

## **Research on the Forms and Value Connotations of Water Culture in Military Reclamation Print Art**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the development trajectory of water conservancy construction in the military reclamation context and interprets the historical value and era image connotations of thematic prints focused on water conservancy construction from the perspective of print art. It reveals the arduous efforts and remarkable achievements of the military reclamation group in water conservancy construction since the founding of the People's Republic of China, highlighting its significant practical implications for the current cultural strategy of enriching Production and Construction Corps.

**Keywords:** Print Art; Water Conservancy Construction; Military Reclamation Spirit

### **1. Introduction**

From the early establishment of the military reclamation group to its high-quality development, water conservancy construction has been a lifeline, playing a crucial role in agricultural development, social stability, and economic prosperity. This article examines art forms themed on water conservancy construction in the military reclamation context, uncovering how print art documents the glorious transformation of the military reclamation people in modern agriculture, urbanization, and living environments. Such print art, serving as documentary evidence, witnesses the extraordinary journey of the military reclamation people from arduous entrepreneurship to magnificent achievements. The military reclamation's mission of cultivating and guarding the border vividly encapsulates their efforts in nation-building, promoting ethnic unity, and benefiting all ethnic groups. This study takes the timeline of military reclamation development as the longitude and the artworks produced in different historical periods as the latitude,

exploring the spirit of the military reclamation in water conservancy construction and its cultural values of ethnic unity, arduous entrepreneurship, and selfless dedication depicted in the artworks.

Print art is an important carrier of collective memory, reflecting the aesthetic trends and social development status of a particular historical period. As an important type of documentation, it becomes a crucial tool for scholars to study social history and evolution. Water culture centers on water, encompassing the material and non-material aspects produced by people in their production and life processes. It usually exists in material forms, non-material forms, and symbolic (conceptual) forms [1]. The water culture of the military reclamation is a cultural type formed by the collective efforts of the reclamation people to address the agricultural production and industrial needs of the industrial era. The unique geographical environment and urban entrepreneurial history of the military reclamation have provided artists growing up on this land with rich creative materials and inspiration. Their works are filled with the spirit of patriotism, hard work, selfless dedication, and pioneering progress inherent in the military reclamation spirit. This study selects thematic print art related to water culture, such as water conservancy projects, water activities, and water figures, from the period between 1949 and 1980 in the military reclamation's water conservancy construction. Combining the historical context and documentary materials such as water conservancy construction records, paintings, and historical photographs, it investigates the development trajectory of water conservancy construction in the military reclamation, revealing the different historical tasks and the new landscape of building a beautiful homeland at various stages of social construction by the reclamation people.

Prints, photographs, stories, and poems are

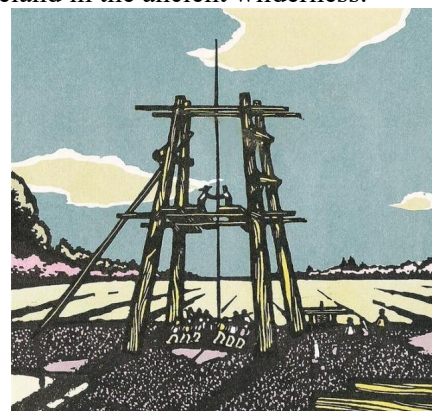
important carriers of water culture in the military reclamation. This article focuses on prints, examining the artistic images of the military reclamation during periods of hard work, vigorous development, and reform and innovation, providing foundational support for constructing the visual artistic image of the military reclamation spirit. The central task of the military reclamation has evolved from settlement and border defense to stability and border defense, with water conservancy being a crucial part of the military reclamation's mission. The development of water conservancy in the military reclamation is a great feat of unity between the military and the people to transform nature and develop oases. The water culture heritage of the military reclamation has shifted its primary functions through different historical stages, initially serving production and life. With economic development and technological progress, its historical value now dominates, serving as historical monuments and important evidence of the spirit of hard work, settlement, and border defense from that era. Water culture landscapes have the function of uniting people, enhancing national pride, and strengthening confidence and determination in new era water conservancy construction.

## **2. Artistic Construction of Hard Work and Selfless Dedication in Early Water Conservancy Construction of the Military Reclamation**

The thematic artistic works of water conservancy construction in the military reclamation highlight the spirit of the military reclamation. Early water conservancy projects were primarily built to address the harsh ecological environment and the needs of agricultural production. Under difficult conditions, the country led people of all ethnic groups in water conservancy construction, and the spirit of hard work has inspired generations. In the new era, the water culture of the military reclamation plays an important role in red-themed education, leading people to relive the spirit of patriotism, selfless dedication, hard work, and pioneering progress, and understand that glorious history. Over the past 70 years, the military reclamation has persistently carried out water conservancy construction, composing a challenging yet magnificent entrepreneurial song.

### **2.1 Artistic Construction Centered on Engineering**

Print art, integrating aesthetics, documentation, and dissemination, constructs the early artistic image of the military reclamation people with production as the core element. Military reclamation prints, as a significant part of painting art and a primary visual art form, document the difficult living scenes of the unforgettable years and the patriotic sentiments of the military reclamation warriors. They are important aesthetic documents and valuable historical assets of military reclamation culture [2]. Through analyzing prints from the early period of water conservancy construction in the military reclamation, water wells, headworks, large canals, reservoirs, and farmland water systems become the main content, confirming the important aspects of water conservancy construction during that period. For example, Gedefu's print "Harvest in the Gobi Desert Does Not Depend on Heaven" (Figure 1) is based on the fact of digging the first military reclamation water well during the construction of the new city of Shihezi. This print, with distant mountains, the Gobi Desert, and the blue sky as the natural background, vividly depicts the military reclamation people's efforts in city and water conservancy construction under harsh conditions. The tall wooden tower serves as the main image of the painting, creating a strong visual appeal and reflecting the determination and perseverance of the military reclamation people to build a beautiful homeland in the ancient wilderness.

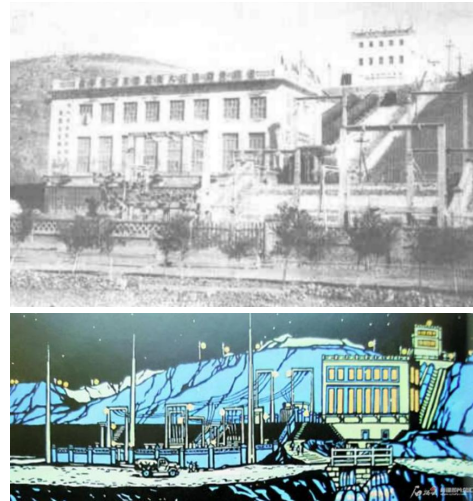


**Figure 1. Gedefu's Print "Harvest in the Gobi Desert Does Not Depend on Heaven" 1956.**

Source:[http://www.360doc.com/content/22/0129/00/13326414\\_1015290523.shtml](http://www.360doc.com/content/22/0129/00/13326414_1015290523.shtml)

Sufficient electricity is a crucial guarantee for the development of the military reclamation, regarded as the "blood" of driving force and machine production. Early hydropower was an important means of solving the electricity problem [3]. Thus, artists focused on hydropower construction as a primary creative subject. In Yang Feng's "Gobi Pearl" woodblock print (Figure 2), the hydropower station is not only a magnificent engineering building but also a vivid interpretation of the spirit of hard work and selfless dedication. This artwork allows us to glimpse how the military reclamation people, with firm belief and endless sweat, forged this miracle in the Gobi Desert. Firstly, the geographical environment of the Gobi Desert itself posed a huge challenge to the builders. It is arid and water-scarce, with rampant sandstorms, creating extremely harsh natural conditions. However, it was under such conditions that people began constructing the hydropower station. Every stage, from site selection, planning to construction and operation, was filled with hardships and difficulties. Yet, the builders were not intimidated by these challenges. They used their wisdom and courage to overcome one obstacle after another, eventually erecting the hydropower station on this Gobi Desert. In the "Gobi Pearl" print, the hydropower station is not just a building but a symbol of spirit. It represents the indomitable, forward-moving spirit of people in harsh environments and their longing and pursuit for a better future. It shows us the resilience and perseverance of humanity in the face of difficulties, and their reverence and respect for nature. Through the art form of prints, it demonstrates the transformation of Shihezi from a barren Gobi to an oasis city, and the struggle spirit and optimistic attitude of the military reclamation people during this process [4].

Artists used the "Gobi Pearl" in their artworks as a beautiful expectation for new city construction. Today, the ideal expression of these artworks has become a reality, reflecting the military reclamation people's efforts over several generations to transform barren land into a beautiful and rich artificial oasis, building a livable and business-friendly "Gobi Pearl" centered around divisions and cities, with regiments and towns as nodes, and companies as units.



**Figure 2. Historical and Realistic Integration. The upper image shows the operation of the No. 3 unit of the fourth-level power station at Hongshan Pass Power Plant on June 28, 1961.**

Source: Selected Historical Materials of the Military Reclamation: Industrial Edition. The lower image is the woodblock print "Gobi Pearl" by Yang Feng based on Hongshan Pass Power Plant in 1962.

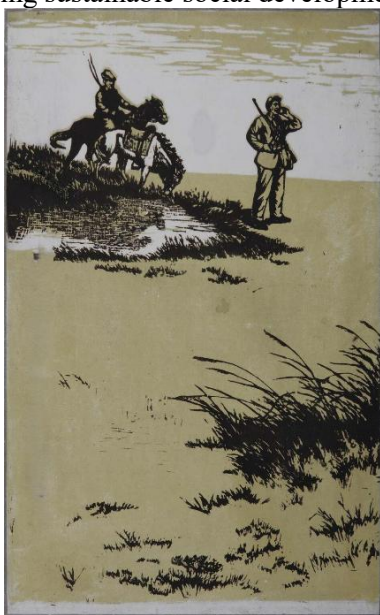
## **2.2 Artistic Construction with People as the Main Image**

Military reclamation print artists depict the grand endeavor and enthusiasm of settling and defending the borders with their carving tools. Their prints contain the unique cultural connotations of the military reclamation, serving as historical documents that enrich border culture, embody special era spirits, and carry the ethnic spirit and social harmony of the region [5]. Therefore, from a historical perspective, the social significance carried by these groups and their works far exceeds their artistic value. The depiction of figures in military reclamation print art is an important part, using character images to reflect production activities and reveal the spirit of the people during the construction process.

In the print "Found Water" by Mu Ge (Figure 3), the artist uses the image of people finding a water source as the main focus, expressing the importance of water sources to people's lives. In this work, the water source is the core element of the image, symbolizing life and hope. The picture depicts the hard work people put into finding a water source and their joy and harvest upon finding it. This method indirectly conveys the positive role of water conservancy construction in improving living



conditions and increasing agricultural production efficiency. Mu Ge's print "Found Water" vividly showcases the importance of water sources to people's lives, while indirectly conveying the benefits brought by water conservancy construction. Water conservancy construction not only ensures agricultural production, prevents floods and droughts, and improves living conditions, but also promotes economic development, which is significant for improving people's living standards and promoting sustainable social development.



**Figure 3. Mu Ge's Print "Found Water"**

Source:[http://www.360doc.com/content/22/0523/18/13326414\\_1032804273.shtml](http://www.360doc.com/content/22/0523/18/13326414_1032804273.shtml)

### **3. Artistic Expression of Ethnic Unity and Progress in Military Reclamation Water Conservancy Construction**

Ethnic unity and progress work is a key focus of ethnic work and has always been upheld in the construction of the military reclamation. During the construction of water conservancy projects, special emphasis is placed on ethnic unity work. Since the early stages of the military reclamation's development, it was particularly stressed "not to compete with the people for water, land, or pastures, and to help ethnic groups develop production as much as possible." The economic construction of the military reclamation is an important part of the autonomous region's economic construction, and water conservancy construction holds a significant position within it. From 1950, when the troops began to settle and defend the borders, to 1982, the military reclamation

invested 2 billion yuan in water conservancy construction. The military reclamation and the people of all ethnic groups have shared weal and woe, integrating like fish and water, inseparable. In the early days of the People's Republic of China, people of all ethnic groups and the soldiers of the military reclamation cooperated closely, vigorously building water conservancy, developing agriculture, and expanding oases. The military reclamation has brought great convenience to the production and life, as well as agricultural irrigation, of all ethnic groups through water conservancy construction, while also creating rich and diverse types of military reclamation water culture landscapes.

#### **3.1 Artistic Depiction Centered on the People**

In military reclamation water conservancy construction, ethnic unity also plays a crucial role. Artists adhere to the spirit of the "Yan'an Forum" in their artistic creation, insisting on creating art centered on the people and consciously writing and coloring for the people of the era. The art creation team of the military reclamation received special training, and the famous print artist Guan Weixiao accumulated rich creative experience through working and living with the military reclamation soldiers. The oasis, with its unique temperament, influenced him deeply. The traces of the military reclamation are, like prints, forever engraved in his heart. Guan Weixiao said with deep emotion: "I will always be a soldier of the military reclamation; the military reclamation is my creative source and theme." In his multicolored woodblock print "Spring Full of the Frontier," Guan Weixiao used exquisite artistic techniques and profound thematic connotations to become an important symbol of the military reclamation's history and culture (Figure 4). This work not only showcases the vitality of the military reclamation during the period of social construction but also subtly reveals the deep connotation of ethnic unity [6,7].

In the multicolored woodblock print "Spring Full of the Frontier" (Figure 5), workers, farmers, and soldiers of different ethnic groups labor shoulder to shoulder, their smiles radiating happiness and pride, vividly portraying ethnic unity. This spirit of unity and cooperation aligns perfectly with the images of

workers, farmers, and soldiers shown in the prints, as they work together on the front lines of water conservancy construction, contributing their sweat and wisdom to the water conservancy cause of the frontier. This work not only showcases the magnificent scenery and social construction achievements of the military reclamation but also profoundly reflects the close unity and cooperation between the military and the people in the military reclamation's water conservancy construction. This spirit is one of the important supporting forces for the military reclamation's mission of settling and defending the borders and provides valuable insights and references for building a harmonious society and achieving national rejuvenation today.



Figure 4. Print Artist Guan Weixiao Creating in 1962

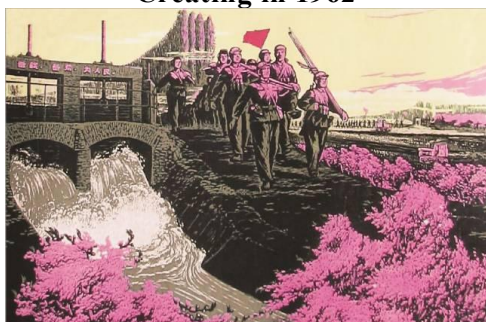


Figure 5. Guan Weixiao's Print "Spring Full of the Frontier" Multicolored Woodblock, 1971

Source:[http://www.huayangnet.cn/content/2019-04/29/content\\_552810.html](http://www.huayangnet.cn/content/2019-04/29/content_552810.html)

### 3.2 Artistic Images of Water Culture as Symbols of Ethnic Unity

In artistic creation, canals and bridges can serve as symbolic elements, explicitly or implicitly conveying the creator's thoughts and artistic connotations. As connections, canals

and bridges express the military reclamation people's efforts in production construction and ethnic unity in ethnic regions, showcasing the tangible, perceptible, and effective ethnic unity work in the military reclamation through artists' works [8].

Canals bring harvest and hope to the countryside and serve as links connecting the military reclamation with local areas and Han people with ethnic minorities. When brothers from various ethnic groups work together to build a canal, they are not just completing an engineering project but are also writing an epic of ethnic unity. This canal witnesses their sweat and effort and their unity and cooperation. During construction, they may encounter various difficulties and challenges, but these hardships bring them closer together, overcoming problems collectively and completing the construction task. The canal's construction brings tangible benefits to both local areas and the military reclamation. Shared water resources not only meet the needs for living and agricultural irrigation but also promote regional economic development. This spirit of sharing vividly reflects the unity and mutual assistance of the Chinese nation. Artistic works reveal the unique charm of the Chinese nation's diverse and integrated culture, reinforcing the belief that only through close unity can all ethnic groups achieve common prosperity and development. This spirit of unity and cooperation is a valuable spiritual wealth and an important force for promoting social progress and development.

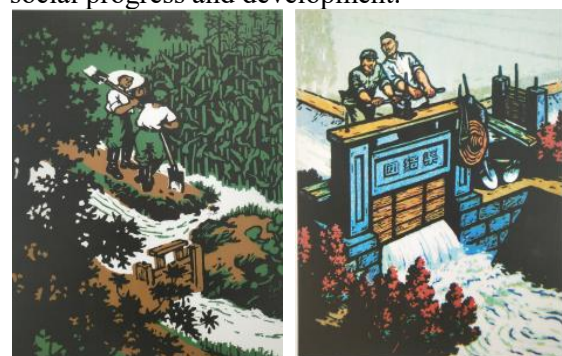


Figure 6. Artistic Depiction of Canal Construction by the Military Reclamation- "Harvest in Sight" (by Lin Jingsong)

The second image in Figure 6 shows a water conservancy project jointly built by military reclamation soldiers and local ethnic people, named "Unity Canal," symbolizing the spirit of unity and cooperation between the military

reclamation production and construction corps and people of all ethnic groups in the early days of the People's Republic of China. The images and print materials from the early stages reveal the limited industrialization level, with water conservancy projects primarily relying on manual labor. Tools such as hoes, wheelbarrows, and shovels can be seen in the images, carrying the intense entrepreneurial passion and aspiration for a better life among the builders and local residents. The images showcase the most fundamental rural labor construction scenes, evoking a strong sense of immersion in viewers.

#### **4. Artistic Depiction of the Spirit of Innovation in Military Reclamation Water Conservancy Construction**

The technological value of water culture. Modern measures for diverting water, flood discharge, and sediment management provide a series of scientific and creative experiences and measures, offering feasible solutions for creating oases in ancient wilderness areas and reflecting the construction technology level of a certain historical period. They are an important part of the process of scientific and technological development. In the military reclamation's agriculture, water conservancy must precede. This was a scientific judgment made by the country based on the environment at the time. Commander Wang Zhen mobilized water conservancy technicians to form engineering teams, traveling to Aksu, Korla, Hami, Urumqi, Shihezi, Yili, and Kashgar to help with water conservancy construction [9]. Water conservancy construction is the comprehensive result of human utilization, transformation, and management of water, often reflecting methods and technologies for sustainable water use, with significance for contemporary water conservation and utilization.

In the early days of the military reclamation's water conservancy efforts, headworks played a crucial role as the starting point for irrigation. These projects often required the military reclamation people to overcome harsh natural environments and carry out arduous construction work. For example, the Hongshan Pass headworks on the Manas River, the first bend-style diversion hub learned from the Soviet Union by the military reclamation, reflects the wisdom and courage of the military

reclamation people in its design and construction. This project not only provided a stable water source for agricultural production at the time but also laid a solid foundation for subsequent water conservancy projects. The development from headworks to reservoirs and then to high-mountain reservoirs demonstrates the significant progress in the military reclamation's water conservancy efforts and the vivid embodiment of the military reclamation people's spirit of hard work and taking on the tasks of the times.

With the continuous development of the military reclamation's water conservancy efforts, reservoir construction gradually became an important direction. Reservoir construction not only provides water storage and flood control but also offers a more stable water source for agricultural production. For example, the Xiaohai Reservoir, the largest plain reservoir in Northwest China, has played a crucial role in water supply, flood control, and drought resistance, and industrial development for surrounding farms since its completion [10]. These reservoirs' construction has enhanced the water supply capacity of the military reclamation's water conservancy efforts and demonstrated the spirit of hard work and pursuit of excellence among the military reclamation people.

In the new era, with economic and social development and the increasing demand for water resources, high-mountain reservoir construction has become a new direction for the military reclamation's water conservancy efforts. These reservoirs, often located at high altitudes, involve great construction difficulties and high risks. However, the military reclamation people have not been deterred; they tackle difficulties and climb peaks, successfully constructing several high-mountain reservoirs.

The development from headworks to reservoirs and then to high-mountain reservoirs is a vivid reflection of the continuous progress in the military reclamation's water conservancy efforts. Throughout this development process, the military reclamation people have consistently upheld the spirit of hard work and taking on the tasks of the times, continuously overcoming technical challenges and enhancing water supply capacity. Their efforts have not only provided a solid guarantee for the economic and social development of the



military reclamation but also made significant contributions to the national water conservancy efforts. Behind these achievements is the spirit of selfless dedication, pioneering, and progress of the military reclamation people, as well as their relentless pursuit of technological peaks and excellence. Therefore, the development from headworks to reservoirs and then to high-mountain reservoirs not only demonstrates the significant progress in the military reclamation's water conservancy efforts but also highlights the great image of the military reclamation people in their hard work, innovation, and commitment to the tasks of the times.

### 5. Conclusion

The water culture heritage within the military reclamation water culture is an important component of Chinese cultural heritage. Scientifically protecting this heritage, exploring and inheriting the history of the red water culture of the military reclamation, and leveraging the engineering benefits of water conservancy construction are crucial. These efforts ensure national grain production and provide vital water conservancy support for implementing the rural revitalization strategy in the military reclamation and promoting the modernization of its farms (towns). This article examines the water conservancy projects and water culture heritage in the military reclamation from 1949 to 1982. It also conducts a detailed study of the artistic visual culture of military reclamation water conservancy projects and figures at the image level, uncovering the contemporary value of military reclamation water culture. Based on this, the article proposes a multifaceted exploration of the new value of military reclamation water culture prints, providing long-term support for the protection of water culture. In modern times, prints serve more as carriers of the spirit of selfless dedication and hard work, promoting this spirit which is conducive to strengthening fostering social righteousness, and forming a healthy and progressive spiritual force.

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