removed once the printing is finished. The explanation is short and provides only an overview which could be used as a starting point, but for troubleshooting this seems rather insufficient.
The last chapter deals with dab printing, one of the oldest forms of reproduction in China. Dabbed prints from stone tablets, often simply called rubbings by Western scholars, have been collected and used for centuries by scholars and art lovers. Here Barker’s description very quickly departs from the explanations of the basics to modern utilisation of the principle techniques for artistic purposes. He once again highlights the value of traditional techniques for modern artistic expression.

Barker is right when he points out that there are very few works in English that provide the reader with detailed descriptions of the printing techniques, tools, materials and methods used in traditional woodblock printing in China. For readers capable of reading Chinese materials this is not the case. Since traditional printing is part of artistic education in China, there are numerous handbooks to be found doing exactly what Barker tries to achieve. Students of printmaking can make use of the descriptions and illustrations provided by Barker as a starting point for their own experiments and practice. They are detailed and useful. Other readers, however, not engaged in printing but interested in Chinese woodblock printing art, might find this book less inspiring. It can, though, be helpful in identifying techniques used by the printmaker when analysing a particular work. It might also be useful to know the techniques when comparing Chinese with other woodblock prints. In this respect it can serve as an introduction for art historians and sinologists planning to undertake further research on printing techniques used in a given period in history, or in examining the works of particular artists. For such readers it is very helpful that most of the terms for tools and materials described are given in English, Chinese characters and Pinyin.