

China's Modern Sketch—1

The Golden Era of Cartoon Art, 1934-1937

by John A. Crespi

The Turbulent
'30s

Windows
on an Era

Graphic
Variations

Sources
& Credits



In January of 1934, a strange horseman appeared on the crowded and colorful magazine racks along Shanghai's "culture street," Fuzhou Road. His body a stout black ink bottle, a straight-edge at his hip for a sword, a drafting triangle for a shield, and his lance a steel-nibbed pen, this was clearly a warrior. Yet a bright red heart painted on his breast seemed to give this unlikely looking knight a mandate of compassion. As for his mount, it, too, was assembled from the western-style artist's stock-in-trade, but for a Chinese brush pen protruding from behind.

Equal parts comic and gallant, this strange horseman heralded the arrival of the longest running and most influential humor and satire magazine in China during the first half of the 20th century: Shidai manhua, or by its English name, Modern Sketch. Published monthly for 39 issues from 1934 through June 1937, Modern Sketch was recognized then, and still is now, as the centerpiece of China's golden era of cartoon art.

Images in this unit, unless otherwise noted, are from Modern Sketch (Shidai manhua), Shanghai, 1934-1937, courtesy Colgate University Library.

THE TURBULENT '30s

There are many reasons *Modern Sketch* stands out among the array of nearly 20 illustrated humor and satire magazines that made the mid-1930s such an exceptional time for China's popular graphic art. One can point to *Modern Sketch's* longevity, the quality of its printing, the remarkable eclecticism of its content, and its inclusion of work by young artists who went on to become leaders in China's 20th-century cultural establishment. But from today's perspective, most intriguing is the sheer imagistic force with which this magazine captures the crises and contradictions that have defined China's 20th century as a quintessentially modern era.



Published in Shanghai monthly from January 1934 to June 1937, Modern Sketch conveyed a range of political and social commentary through lively and sophisticated graphics. Topics included eroticized women, foreign aggression—particularly the rise of fascism in Europe and militarized Japan, domestic politics and exploitation, and modernity-at-large as envisioned through both the cosmopolitan “Modern Girl/Modern Boy” and the modernist grotesque.

[ms08_000] [ms10_000] [ms11_000]
[ms12_041] [ms16_046] [ms20_000]

Modern Sketch could be incisive, bitter, shocking, and cynical. At the very same time it could be elegant, salacious, and preposterous. Its messages might be as simple as child's play, or cryptically encoded for cultural sophisticates. *Modern Sketch* was many things for its many readers. The democracy of popular artistic forms it hosted, united in the mission of fusing art and the era, made it a landmark publication.



Contributors to Modern Sketch critiqued current politics and society with an array of styles and genres that defies generalization.

Lu Shaofei
 “Peace No More”
 [ms18_042]

Yu Weizi
 “Elucidation through
 Tinted Lenses”
 [ms24_000]

Wang Zimei
 “Hung by the Heels in
 Hell”
 [ms39_010]

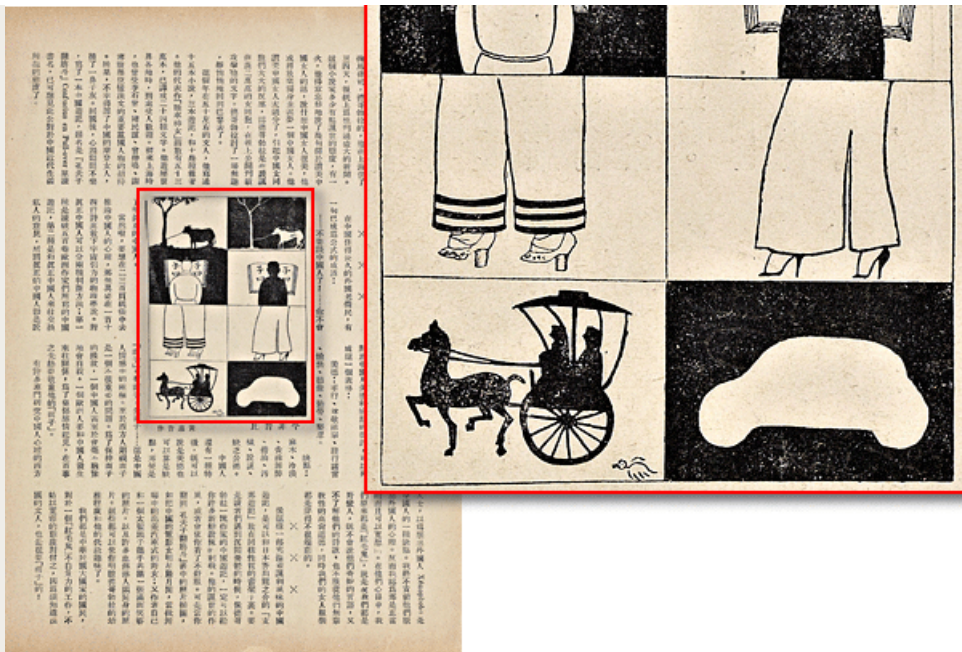
Dou Zonggan
 “As If Confronting
 a Mortal Foe”
 [ms25_010]

Epoch and Image

Borrowed from the Japanese word *jidai*, the *shidai* in Shidai Manhua might be more literally translated as “epoch” or “era”; that is, a discrete period of historical time coming after a past era and, presumably, before a future era, with each marking a segment along a linear, evolutionary progression.^[2] For educated urban Chinese in 1934, a number of recent epochal events, both political and material, gave cause to believe that they were, or at least ought to be, living in a new, and very modern, *shidai*.

Huang Jiayin
 “There’s No Comparing
 the Past and Present...”
 (detail highlighted in red)
 [ms17_025]



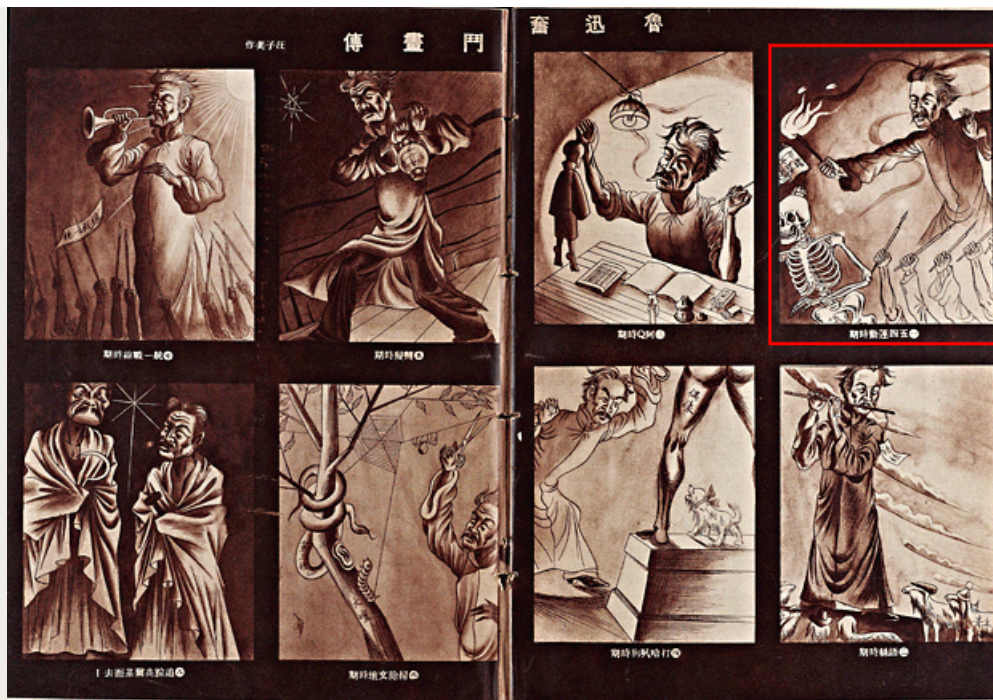


The most fundamental political event had been the collapse of China's dynastic system just over two decades earlier, in 1911. The Republic of China that replaced it, while modern in aspiration, spent its first several decades struggling with territorial fragmentation and reactionary coups. Less than a decade later, in 1919, China's educated elite asserted a new national consciousness during what came to be called the May Fourth Movement, a broad-based protest against imperialism coupled with efforts to modernize China's cultural tradition by introducing new, enlightened, and mostly foreign-inspired literature, art, and thought.

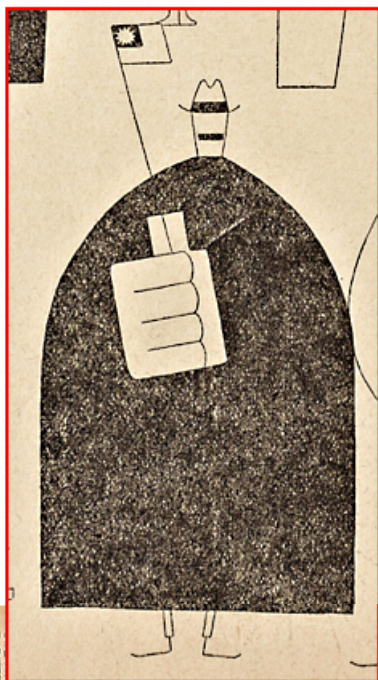
Wang Zimei
 "The May Fourth Period"
 A panel from the
 "Illustrated Record of
 Lu Xun's Struggles"
 (detail highlighted in red)

[ms32_034]





From 1926 to 1928 another wave of nationalism swept the country. Culminating in the Northern Expedition that marched up from the southern province of Guangzhou, this second revolution temporarily united the country's antagonistic Nationalist and Communist camps with the patriotic goal of completing the unfinished work of 1911. On its way north, idealistic members of the Expedition agitated against repressive traditionalism, challenged the imperialist occupiers in China's treaty port cities, and rolled back the influence of regional militarists who had filled the power vacuum following the end of dynastic rule.



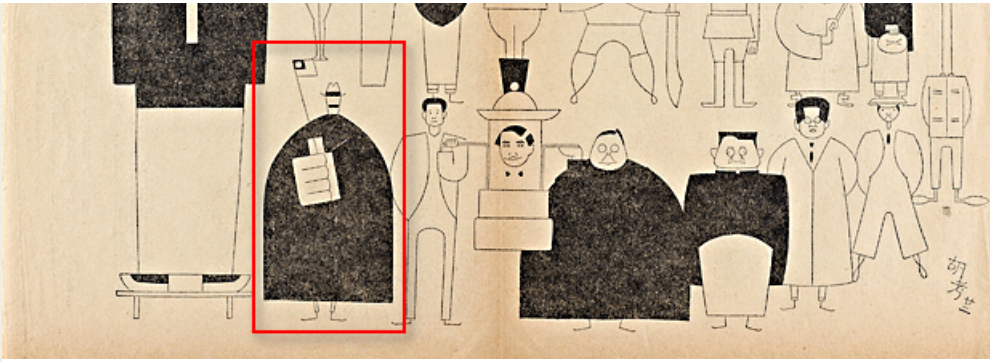
In April 1927, however, the march north exploded in a notoriously bloody purge of communists. The mastermind of this political violence, "Generalissimo" Chiang Kai-shek, then led the country through the Nanjing Decade (1927 to 1937), 10 years of relative stability during which *Modern Sketch* and other cultural enterprises thrived in China's large coastal cities.

As pictured in Hu Kao's group caricature "Big Names of the Day," Chiang Kai-shek has an outsized fist relative to a puny head—a veiled commentary on the Generalissimo's tendency to apply brawn instead of brains when resolving problems of state.

(detail highlighted in red)

[ms01_016]





Trouble with regional militarists or “warlords” did not end with the Northern Expedition. This photo from the pictorial magazine Modern Miscellany shows a propaganda cartoon posted during the Central Plains War of 1929-1930, when a group of regional militarists—including the “Christian General” Feng Yuxiang, pictured holding an axe in field of skulls—tried in vain to break with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Government.

*Shidai Huabao, 1929, no. 2, p. 24,
 Courtesy of Shanghai Library
 [ms404]*

The material impact of the modern hit with greatest force in China’s major treaty ports. These cities, which developed on the basis of “unequal treaties” successively instituted after the First Opium War in 1842, numbered nearly 80 by the end of the 19th century. The largest and most developed treaty ports—Tianjin, Guangzhou, Hankou, and above all Shanghai—experienced a welter of technological and demographic changes that set them apart from the inland regions, especially from the 1910s onward when international trade burgeoned. The look and—depending on one’s economic means—the practice of everyday urban life was radically transformed. Most striking to all newcomers were the steel-framed, multi-story buildings that loomed above major streets, like Shanghai’s riverside financial avenue the Bund and its prosperous main shopping thoroughfare, Nanjing Road. Closer to ground level were any number of new technological introductions, from automobiles to rolled cigarettes, as well as new places of entertainment, from coffeehouses and movie theaters to hotels doubling as brothels. All were absorbed by the era’s popular culture as emblems of the joys, evils, and rampant incongruities of urban treaty-port living.

Visual Narrative: City Life

The modern city provided endless inspiration for the artists of Modern Sketch. Some took their images directly from life, others concocted fantastic imaginary tableaux. The finest and most ambitious depictions of city life express a deeply ambiguous mixture of fascination and repulsion.



Zhang Guangyu

“Bumpkin One (looking at the Park Hotel): What’s that there big building fer?”

Bumpkin Two: Dontcha know? It’s bilt in case the Huangpu River floods!”

Palace Museum, Beijing
[ms15_015]



？識認新與女



作新海陸 ？嗎麼什麼多調生先 ；替指女
！呢想想我後 ；（來函放釋要回來剛）客顧



你真聰明 ？原來嚮向老情思的人女張伴為 ；甲客看
！神極的人男那慣不看是怕恐 ；乙客看



渴不 ；愛愛所人女多許被要來家育體 ；了得懂我！眼 ；（人情的家育體）桂芬
作假所全 ！呢響響應伴看又這 ；了愛家夫 ；



去出來都天每麼伴為你 ；子且轉讓 ；楊絲雲
？嗎那衣新件幾了做又我這知不厚 ；呢次機
作頭文劉

This page of single-panel gags develops the theme of “Women and New Knowledge.” The modern topics covered include café waitresses, foreign cinema, celebrity athletes, and fashion.

[ms16_028]

Chen Paiyi

Waitress: Would you like anything else, sir?
Customer (just released from prison): Give me
a minute to think about that...

Yu Suoya

Jinggui (girlfriend of an athlete): Oh, now I
understand. All the girls are in love with
athletes. Loved by one and all... Well, who
gives a fig about that!

Liu Chuliang

- Why is she staring up at the sky?
- Doesn't like his looks, I guess.

Liu Wenxian

Miss Yang: What's with your constantly
going in and out every day lately?
Miss Pei: You didn't notice? I've just made
myself some new outfits!



Wang Dunqing

“Negotiating”

Anti-prostitution campaigns in Shanghai drove many women to do their business in collaboration with hotels. The writing on the entranceway reads “Shanghai Hotel.”

[ms13_020]

The booming international trade financing these material changes transformed the human landscape, too. Largest among the treaty ports, Shanghai was divided into three independent municipalities: the International Settlement, the French Concession, and the Chinese-controlled areas. The former two zones were governed by councils comprised of wealthy, property-owning residents, while the parts of the city governed by the Chinese—Greater Shanghai—were headed by a mayor, appointed through the central government in Nanjing.



象氣新的民殖次

Lu Zhixiang

"The New Climate for the Sub-colonial"

For regular Chinese like the blue-clad worker depicted here, treaty-port life was partitioned by hard boundaries of class and race.

[ms13_022]

By 1934 a steadily increasing foreign population had been concentrated in the city's foreign concessions for nearly 100 years. Between 1915 and 1930, however, the number of foreign nationals doubled in response to a spurt of economic growth during and after the First World War. Japanese and British topped the list, ahead of White Russian émigrés, Americans, German, Portuguese, and French, as well as "colonials" like Sikhs and Annamites (Vietnamese), not to mention the multinational sailors, soldiers, and tourists from all over the globe who steamed in and out of China's ports. Though far outnumbered by the Chinese population, the foreign presence in Shanghai and other coastal cities became an integral part of the modern *mélange* of sights and sounds, mediated on the street by the urban lingua franca, pidgin.



Hello ! Johnie Kumishow!
No Papa, No Mama, No Chow!
 (註: Kumishow 卽 Commission 之意, 謂要求
 些極微少之賞賜也。Chow 卽吃也) 王定傑作

Wang Dingjie
American and European
sailors on shore leave
were a frequent sight in
Shanghai and other
coastal treaty-port cities.
The caption explains that
kumishow means
"commission," in this
case referring to a
tip or gratuity.

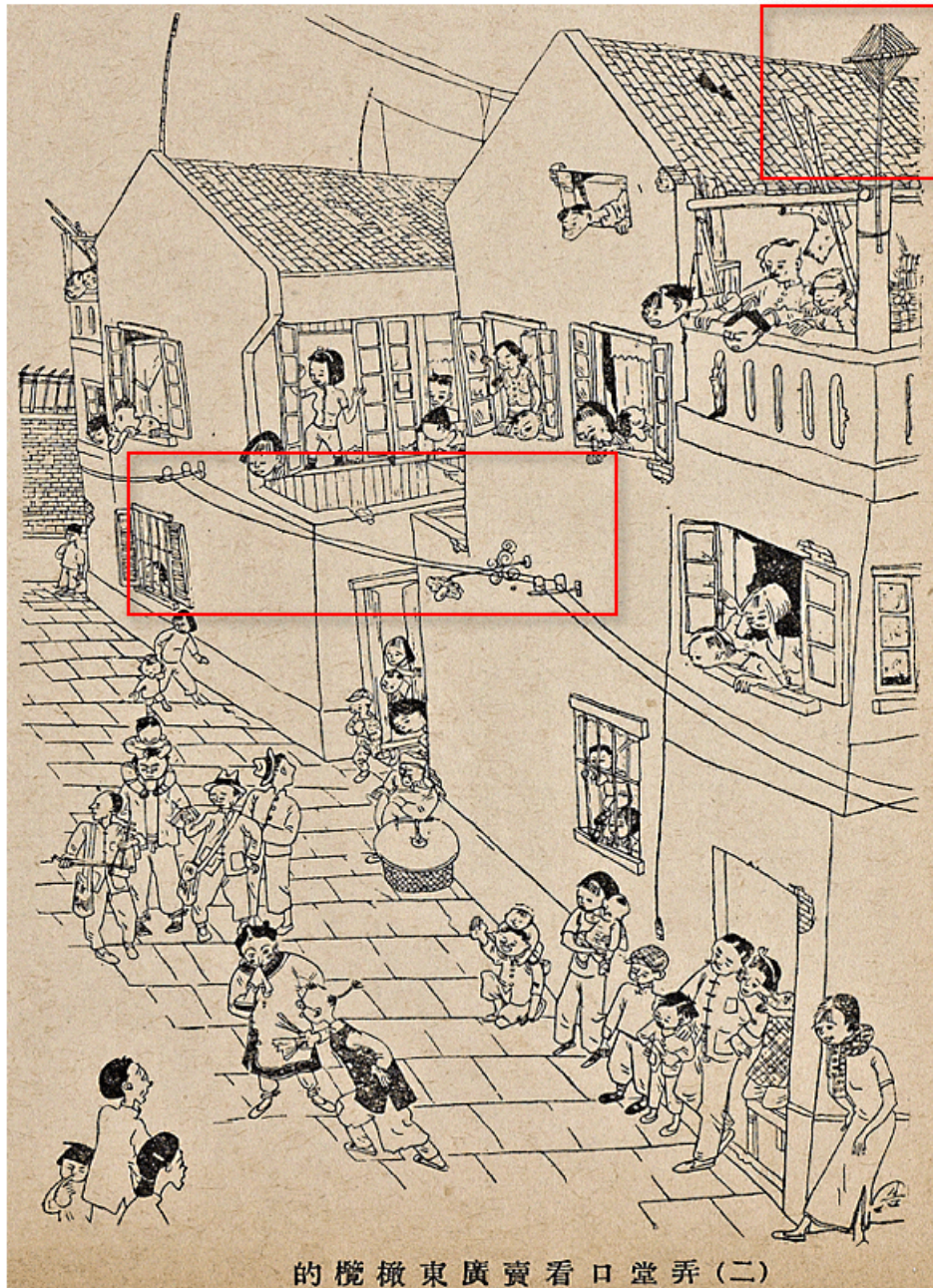
[ms_34_008]



Hua Junwu
"Tour Group" (detail)

In the 1930s Shanghai was a major international tourist destination.

[ms17_011]



的攪橄東廣賣看口堂弄(二)

The artists of Modern Sketch also depicted local Chinese street life. This panel from Chen Haoxiang's "Pursuit of Low-brow Entertainment" shows residents of Shanghai's overcrowded nongtang row houses craning to view itinerant performers put on a show of Cantonese opera. Some "modern" touches here include electric wires and an improvised radio antenna (highlighted in red).

[ms25_029] detail

By the 1930s the idea of *shidai* not only permeated talk of history, politics, and society, the term itself had become a buzzword used to promote products from furniture to face cream. Thus the magazine buyer on Fuzhou Road, in addition to intuiting a sense of epochal change from the title of *Modern Sketch*, would probably have been aware, too, that this name linked our strange horseman to a carefully branded line of popular periodicals put out by an ambitious new company: Modern Publications Ltd. In 1934, Modern Publications initially featured four magazines alongside *Modern Sketch*: the glossy, sophisticated monthly *Van Jan*, the mass-market pictorial *Modern Miscellany*, the cinema-goer's companion *Modern Film*, and the humor magazine *Analects*.

Eye-catching popular periodicals from Modern Publications were one reason 1934 was dubbed Shanghai's "Year of the Magazine."

In the city's intensely competitive publishing market, image was everything.

Cartoonist and commercial artist Zhang Guangyu's June 1934 cover of Van Jan fancifully depicts a future world, long after the demise of human beings, in which robots battle dinosaurs in dense jungle.

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms303_Wanxiang_00]



The Chinese titles for each of Modern Publications' "Five Big Periodicals" (highlighted in red) featured custom-designed typefaces, likely created by Zhang Guangyu. From top to bottom, the names refer to Van Jan, Modern Miscellany, Analects, Modern Sketch, and Modern Film.

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms303_Wanxiang_00]



A richly colored cover design from Modern Miscellany (highlighted in red) as printed in an advertisement in Van Jan. (full page and enlarged detail)

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms305_Wanxiang_03_44]

However varied and experimental the content of its periodicals, Modern Publications was from start to finish a money-making venture, funded in the main by Shao Xunmei, a high-born Shanghai sophisticate, poet in the decadent mold, and cynosure of the city's literary and art circles. In a last-ditch effort to save his extended family from bankruptcy, Shao had invested a small fortune to purchase cutting-edge rotogravure printing machinery and photographic equipment from Germany. The physical plant these machines comprised formed the industrial heart of his publishing empire, The Modern Press.[4]

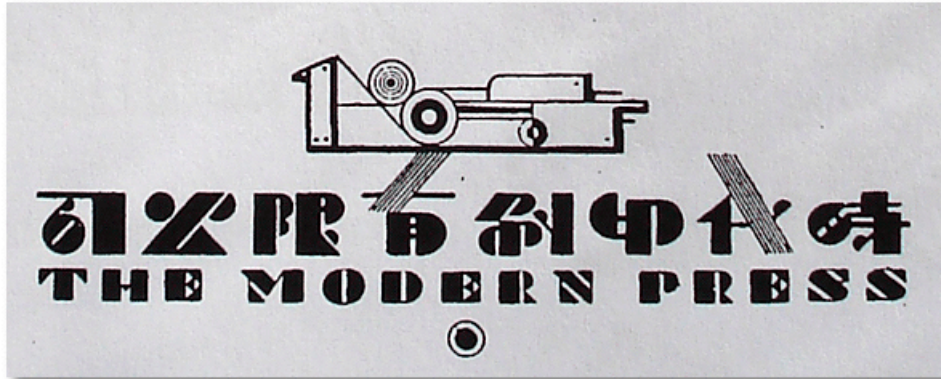


“Portrait of a Literary Gathering”

This elaborate group caricature, unsigned but usually attributed to Lu Shaofei—the editor of *Modern Sketch*—shows the founder of *Modern Publications* Shao Xunmei at the table’s head (highlighted in red), hosting an imaginary soiree of Shanghai writers. Shao is seated between portraits of Maxim Gorky and the late-Ming writer Yuan Zhonglang, suggesting the range of literary styles his periodicals supported.

The original drawing appeared in the February 1936 issue of the magazine *Six Arts* (*Liu yi*).

[ms402]



Logo for *The Modern Press*, designed by Zhang Guangyu.
From Zhang’s 1932 book *Modern Commercial Art* (*Jindai gongyi meishu*)

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms401]

No less impressive than the technology behind *Modern Publications* was the pool of contributors to Shao’s stable of popular-press magazines. For instance, in its brief, three-issue lifetime, *Van Jan* alone published the work of Shanghai’s most fashionable pop-modernist writers, such as Shi Zhecun, Liu Na’ou, Mu Shiyong, and Ye Lingfeng. *Modern Publications* also engaged the talents of a group of graphic artists who had joined forces some seven years before to produce the predecessor to *Modern Sketch*, a large-format weekly that ran from 1928 to 1930 called *Shanghai Sketch* (*Shanghai manhua*).^[5] Known for its provocative cover art, *Shanghai Sketch* informed its readers with photojournalistic content, kept them abreast of the latest doings in local artistic and social circles, and entertained with several pages per issue of humorous, satirical, fashion-related, and fine-art illustration.

Cover illustration entitled “Degeneracy” (Duoluo) from the November 23, 1929 issue of Shanghai Sketch, the forerunner to Modern Sketch.

The artist, once again Zhang Guangyu, has superimposed a nude woman against the five lobes of a fallen, tattered leaf from a plane tree, the kind planted along the boulevards of Shanghai’s French Concession. A disturbing image, to be sure, but one that condenses the ideas of seasonal content, fallen women, a quarter of the city notorious for vice, anxiety over sociopolitical decline, and the period’s bohemian vogue for decadent-style poetry and art.

[ms207]



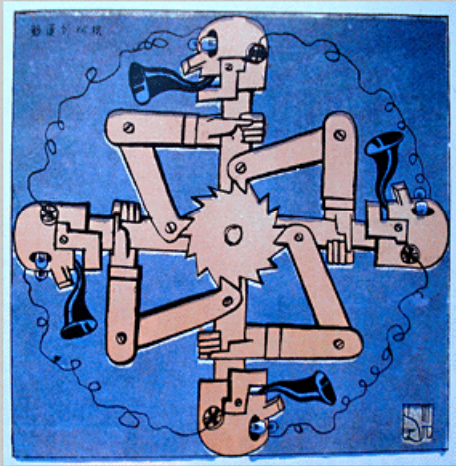
It is also conceivable that Zhang’s leaf motif was a good-natured gibe aimed at his junior, unmarried colleague at Shanghai Sketch, Ye Qianyu, whose surname means “leaf.”

Plane tree leaves, like the one shown in this recent photograph, can still be found littering the sidewalks in Shanghai’s former French Concession during the late autumn months.

[ms403]

Cartoon Art from the '20s to the '30s

It is important to keep in mind that the English word “cartoon” can be a misleading translation for the Chinese term manhua. Cognate with the Japanese word “manga,” Chinese magazines like Shanghai Sketch (Shanghai manhua) and Modern Sketch (Shidai manhua) expanded the meaning of manhua to cover a diversity of graphic forms beyond what we normally think of as “cartoons.” We can see some of the evolution of manhua by looking at “before and after” samples of work by artists who contributed to both Shanghai Sketch in the late 1920s and Modern Sketch in the mid-1930s.



"Mechanical Movement"
Shanghai Sketch, November 24, 1928

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms204]



"Stalin, the Steel-armed Soviet God and Roosevelt, the American Blue Eagle Emperor;"
Van Jan, May 1934

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms301]

Zhang Yingchao



"Study hard today, strike it rich tomorrow. Such joy!"

Shanghai Sketch,
June 1, 1929

[ms205]

"The Song of Spring"

Modern Sketch,
February 1935

[ms_14_022]



Lu Shaofei



"Flower of Society"
Shanghai Sketch, August 11, 1928

[ms201]

"The Secret to Raising Money"
Modern Sketch, February 1934

[ms02_018]



Ye Qianyu



“The Era of Youth”
Shanghai Sketch, April 19, 1930

[ms208]



“Latest Floral Pattern, Indigo on White”
Van Jan, May 1934

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms302]

Crises and Visions

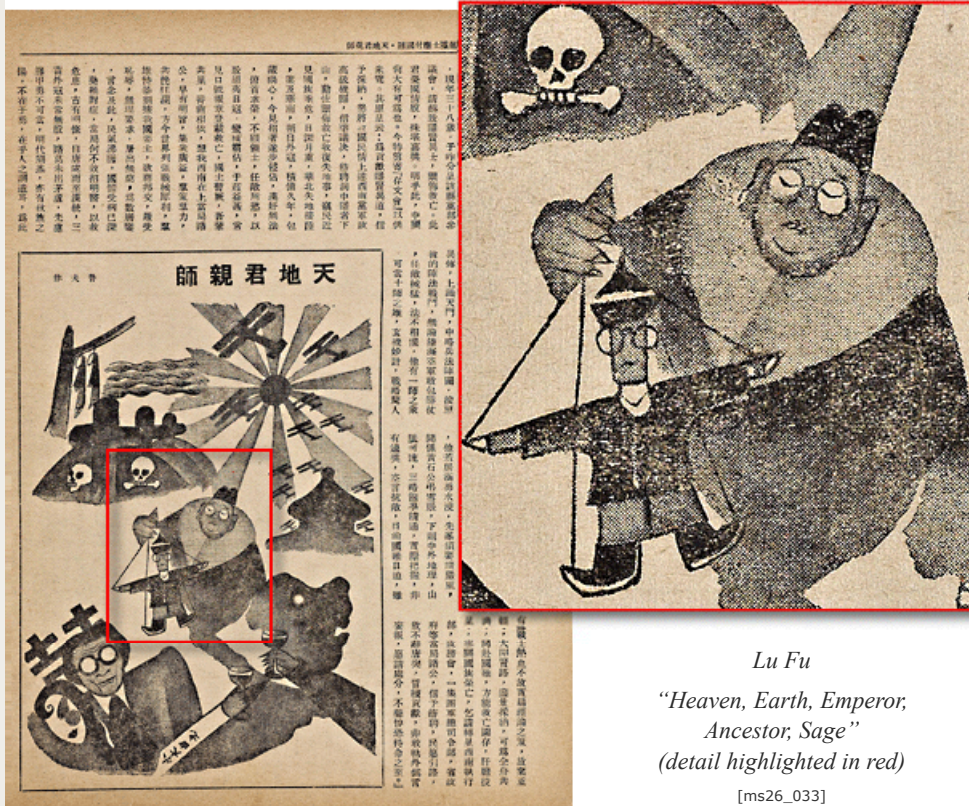
The art of *Shanghai Sketch* anticipated what was to appear in *Modern Sketch* half a decade later. But as its name suggests, the earlier magazine’s symbolic center of gravity lay in the city of Shanghai, with all its distinct character types, mercurial fashions, and urban absurdities. *Modern Sketch* was also embedded in the Shanghai urban milieu, but cast its net much wider. In part, this widened scope can be attributed to national and global crises that had intervened since 1930 and continued throughout *Modern Sketch*’s lifetime. That decade began with the Japanese military takeover of China’s Northeast in 1931 and subsequent establishment of the colonial puppet-regime Manchukuo, a catastrophe that galvanized elite nationalist sentiment.





Wang Zimei
 "Twelve Animals of the Zodiac"
 caricaturing the puppet-emperor
 of Manchukuo, Pu Yi
 (detail highlighted in red)

[ms33_007]



Lu Fu
 "Heaven, Earth, Emperor,
 Ancestor, Sage"
 (detail highlighted in red)

[ms26_033]

In January 1932, Shanghai itself became a battlefield when Japanese forces attacked the city in the Song-Hu War. The furious shelling, bombing and street fighting, incited by a territorial dispute between the Nationalist Government and Japan, devastated entire neighborhoods—and in fact interrupted Shao Xunmei’s publishing ambitions until the city had recovered.[7] As Japanese aggression loomed larger on the horizon, global depression disrupted China’s rural and urban economies even as it boosted fascist movements in Germany, Italy, Japan, and right in China’s own ruling Nationalist Party.

Ye Qianyu
 “The New Lines of Battle?”
 Ye depicts Mussolini, Hitler,
 and in the background, a
 figure probably representing
 Japan. Note that Hitler’s
 salute blocks the face of the
 figure in a Chinese cap and
 scholar’s robe. China’s ruling
 Nationalist Party had a
 powerful fascist faction
 during the 1930s, to which Ye
 discreetly alludes.

[ms01_018]



Visual Narrative: The New World Dis-Order

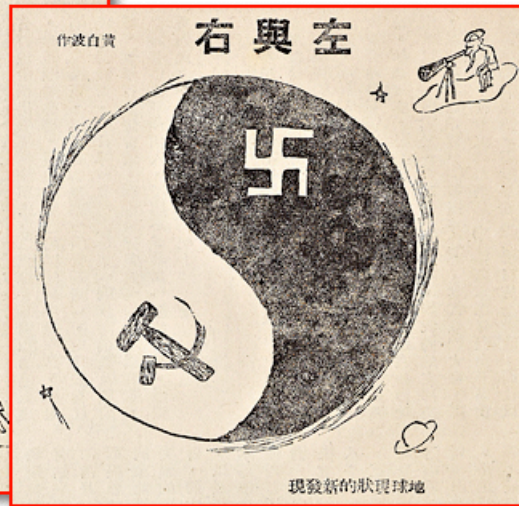
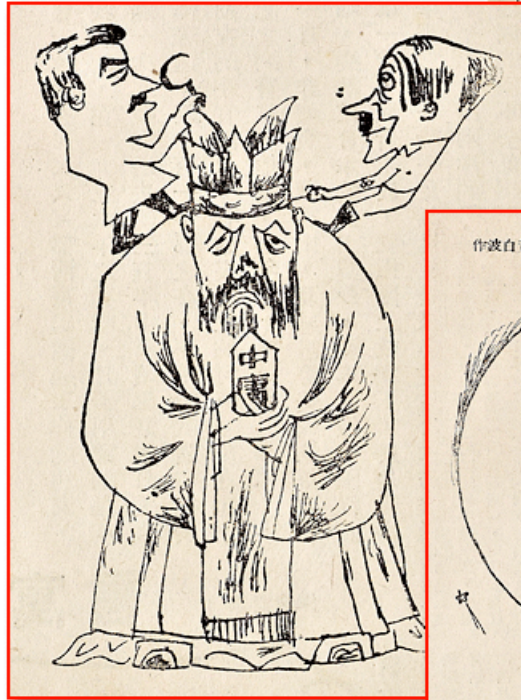
The print-run of *Modern Sketch* from 1934 to 1937 placed it squarely athwart a dangerous age of global uncertainty. These were years when fascism squared off with communism, and liberal nations sparred weakly against expansionist powers like Germany, Italy, and Japan. Many Chinese saw themselves threatened on all sides by imperialist aggressors, most urgently Japan, which by 1936 virtually controlled all of north China. Dramatic international events, like the League of Nations’ abandonment of King Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia to the invading Italian fascists were, for China, the writing on the wall. Even China’s “goose egg” showing of zero medals in the 1936 Berlin Olympics seemed to bode ill in a world where might trumped right at every turn.



Internationally and domestically, forces of the left confronted those of the right, with the Soviet Union facing off against European fascism, and China's own communist movement struggling to survive, underground in the cities and aboveground in isolated rural bases.

Huang Baibo
details from "Left and Right"

[ms36_006]





But *Modern Sketch* did much more than react to big national and global events. Due to the vision of its editor, Lu Shaofei, the collective pictorial imagination of *Modern Sketch* probed all corners of the modern era, beyond and below the big stories of politics, economics, Shanghai, and even China.

Lu Shaofei at work on Modern Sketch. A copy of issue 3 can be seen beside his elbow.

Van Jan, May 1934

Courtesy of Shanghai Library [ms306]

Lu introduced his editorial philosophy unobtrusively, as if giving implicit privilege to images over words, in a brief note tucked into the lower right corner of the last page of *Modern Sketch's* inaugural issue, the same one that featured the strange horseman on its front cover:



On all sides a tense era surrounds us. As it is for the individual, so it is for our country and the world. Will things always be this way? I for one don't know. But since the feeling won't go away, one desires an answer, and the more one fails to find it, the more that desire grows. Our stance, our single responsibility, then, is to strive! As for the design on the cover of this first issue, it shall be our logo. Its meaning: Yield to None.

Inside last page of the first issue of Modern Sketch (detail highlighted in red)

[ms01_034]

編者補白

編這書經過，自然很多話想說，但不占地位，因就省去。祇希望讀者不原諒，作者努力追究，編者極不厭煩，發行者盡力推銷。

目下四圍環境緊張時代，個人如此，國家世界亦如此。永遠如此嗎？我就不知道。但感覺不停，因此什麼都想解決，越不能解決越會想解決。所以，需要努力！就是我們的態度。責任也祇有如此。

這一期封面的圖案，以後用作我們的標識，表明「威武不屈」的意思。『事事要不浪費』，是一句很時髦的話。我吃的是流行飯，當然擠出一點流行的腦汁，就此擱筆。

Knowing but ambiguous, brave yet vague, Lu's quiet manifesto invites the reader to join the strange horseman on a mission to make sense of extreme times, a *shidai* like no other. As for the horseman, suspended in a space deliberately left blank, it seems poised to engage all comers, known and unknown, with the tools of the cartoon artist's trade. But what, precisely, were these "cartoons," these "*manhua*," these "sketches" that would take on the modern era?

On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: [click here](#).

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by John A. Crespi

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Ye Qianyu

“Supply Exceeds Demand, Demand Exceeds Supply”

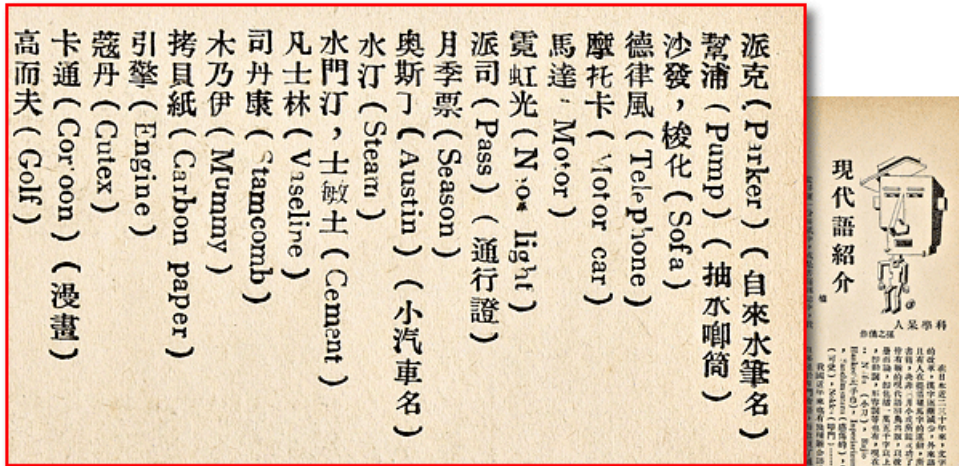
[ms23_021]

WINDOWS ON AN ERA

A Motley Democracy of Forms

As editor of *Modern Sketch*, Lu Shaofei gave his magazine one mission: “grasp the era.” The guidelines were simple. He invited contributors to send in material that “critiques the fine points of life’s problems, be they large or small” and “describes every level of society.” Submissions were not to “promote any ideological line,” and photographs could be sent in as well, if they were “cartoon-like.”^[1] He specifically encouraged contributors to “explore the future, be it bright or dark,” all with the goal of “making life better.”^[2] Lu knew very well that his editorial strategy extended an artistic *carte blanche* to potential contributors. In effect he was asking them, in the spirit of free and uninhibited expression, whoever and wherever they were, to present their personal angles on a complex and anxious era. The visions they offered could, in the interests of exposing a truth, be embellished and exaggerated, and they should have a point—the sharper the better.

But before surveying this imagery, it bears mention that *Modern Sketch* published both graphic art and the written word. *Manwen*—the verbal counterpart to *manhua*—comprised up to one-third of any given issue’s content. In practice *manwen* referred to a miscellany of jokes, one-act plays, journalistic fragments, erotic anecdotes, travel sketches, glossaries of transliterated “modern” terms, whimsical essays, satirical songs, and drolly cynical social commentary.



Detail from the *Modern Sketch* manwen called "An Introduction to Some Modernisms." Readers found this guide to transliterated loan words so useful they asked for another installment. (detail highlighted in red)

[ms02_028]



Although we will not deal with *manwen* here, it is worth noting that a good deal of written content in *Modern Sketch* aimed at promoting and developing the art of cartooning. To this end Lu Shaofei not only wrote a column answering practical questions sent in by would-be contributors, but also hosted a substantial series of translated and original articles on the history, artistic techniques, and foreign masters of cartoon illustration.

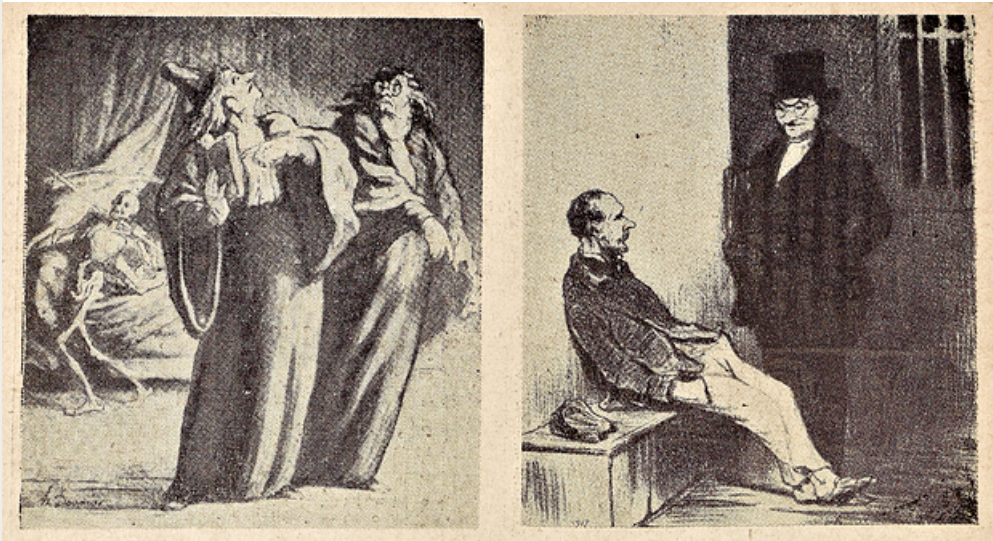
Foreign Models: Toba Sōjō to James Thurber

China's cartoonists were keenly interested in where their art came from and how it was developing internationally. The illustrated articles in *Modern Sketch*, many translated from Japanese, satisfied their curiosity. Here are just a few samples of foreign cartoonists' art as introduced through *Modern Sketch*:



Image by 12th-Century Japanese monk Toba Sōjō

[ms16_038] detail



Images by French caricaturist Honoré Daumier (1808-1879)

[ms11_039] detail

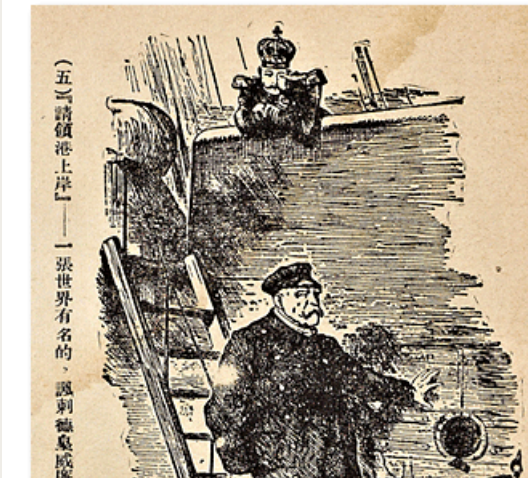


Image by British graphic humorist and long-term Punch contributor Sir John Tenniel (1820-1914)

[ms14_039] detail

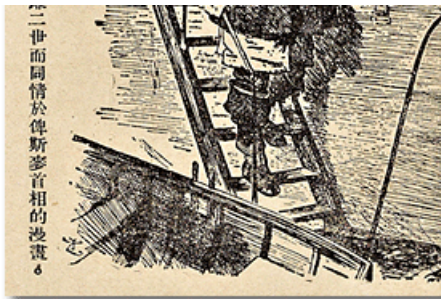
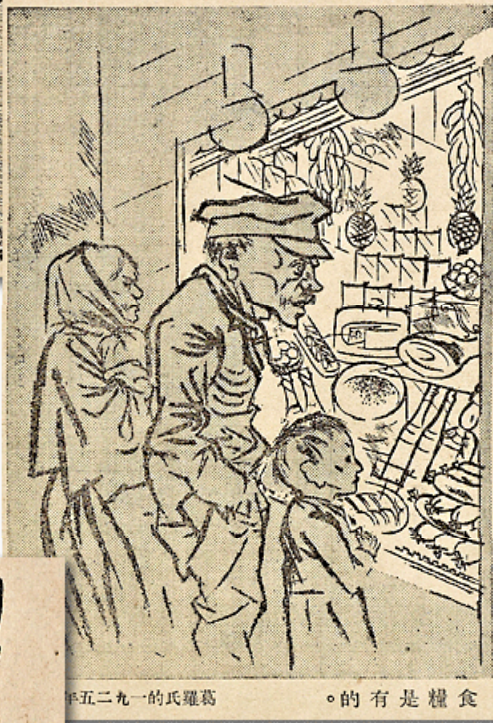


Image by German dada-expressionist painter and caricaturist George Grosz (1893-1959)

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms12_038]



葛羅氏的一九五二年
食糧是有的



Image by Japanese leftist cartoonist Masamu Yanase (1900-1945) depicting the expansionist, anti-communist Prime Minister Tanaka Giichi's "Equitable Distribution of Fertilizer."

[ms31_041] detail

The Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias (1904-1957), a caricaturist for New York *Vanity Fair* who visited Shanghai in 1934, had a direct influence on several Chinese cartoonists' style. For instance, Covarrubias's clean, linear drawing style seems mirrored in the work of Zhang Guangyu, as can be seen when comparing certain images by the Mexican and Chinese artists. To conclude that Zhang's style is derivative of Covarrubias's, however, ignores how both artists participated in the Modernist predilection for primitive art: Mayan in the case of the Mexican artist, Chinese—and beyond—in the case of Zhang Guangyu.^[3] Nor should one assume any stigma was attached to copying foreign models. China's cartoonists saw imitation as a way of building a foundation for an individual style.^[4]



The modernist predilection for primitive art can be seen in an image by a Mexican artist (above, left), and mirrored by a Chinese artist in Modern Sketch (above, right).

Miguel Covarriubias
"Female Zapatista Soldiers"
[ms02_003] detail



Zhang Guangyu
detail from "Folk Love Songs" series
[ms14_035] detail

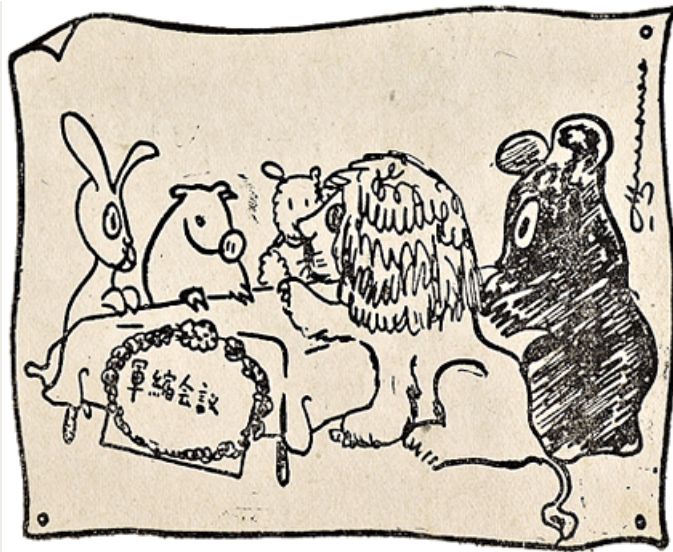
James Thurber (1894-1961) and other cartoonists of *The New Yorker* were admired, too, as was that magazine's smart literary prose, which *Modern Sketch's* university-educated, left-leaning theorist Wang Dunqing described as "able to convince average petty urbanites that they are the most clever of intellectuals."^[5]

Modern Sketch contributors were avid collectors of foreign magazines, which flowed into China's treaty ports along with the resident and visiting foreign populations.

[ms20_037]



Hua Junwu's series "New Aesop's Fables" borrows from *The New Yorker* cartoonist James Thurber's beast fables cartoons, but with an explicit political edge, as in this fanciful depiction of an "Arms Reduction Conference."

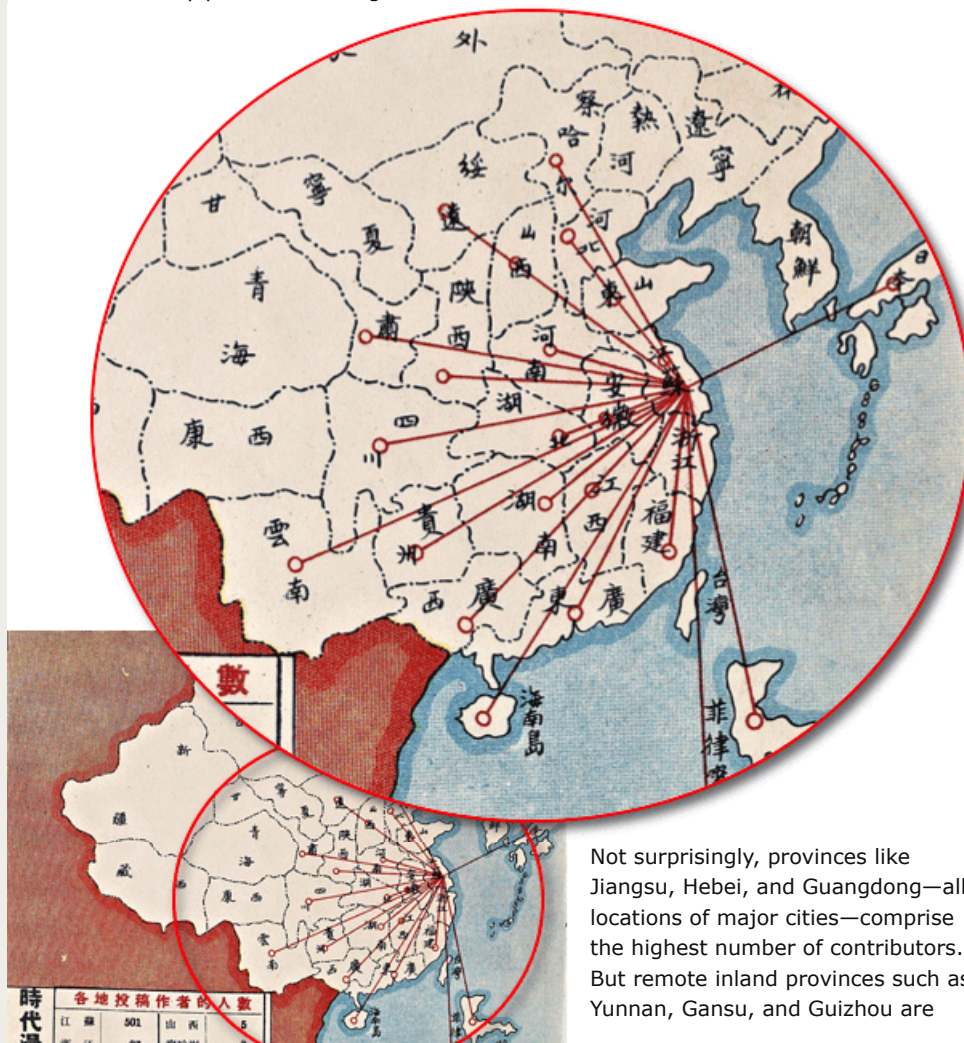


Lion: When you have claws like mine, then we'll talk about peace.

[ms36_009] detail

The Geography of an Era

While the Republican-era publishing industry that spawned *Modern Sketch* was indisputably centered in Shanghai, Lu Shaofei's vision of capturing the era extended far beyond that city, and far beyond the borders of China proper. A map diagram with accompanying charts, published in February 1937, three years after *Modern Sketch* began, suggests just how far that network stretched. The smaller, horizontal table provides the number of contributors by career, listing these from the left as Laborer, Merchant, Student, Scholar, Military, and Other. The larger, vertical table enumerates contributors by province and region.



Not surprisingly, provinces like Jiangsu, Hebei, and Guangdong—all locations of major cities—comprise the highest number of contributors. But remote inland provinces such as Yunnan, Gansu, and Guizhou are

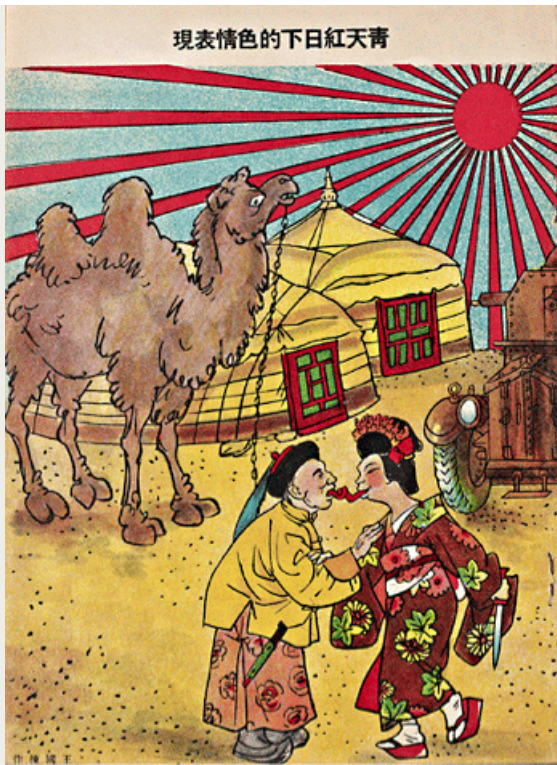
often depicted that region's Central Asian nomadic peoples. In the mid-1930s, China's northern provinces were slipping into Japanese hands, a chilling geopolitical reality that gave Shen's lyrical sketches, like the black-and-white "Travel *Manhua*," a political edge.



Shen Yiqian

*"Travel Manhua: Sketches of the Lifeways of
Chahar, Suiyuan, and Mongolia"*

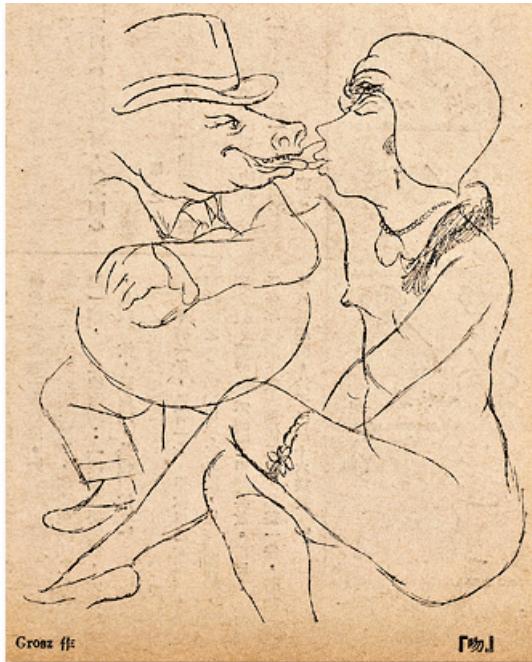
[ms35_033]



The same Japanese incursions lent other political cartoons a powerful urgency. For example, Wang Guodong's "Pornographic Behavior under the Blue Sky and Red Sun" maligns the idea of Inner Mongolians collaborating with Japanese infiltrators, who were at the time maneuvering to set up an "autonomous" North China.

Wang Guodong
"Pornographic Behavior
under the Blue Sky
and Red Sun"

[ms26_024]



Chinese cartoonists' domestic concerns were often inflected with international influence, as we can see when comparing Wang's two figures with those from the George Grosz cartoon "The Kiss," which was reproduced in the very same February 1936 issue of *Modern Sketch*.

George Grosz
 "The Kiss"
 [ms26_040]

Meanwhile, thousands of miles to the south, more contributions came from near the equator, in Singapore. One of the most colorful is Zheng Guanghan's illustration of an ethnic Chinese man who has immigrated to the Malaysian archipelago to homestead in the tropical wilderness.

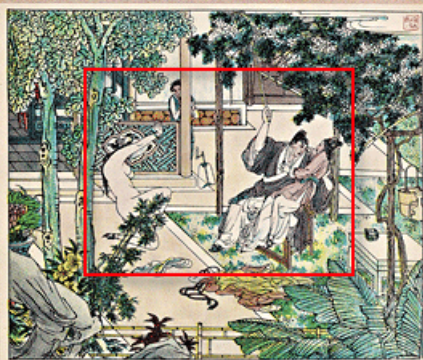


Zheng explains in his lengthy caption that the red rectangles on the front of the hut are Chinese couplets—traditionally pasted in red-paper around doorways during the Lunar New Year festival. He adds that the festival decorations resemble "national flags" symbolizing victory over the jungle wilderness, then warns that these hardy pioneers should not be forgotten by their offspring, especially those who have come north to squander their patrimony in China's foreign concessions.

Zheng Guanghan
 "Pioneer Farmer"
 [ms07_023]

Even more than the geographic variety represented in *Modern Sketch*, the most striking consequence of Lu Shaofei's editorial policy was the sheer variety of visual forms he accommodated under the umbrella term *manhua*, an expression whose meaning extended well beyond what we would normally call cartoons. To be sure, familiar genres—like single-panel "gag" and political cartoons, as well as multi-panel sequential comic strips—made up the backbone of *Modern Sketch's* pictorial content. But as we shall see, over time Lu Shaofei accepted and published paper-cuts (*jianzhi*), collage (*jiantie*), photographs (*sheying*), photomontage, and even photos of small sculpted models (*mandiao*) set in dioramas. Adding to the mix were items like celebrity and political caricature, children's art, and the magazine's cover art, the last constituting

something of a subgenre in itself. Sketch art was also common, and like Shen's "Travel Manhua" usually more a form of documentary than humor or satire. Nor did the border between word and image hold firm; newspaper clippings, stock certificates, theater tickets, paper money, and other printed matter were frequently combined with drawings and photographs. Finally, the art submitted did not necessarily have to be fully "modern" in appearance, but could update traditional forms like woodblock illustration.



Each issue of Modern Sketch featured a neo-traditional illustration accompanying an excerpt from the Ming dynasty erotic novel Plum in the Golden Vase (Jin ping mei). The artist, Cao Hanmei, republished the series in two volumes in 1936 and 1937.

(detail highlighted in red)

[ms18_022]

Cover Art

Designed to define *Modern Sketch* in the eyes of readers, the magazine's full-color front covers offer a convenient point of entry into its diverse subjects and styles. What strikes the viewer's eye now, as it surely did in the 1930s, is a consistent theme of eroticism. Nude or semi-nude figures were undoubtedly displayed to titillate the potential buyer. Yet during the first decades of the Republican period nudity could also project positive symbolic values, such as freedom, liberation, and physical health—all tropes aimed at counteracting representations of China as the tradition-bound, feeble, "Sick Man of Asia."

Thus on the one hand we can be sure that Hu Kao's geometrically minimalist bikinis, featured on the July cover and entitled "Swimsuits of 1934," poke fun at Shanghai fashion trends. But on the other hand, we need to take Lu Shaofei at least partially at his word when, in his explanation of Hu Kao's cover at the back of the same issue, he explains, "The body is not a crime; misfortune can only arise from insufficient knowledge of it."

Hu Kao
"Swimsuits of 1934"
Cover of the July issue
[ms07_000]



When flat modernist compositions like Hu Kao's give way to a deeper visual perspective, semi-nude images lent themselves to socially motivated figure-ground compositions. On the cover of the July 1936 issue Lu Shaofei depicted an emaciated boat-tracker foregrounded against a tableau of idle beachgoers. Beyond the stark contrast of rich and poor, contemporary readers would have quickly detected a subtler irony in this composition: the tracker and the bathers are almost equally well tanned.

Lu Shaofei
 "Opening Up a New Era"
 Cover of the July 1936 issue

[m28_000]



Skin color in such a context was, so to speak, no joke, as further suggested by the cover of *Modern Sketch's* final, June 1937 issue, drawn by Zhang Yingchao, an artist generally deemed politically superficial because his style followed that of the American flapper-fashion illustrator, Russell Patterson (1893-1977).

Here, however, the mildly salacious surface appearance of two swimmers—one a svelte, pale-skinned, bikini-clad woman and the other a muscular, darkly tanned man—is sharply undercut by the fine print of the caption: "You're almost the same color as the corpses found floating in Tianjin's Hai River."

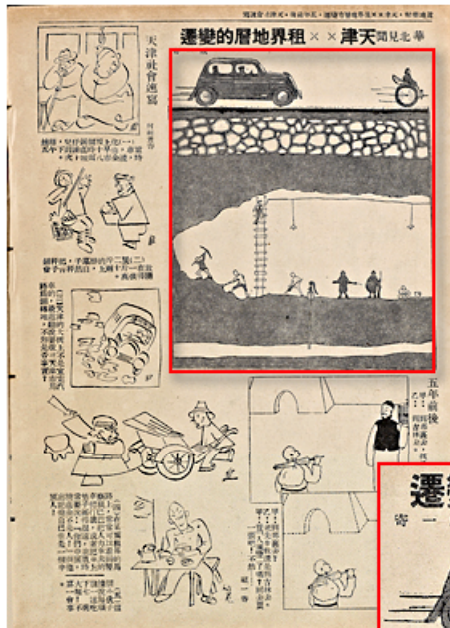
Zhang Yingchao
 [Caption:] You're almost the same color as the corpses found floating in Tianjin's Hai River.

[ms39_000]

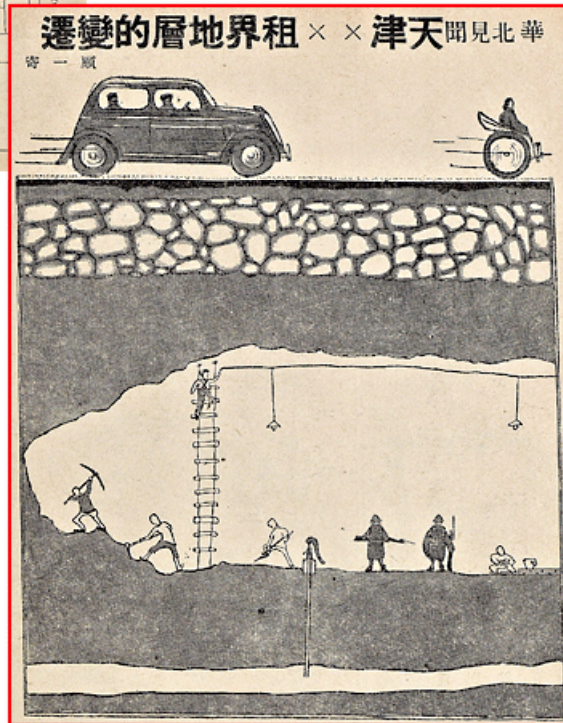


Readers of the time would have immediately recognized this caption as referring to the hair-raising mystery of hundreds of male corpses, mostly those of able-bodied men between the ages of 20 and 40, recently found drifting down Tianjin's Hai River below the Japanese Concession. The local Chinese authorities insisted that the bodies were those of heroin addicts from drug houses in the city's foreign concessions. Strong circumstantial evidence, however, indicated that the Japanese army had been using the

river to dump bodies—those of Chinese laborers originally hired to build military installations, and then brutally silenced to maintain secrecy.[8]



Especially during the latter half of its three-year run, Modern Sketch became a platform for airing otherwise censored information. For instance, due to fear of exacerbating tensions with the Japanese, the Nationalist regime blocked major newspapers from speculating on Tianjin's floating corpse incident. But because it was not regarded as a "serious" publication, Modern Sketch could get away with publishing cartoons like Gu Yi's "News from North China: Changes to the Stratum under the XX Concession," which appeared in April 1937.



Gu Yi

"News from North China:
Changes to the Stratum under
the XX Concession"

The word "Japan" was forbidden
by government censors, thus
the X's. Readers, however,
would have had no problem
filling in the blanks.

(detail highlighted in red)

[ms37_014]

The political innuendo behind Zhang Yingchao's swimsuit tête-à-tête shows that there can be more to Modern Sketch's cover art than first meets the eye. As a general rule, however, cover illustrations eschewed visual subtlety. Political messages were typically quite stark, though often tinged with irony, as in Chen Juanyin's December 1936 cover "Viewing the Sunrise over the East China Sea."

Chen Juanyin
 "Viewing the Sunrise over
 the East China Sea"

[ms24_042]



Where Chen quite plainly takes aim at his fellow nationals' passivity in the face Japanese expansionism, elsewhere political commentary could be conspicuous for its absence. For example, the only politics to be found in "New Temptation in Pink," by Japan-educated oil painter Chen Baoyi, are those of the sexual encounter, as facilitated by Shanghai's lively coffee-shop culture.

Chen Baoyi
 "New Temptation in Pink"

[ms16_042]



Other covers, like Zhang Guangyu's cheerful January 1935 contribution, commemorated the Republican government's Year of Children...

Zhang Guangyu
untitled cover
[ms13_000]



...or were drawn by children themselves, like the Chinese opera character published that same year in March.

Chen Keyan
"Martial Spirit"
[ms15_042]



A cover from 1936 featured a statuesque black woman athlete to celebrate the achievements of "colored peoples" in the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics...

Zhang Yingchao
"The Olympic Victory of Colored Peoples"
[ms29_000]



...while one from 1935 grotesquely caricatured petty-bourgeois passengers in a second-class rail coach. When it came to cover art, it seems safe to conclude that fans of *Modern Sketch* quickly learned to expect the unexpected.

Ye Qianyu
"The Second-class Rail Carriage"
[m19_000]



Visual Narrative: The Japanese Menace

During the several years before *Modern Sketch* began publication, Japan had invaded Manchuria, taken over the neighboring province of Jehol (Rehe), and occupied even the Great Wall of China. By 1936, the Nationalist Government had been pressured into signing treaties that effectively ceded to Japan the northern provinces of Chahar, Hebei, Shandong, Shanxi, and Suiyuan. For Chiang Kai-shek, appeasing Japan meant more resources to attack a domestic foe: the Chinese communists. But China's elites, cartoonists included, were outraged by

this disregard for national integrity. Nor were they pleased with political passivity among their countrymen, or worse, the acts of collaboration—whether willing or coerced at bayonet-point—reported from the occupied northern provinces. The artists of Modern Sketch responded to the impending national crisis with unruly imagination, portraying Japan and the threat it posed with a cascade of unpredictably diverse satirical imagery.



Single-panel Cartoons: Windows on an Era

For all their rich variety, cover illustrations belong to the most plentiful subgenre found in *Modern Sketch*: the captioned, hand-drawn, single-panel cartoon. Including cover art—but excluding media like paper-cuts, photographs, and photomontage—*Modern Sketch* published over 1000 single-panel works. To call these “windows onto an era” may sound like a convenient, even reductive, cliché. For several important reasons, however, the comparison is helpful. First, Lu Shaofei’s invitation for contributors to frame and expose the inner workings of their life and times calls to mind the idea of window-like visual openings onto a larger picture of reality. Second, in terms of the visual structure of the magazine itself, *Modern Sketch* inherited the conventions of the pictorial magazine, whose format encouraged the reader’s eye to travel vicariously, and often voyeuristically, into the new and unknown.

Then as now, pictorial publications were not so much read as scanned, a process that involved searching for, then engaging or rejecting, the various demands for sympathy, action, shame, laughter, envy, pleasure, shock, horror, and so on offered by framed images arranged on the plane of the page—not unlike windows arrayed on the face of a building.

Xu Ruoming
*“Floating Blossoms Fill
the City in Spring”*

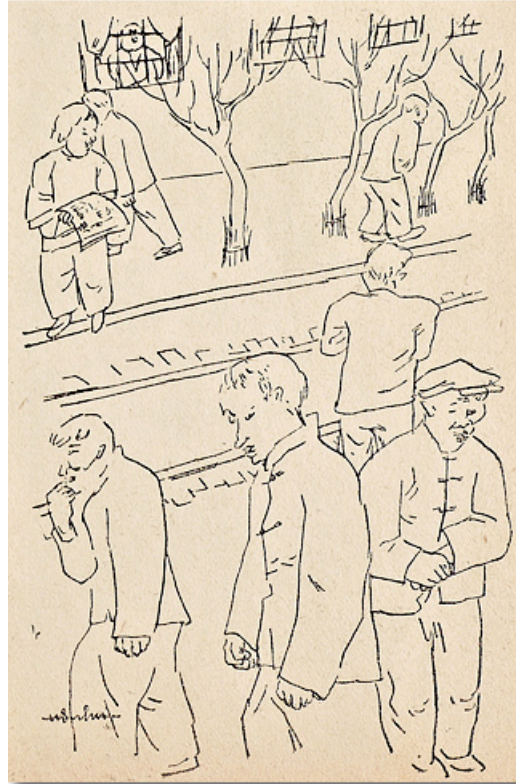
[m34_000]



Strictly speaking, pictures are not windows; but to disregard the striking iconic resemblances between one and the other would be a mistake. This is because beyond

surface appearances, windows by their very nature visually mediate interiors and exteriors, insiders and outsiders, the seers and the seen, the dominator and the dominated, making them an endlessly flexible figure for picturing, and potentially inverting, unequal power relations. It should not come as a surprise, then, that contributors to *Modern Sketch* played extensively with the visual ironies made available by positioning the frames of windows within the frames of their cartoons. In doing so they open some thought-provoking windows for us—outsiders to the historical world of *Modern Sketch*—onto how the single-panel cartoon constructed the multi-layered imagery of an era.

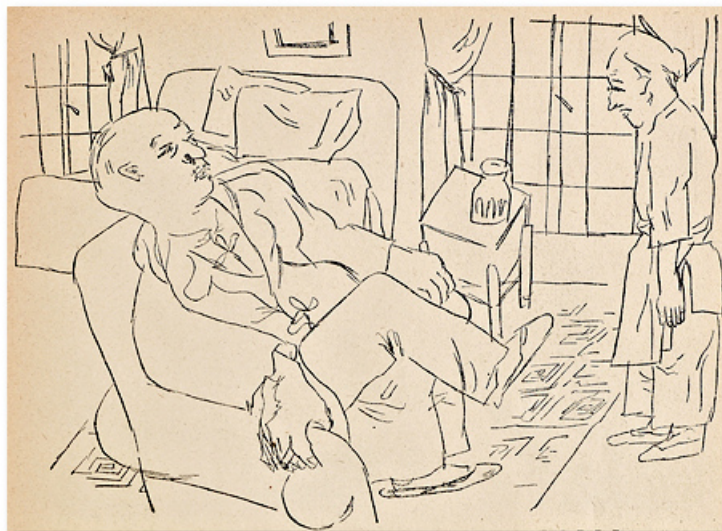
Cartoon windows could be large or small, transparent or opaque, viewed from within or without. In Lu Zhixiang's series "Shanghai Winter," for instance, window glass separates the haves from the have-nots, but also positions the gaze of the viewer on either side of a stark economic divide. Not to be ignored either is that Lu published these images in a January issue; like many popular pictorials, the content of *Modern Sketch* shifted with the seasons.



Lu Zhixiang
"Shanghai Winter" series

They just go on with
their lives like this, no sense
of the changing seasons.

[ms01_024] detail



Lu Zhixiang
"Shanghai Winter"
series

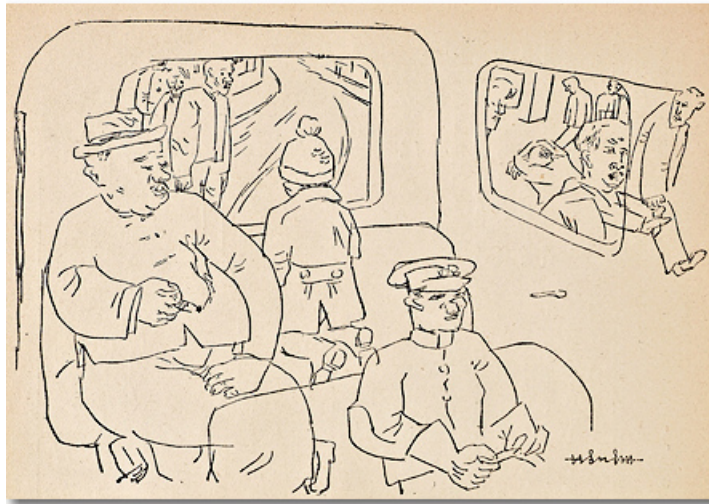
(The Master at one
in the afternoon)
"You should say
'Good morning!'"

[ms_01_024]

Lu Zhixiang
"Shanghai Winter"
series

(Street scene on a cold day) "Why don't these people have leather overcoats?"

[ms_01_025]



Liu Lipu's 1934 cartoon "Human Lives in Ubiquitous Autumn Rain" achieves a similar effect—also through the icon of the window, but using soft, rounded, faceless figures in shades of gray rather than Lu Zhixiang's spare, bleak line drawing. In Liu's composition stylized raindrops visible through the open window in the panel's upper right corner offer a visual point of entry from the leisure apartments of a wealthy man and his female companion out into the cold wet street below, where a rickshaw puller exposed to the elements hauls his fare. The puller's gaze is tilted upward to view a passenger riding comfortably behind the windows of a chauffeured limousine—the motorized, upper-class counterpart to his own human-powered vehicle. What does the rickshaw man feel? Longing? Resentment? Resignation? In the absence of facial features we can only guess. But following his gaze beyond the automobile, we return to the warm, dry interior of the wealthy man's chamber, lending closure to the top and bottom of the panel, and leaving us to ponder the nature of the relationship between these two men.



?! 種種生人，處處雨秋

Liu Lipu

"Human Lives in Ubiquitous Autumn Rain"

[ms10_006]

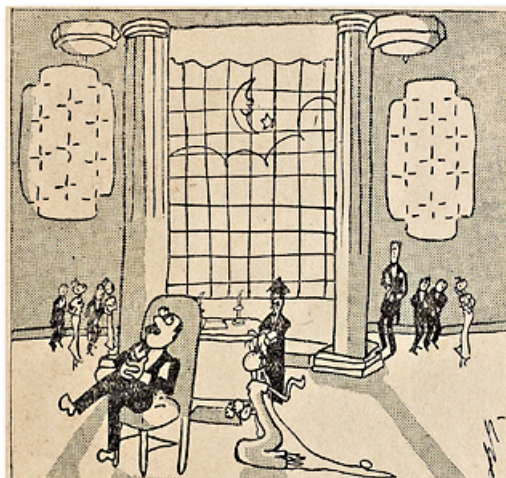
Windows always serve some compositional purpose, sometimes simply to define the plane of an interior wall, to provide "light," or to indicate night and day. Even without any notable objects or people visible through them, windows can by their sheer size signify power and wealth, setting the scene for the cartoonist's barbs.

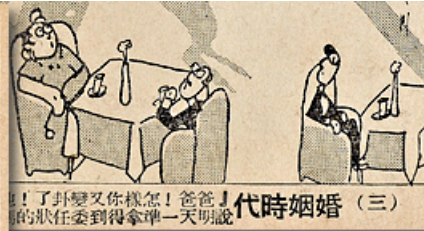
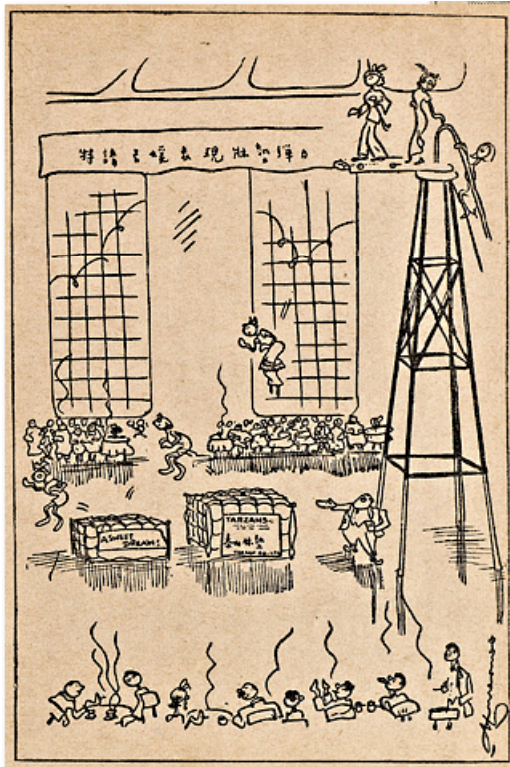
Shen Tuzheng, for example, uses a giant picture window as backdrop for a cartoon satirizing nepotism in government officialdom.

Shen Tuzheng

- But Daddy, you promised! He said that certificate of appointment would be in the bag for him tomorrow!

[ms31_031] detail





Hua Junwu

Manager of the Tarzan Mattress Company: Gentlemen, observe the bounciness of our mattresses!

[ms24_011] detail

More commonly windows are drawn as open frames set within the larger frame of a cartoon panel, thus aligning the viewer's gaze with the detached perspective of the rich, who are often shown making cold commentary on anonymous panoramas of political violence and social misfortune.

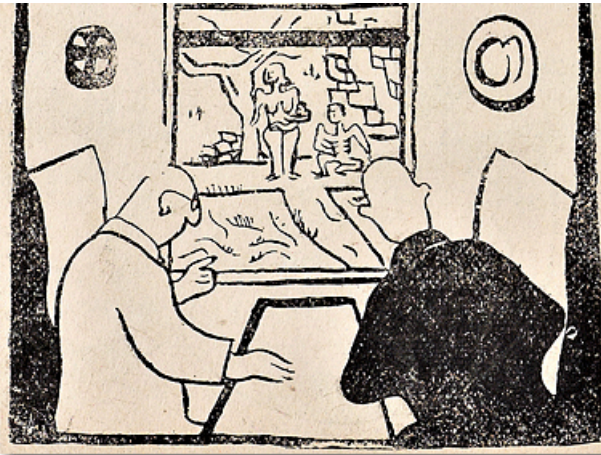
Chen Fengxiang
(sent from Beijing)

Grandson: Grandpa, look at these kids. Why don't they stay home and eat their supper instead of letting the police beat them up for petitioning the government? They just don't get it. Hey, another one's down. They just don't get it.

Grandpa: That's quite enough. You might upset them. Come, let's drink!

[ms26_021] detail





Liu Xinquan
(sent from Hong Kong)

“The West Wind
Creeps East”

Tourist: The people of your
esteemed country go about
naked. Such ill manners!

Tour guide: Again you
misunderstand. These are
members of a nudist society,
a fashion that has come here
from *your* esteemed country.

[ms34_014] detail

Cartoonists also used windows to position the viewer as a sexual voyeur. Interestingly, not all artists who did so were male.

One of the very few woman cartoonists who published in *Modern Sketch*, Liang Baibo, places a pair of highly-stylized female nudes conversing in front of a large window. As was often the case, the caption undermines the image, here with an ironic aside on men’s continuing preference for the outmoded fashion of foot-binding.

Liang Baibo

To the woman with
bound feet: You have more
boyfriends than I do!

[ms23_000]



The densely built, window-ridden environment of the treaty-port cities certainly encouraged a fascination with the role of the voyeur. The desired object of the gaze, however, might be left to the imagination, as in Ye Qianyu's August 1934 cover "Ingredients of Seduction"...

Ye Qianyu
"Ingredients of Seduction"
[ms08_000]



...or viewers and the viewed might all be on display through a balcony window nearly coextensive with the cartoon frame itself.

Zhang Yingchao

Mama Zhao, what are those ugly mugs looking at? It's not as if an airplane were flying over...

[ms02_013]

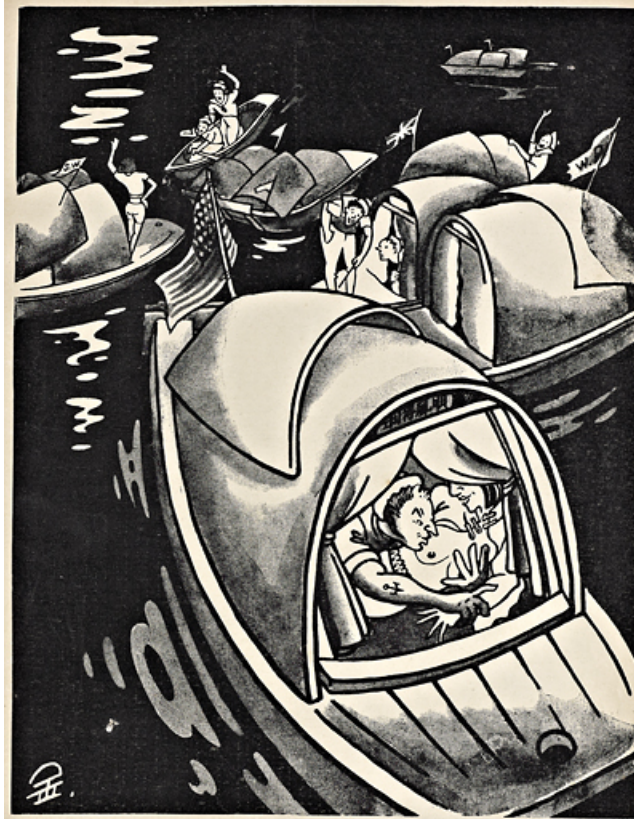


Not all windows belonged to buildings. Jin Mo's "Evening on the Pearl River" uses the stern window of a sampan as the focal point for his single-panel window onto the "salt-water sister" (*xianshuimei*) prostitution trade near the southern treaty port of Canton. Salt-water sisters (note the abbreviation "S.W." on the pennants) was the term for prostitutes who since the 19th century had exclusively served foreign sailors around the treaty ports of Hong Kong and Canton. From today's perspective the most striking element of this cartoon is its lack of explicit condemnation for prostitution, imperialism, or worse—Chinese prostitution catering to imperialist powers. Seeing this cartoon, his eyes drawn inexorably to the sordid scene in the window of the sampan, would a typical Chinese male reader of the 1930s feel appalled? Bemused? ...or appalled at his own voyeuristic—and thus vaguely complicitous—bemusement?

Precisely because such questions are impossible to answer, this cartoon raises our awareness of the historical gap between the interpretive conventions of today and those of the 1930s, especially when it comes to politics of representing the nation. Without exception, the artists of *Modern Sketch* were deeply concerned with the fate of China. But when confronted with a cartoon like Jin Mo's, we are reminded of how much the rules for expressing such concern have changed.

Jin Mo
"Evening on the
Pearl River"

[m19_015]



山東美術家協會

面水江珠的昏黃

Visual Narrative: A Child Prostitute's Life

The actual number of prostitutes working in China's big treaty ports may not have increased from the 1920s into the 1930s, but their public visibility exploded during those years. At the same time, the figure of the prostitute-as-victim entered the popular imagination as a metaphor for the weakness of a semi-colonized, harshly oppressed China. Prostitutes of all varieties and attitudes proliferated in Modern Sketch. Wang Zhu's nine-panel "Illustrated Biography of a Child Prostitute" takes the victimization story to a shocking extreme, narrating the physical and mental devastation of a "little thing" (the euphemism for underage sex workers) in the treaty port of Tianjin.



Especially in the later years of *Modern Sketch's* 39-issue run, cartoonists used the image of the window to express intensifying distress over imminent national crisis.

For instance, cartoonists like Chen Huiling drew attention to Japanese military exercises as a sign of looming invasion. The open window in his illustration from November 1936 forces us to share a view of skyline and aircraft with two lovers. His caption suggests that we be alarmed less at the warplanes than the hedonistic couple's willful obliviousness to events outside.

Chen Huiling

Her: Just listen to the gunfire! How frightening!

Him: Oh forget about it. Nothing but another round of military exercises by the you-know-who!

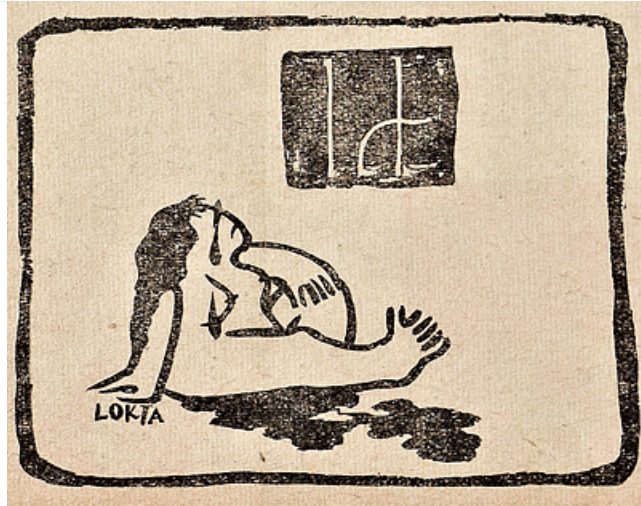
[ms32_024]



If large windows symbolize power, small ones could be icons of entrapment and despair, as in an untitled cartoon by Lu Di in *Modern Sketch*'s final issue.

Lu Di
untitled

[ms39_025] detail

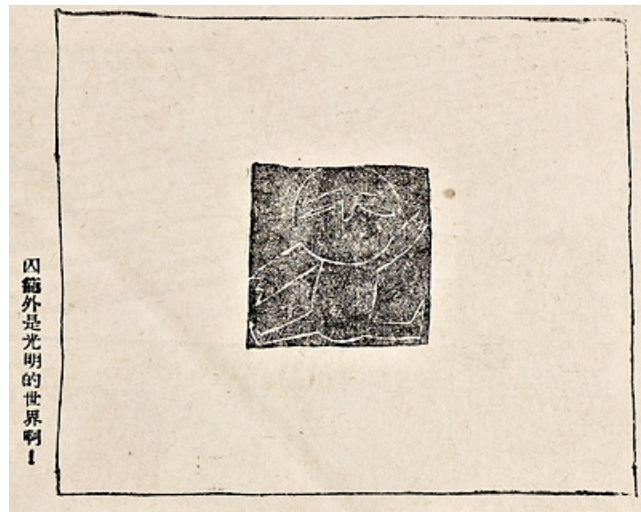


Or, as shown in one of Liao Bingxiong's simple, deceptively child-like compositions, the very lack of windows could inspire hope in the face of despair.

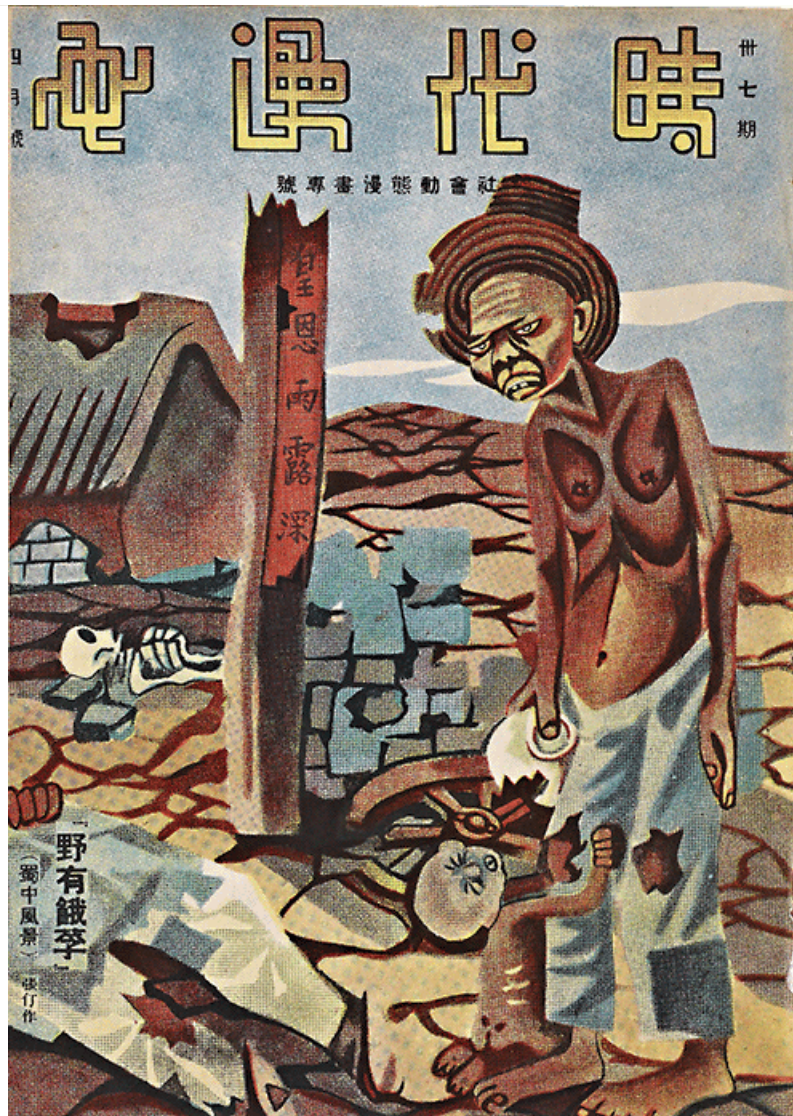
Liao Bingxiong

It's a bright world outside the prisoner's cage!

[ms34_036] detail



Liao's was a much-needed optimism. Three months later, in April 1937, a cover by Zhang Ding envisioned the consequences of having a home bereft of windows, doors, and even walls. The caption, based on a quotation from the Confucian philosopher Mencius, indicates that this was a depiction of the rural famine and local warfare ravaging the inland province of Sichuan. For the urban reader of *Modern Sketch*, the near total exposure of Zhang's desperate peasant may have held an allegorical meaning. Beyond suggesting privation in the distant countryside, the image of shattered walls, windows, and doors implied a larger and more immediate sense of vulnerability: that faced by the Chinese nation itself, confronted by the overwhelming forces of Japanese militarism then massing on its distressingly porous borders.



Zhang Ding "Victims of Famine Lie Dead in the Wilderness
(The Scenery of Central Sichuan)"

The writing on the broken doorframe is half of a traditional New Years couplet, invoking the "deep and fulfilling blessings of the emperor." Zhang includes it as bitter commentary on the failure of China's current rulers.

[ms37_000]

Economic inequality, official corruption, the rural-urban divide, student protests, the predilections of petty-urbanite readers, the depredations of the Japanese, representations of women...*Modern Sketch* has something for almost everyone with an interest in modern China. The single-panel cartoons in *Modern Sketch* and other periodicals of the time can indeed be treated as windows onto specific historical realities. But the frequency and variety with which images of windows themselves appeared in these cartoons should tell us something more: that these cartoonists, by observing the world around them and emulating colleagues either in China or abroad, were developing their own iconic language of the cartoon. Just as what we say depends on how we say it, "reading" even the simplest cartoons requires attention to how the cartoonists of *Modern Sketch* manipulated the dynamic visual discourse that emerged from the magazine's every page. Understanding this art also requires moving deeper into the motley graphic forms that were redefining the art of the Chinese cartoon.

Visual Narrative: Exploitation & Oppression

Many cartoonists felt compelled to expose the suffering and injustice that the strong inflicted on the weak in a society riven by uneven

distribution of wealth and power. The issues they represented—construction site accidents, corrupt officials, degradation of women, and the hard lot of the poor in the city and the country—were as alive in the minds of Chinese then as now: all part of the never-ending feast of big fish on little fish that haunts the dark underside of modernity.



On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: click here.

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China's *Modern Sketch*—1

The Golden Era of Cartoon Art, 1934-1937

by John A. Crespi

The Turbulent
'30s

Windows
on an Era

Graphic
Variations

Sources
& Credits

GRAPHIC VARIATIONS

Sequential Cartoons

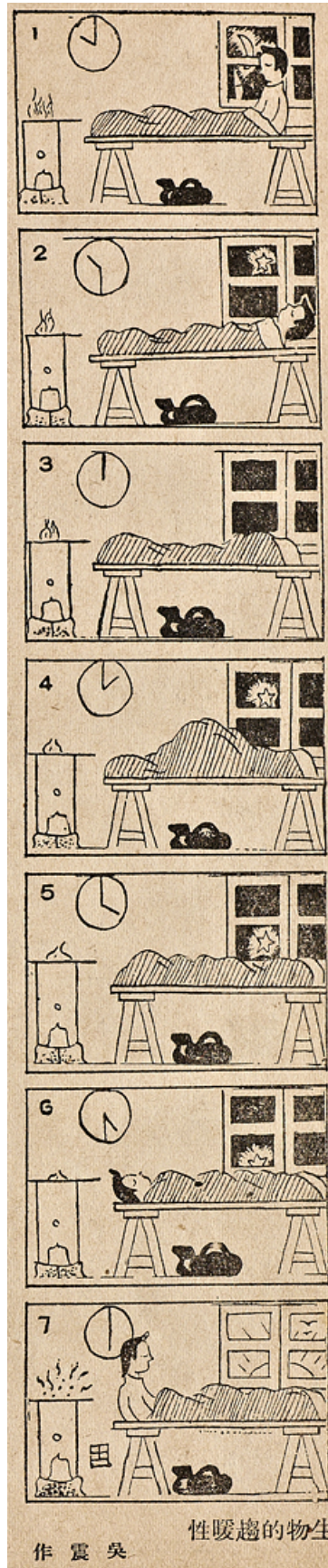
If single-panel cartoons in *Modern Sketch* frame discrete moments of their era, multi-panel cartoon strips narrate the era by manipulating the reader's experience of time. This is because the cartoonist's art of paneling, or arranging images in a sequence, in effect "tells" time by inviting the reader to interpolate what happens between one panel and the next.^[1] Filling in the panel-to-panel gaps to create a smooth narration—a mental process known as closure—allows the reader to "construct a continuous, unified reality."^[2] As to how the reader constructs that reality, myriad factors come into play. Most fundamental, of course, is the reader's familiarity with cartooning conventions.^[3] Other factors include accompanying text (such as titles, captions, or speech balloons), awareness of cultural and historical background, and above all, the cartoonist's skill in manipulating imagery and words to construct a time-based visual narrative whose "unified reality" engages the imagination. Just as in the single-panel cartoon, the contributors to *Modern Sketch* experimented with variations on the multi-panel cartoon strip as a means to place their humorous and satirical stamp on the era.

Wu Zhen

"Biological Heat Preference"

A straightforward way to indicate the passage of time in a cartoon sequence is to simply include a clock on the wall and a window onto the sky. The item under the bed is a chamberpot.

[ms15_032]



Normally—but as we shall see, not necessarily—it takes at least two panels to activate closure. Even the shortest of sequences, however, can ask for quite different kinds of narrative participation from the reader.

For instance, when closure is



determined by linking one action to another action, the implied time duration between panels can be very tight. Such is the case in Zhang Leping's two-panel depiction of a pair of snappily dressed paparazzi who come to blows while fighting for the perfect shot of a celebrity bathing beauty.

Zhang Leping

[ms02_030]

By contrast, when the panel transitions not from action to action, but from one space and time to another, the interval "between" panels can leave much more to the imagination, because readers must work harder to deduce a logical linkage. The process of deduction, however, draws the reader into a potentially rich and evocative space of closure. In *Modern Sketch*, this was usually the space of social satire, as Feng Di demonstrates in a set of two-panel sequences under the collective title "Taking Full Charge."



Work like a slave...
...and the crows
take charge.

Graduation ceremony...
...and the street
takes charge.

Old-style
marriage...
...and the lawyers
take charge.

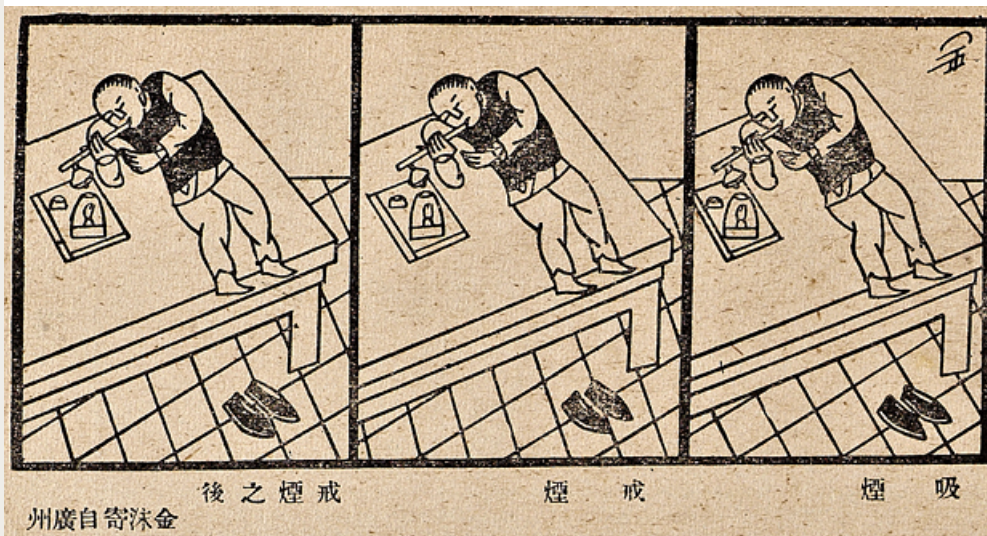
Pregnant...
...and the trash bin
takes charge.

Feng Di
“Taking Full Charge”

[ms28_09]

Just how closure in Zhang’s and Feng’s cartoons engages these cartoonists’ era is, of course, the key question. As contributions to *Modern Sketch*, we can assume that they were accepted for publication because they captured some aspect of the modern era, and did so with a satirical flair intended to improve life through critique, as Lu Shaofei stressed in his guidelines for submission. In the case of Zhang’s cartoon, the motivation behind the comic violence that we infer breaking out between the panels is none other than the intensely sexualized commodification, through pictorial magazines as well as film and advertisement, of images of women—more of which we shall see below. In Feng’s very different sequence, building continuity between each upper and lower panel invites the reader to construct a much broader critical vision, one in which modern urban society has failed, socially and institutionally, to take moral responsibility for its members.

Accompanying text—in the form of a title, captions, or speech—can be critical to how we read most any cartoon sequence. Some Chinese cartoonists took good advantage of the space for humorous and satirical play when combining text with the effects of sequencing. The Canton-based cartoonist Jin Mo, for instance, deliberately frustrates expectations for closure by lining up three identical panels of an opium smoker. The sequence works as a narrative only because the three captions—“Smoking,” “Quitting,” “After Quitting”—do tell a story, but one in ironic tension with the repeated images. As for the depiction of the addict, Jin’s decision to draw a stereotypical “Chinese” figure with notably traditional hairstyle and clothes suggests that drug use is a national, rather than individual or even fully modern, issue. Between the irony and the iconicity, then, Jin’s sequence communicates both the intractability and prevalence of opium addiction.



Jin Mo
“Smoking,” “Quitting,” “After Quitting”

[ms20_009]

Viewed from today’s perspective, one may well ask to what extent Jin intended to criticize the use of opium, a substance vilified in China’s national narrative as a scourge upon the health of the national body. Again, as we saw with Jin Mo’s cartoon of the “salt-water sisters,” there is no simple solution to such a question, because its answer depends upon the response of the reader, which is in turn conditioned by historical changes to the rules of representation. Indeed, subsequent readers have found opium cartoons in *Modern Sketch* so politically incorrect that they felt the need to rectify them on the spot with their own accompanying text.

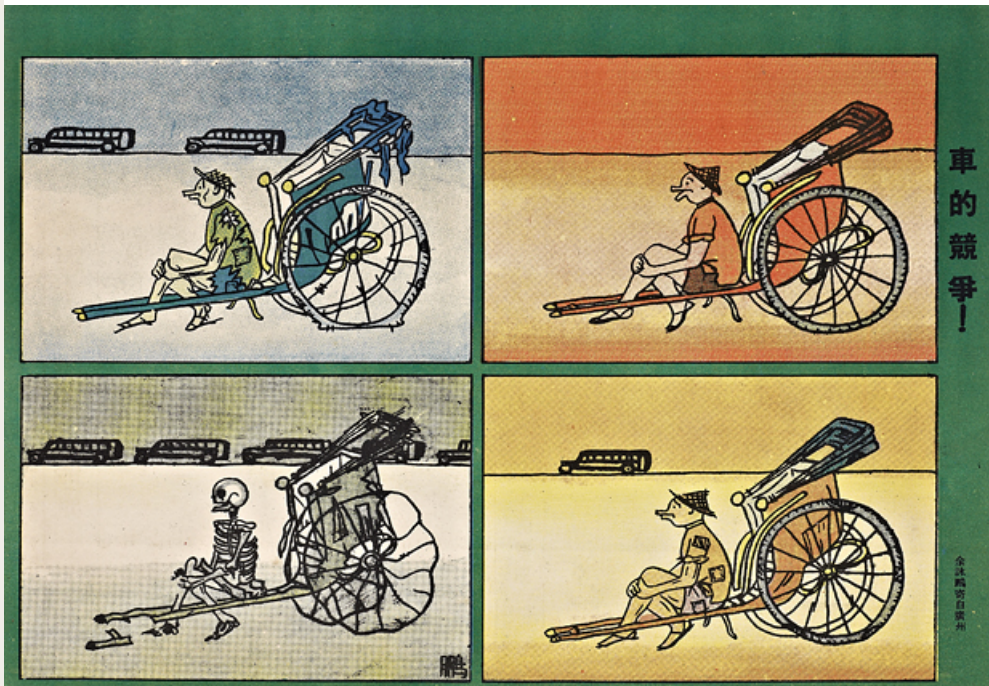
We can see how this has



happened to a cartoon by Tao Mouji. Above the admonitory but intentionally ironic slogan "Strictly Prohibit Opium," Tao shows us an addict paying off an armed enforcer, likely a police officer, thus giving the lie to the period's official anti-narcotic campaigns.^[4] Unhappy with or perhaps even oblivious to Tao's satirical intent, an anonymous previous owner of this copy of *Modern Sketch* felt obliged to write in with a fountain pen: "Damaging to the health of the people" and "Harmful to national citizens."

Tao Mouji
 "Strictly Prohibit Opium"
 [ms10_016]

To return to the art of sequencing, another Canton-based cartoonist, Yu Yongpeng, uses a fixed-gaze approach not unlike Jin Mo's to narrate the passage of time in his richly colored sequence "Competing Vehicles." Here time is constructed in relation to the mechanization of modern urban life. Rickshaws themselves had become widespread in China's treaty-port cities as a modern mechanical contrivance only around the turn of the century. Here, through gradual bleaching of hue from warm orange to bleak gray, the deterioration of the patient puller, and the proliferation of motorized public buses in the background, Yu's sequence defines modernity as a process of merciless technological change.



Yu Yongpeng
 "Competing Vehicles"
 [ms33_022]

Visual Narrative: Politics & Corruption

Cartoonists' disgust with the fraud, vice, and official duplicity they saw around them was exceeded only by their delight in dreaming up ways to caricature those with power, from the Generalissimo himself, Chiang Kai-shek, on down to crooked beat cops. By amplifying the deformations of society and government, they created an irreverent, incisive brand of humor, one that highlights the remarkable freedom of expression to be found in Modern Sketch.



In contrast to characters like Yu's gruesomely stoic rickshaw puller, the figure of the woman in *Modern Sketch* often represents the active, living emblem of modern transformations. Nowhere was this more apparent than in representations of the "modern girl," an icon of urban life not just in China but around the globe between the two world wars.^[5] Where single-panels tend to depict the modern girl in some relation to the gaze—either receiving, giving, or both—cartoon sequences lend themselves to depicting young women as masters of adaptation to the city's consumerist lifestyle.

One example is Wang Letian's six-panel "The Change, As Such," which stages the disquieting ease with which a country girl can shed her rural identity in exchange for a surface appearance of the urban femme fatale.

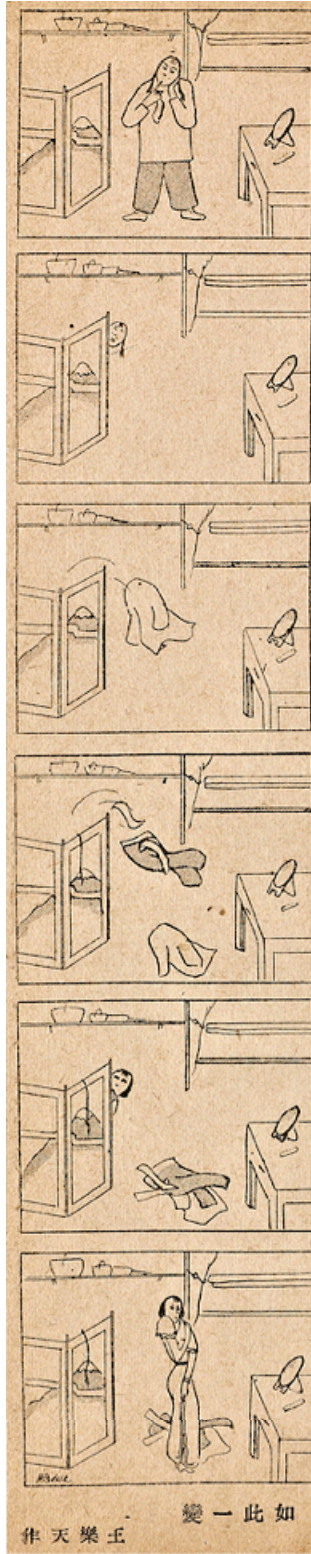
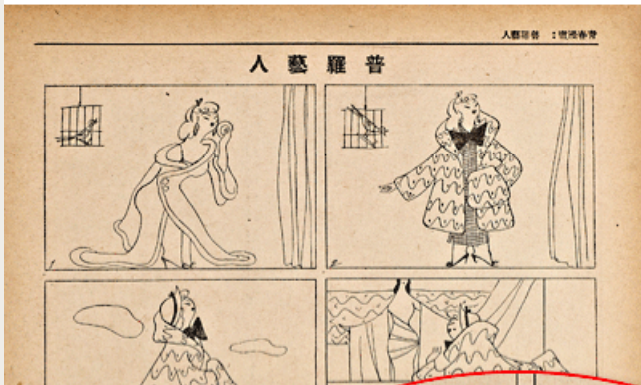
Wang Letian

"The Change, As Such"

[ms25_040]

Miss Bee (Mifeng xiaojie), below, a modern-girl character invented by woman cartoonist Liang Baibo, inverts Wang's narrative, but with an ironic twist. The sequence begins with Miss Bee draped in a luxurious dressing gown, making herself up before going on a shopping trip. On the street, she pauses before two display windows, the first showing high-fashion fabrics, and the second a more prosaic array of low-priced patterned cloth.

After purchasing a swatch of the latter (the most expensive of the three samples, a close look reveals), Miss Bee is next shown having her photograph taken against a background of factory buildings, smiling for the camera, her stylish hat and coat replaced by the headscarf and overcoat of a female laborer. The final panel shows her featured on the cover of a pictorial magazine as "Miss Bee: Star Proletarian Entertainer."



Liang Baibo
 "Miss Bee"
 (detail highlighted in red)
 [ms25_019]



Sequences like Wang's and Liang's can certainly be interpreted as projections of male anxieties, with the image of the modern girl serving as a metaphor for the threatening, uncontrollable transformations wrought by modernity. At the same time, however, it is important to keep in mind how these cartoons derive their satirical edge from "displaying the display," thus prompting the reader to think twice about the commodified images of women that saturated print and film media. We see this, for instance, in the way Wang's modern girl repeatedly looks out at the reader, as if to make sure we are watching, and then ends the sequence with an almost audible "ta-da!" Liang's sequence "reveals the mechanism" behind commodified displays of gender, this time through a send-up of Shanghai's "proletarian chic" of the mid-1930s, a time when leftist filmmakers often cast celebrity starlets in working-class roles.[6]

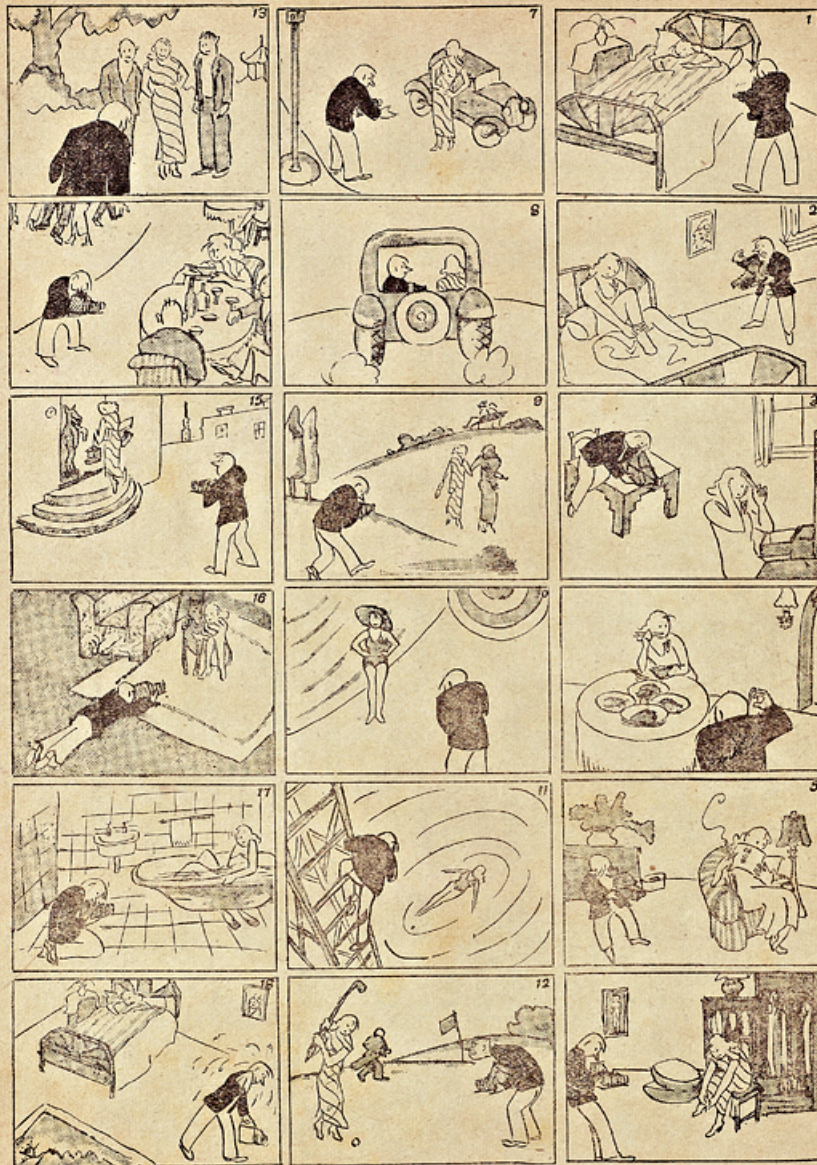
Visual Narrative: "Modern Girl Modern Boy"

The phenomena of the "modern girl" and "modern boy" swept the world's urban centers during the interwar years. Shanghai-based Modern Sketch contributors like Zhang Yingchao, Guo Jianying, Hu Kao, Tao Mouji, and Ye Qianyu played a key role in propagating these jazz-age images. The Chinese artists emulated and extended a global style, just as their counterparts in cities like Berlin, Bombay, and Tokyo were doing, creating pictures of play and seduction for a pair of types sometimes worshipped, sometimes reviled, but always in tune with the allure of the modern.



Such implied critique of the female spectacle is even more apparent in Chen Zhenlong's long sequence "Contributions of a Photojournalist," which lampoons the era's consumer-driven fascination with celebrity lifestyles.

獻貢的者記影攝個一



作圖張麗

21

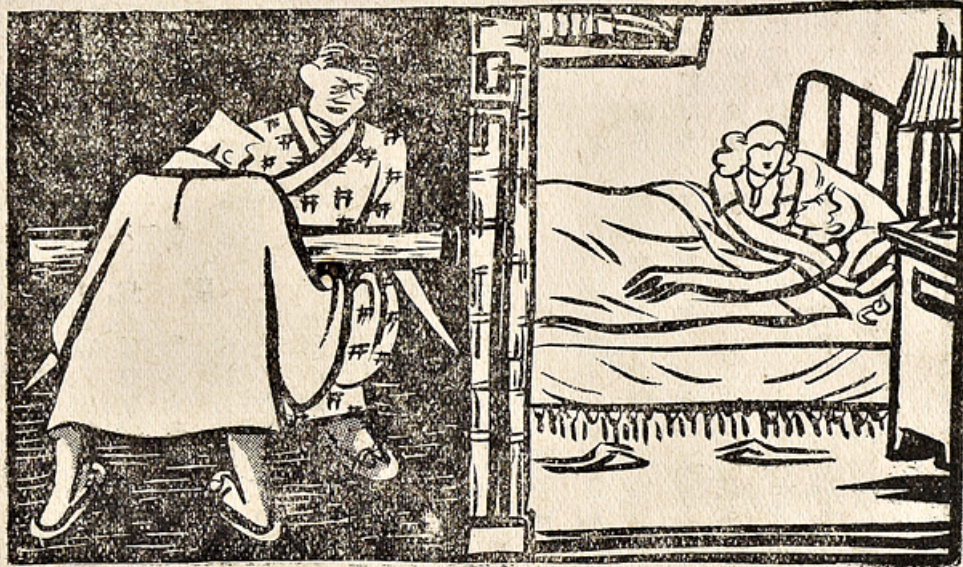
Chen Zhenlong

“Contributions of a Photojournalist”

(detail highlighted in red)

[ms22_055]

When viewing this sequence, it helps to know that a closely corresponding “day-in-the-life” photo-spread of a modern women in fact appeared in the companion magazine to *Modern Sketch*, the pictorial *Modern Miscellany*.^[7] By foregrounding the back-story to such visual displays of the modern woman, rather than the image of woman itself, Chen’s cartoon generates ironic distance—a distance that defined the content of *Modern Sketch*.



！了靜動麼什有又外門大！好不：女
！心放！呢很得固堅門大的們我，個好正我：男
作廉戴

Dai Lian

Woman: Oh my! I heard a noise outside the door again!

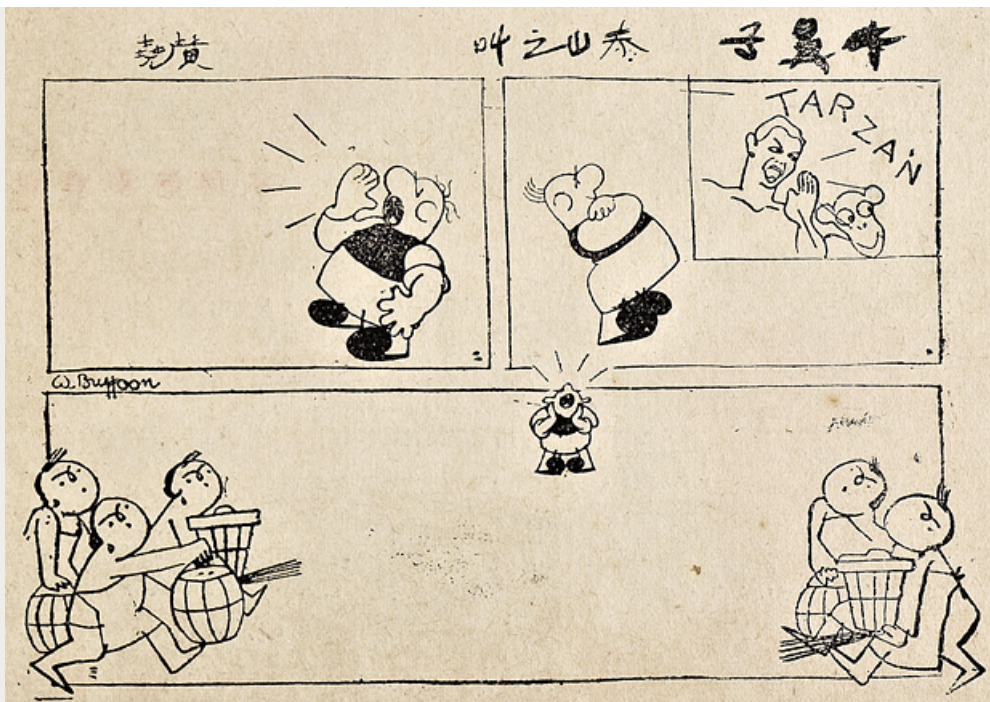
Man: And I was sound asleep. Don't worry, our door couldn't be stronger!

[ms32_003]

Where "Contributions of a Photojournalist" invites us to construct an entire day by linking 18 separate panels, an untitled cartoon by Dai Lian uses just one panel to point us toward a single dramatic and impending moment. As we have already seen, cartoonists often satirized fellow citizens' passivity in the face of looming national crisis. Dai Lian's cartoon revisits this theme by showing us a door separating a couple in a brightly lit, well-appointed bedroom from a pair of sword-bearing, Japanese-robed intruders in the darkness outside. Unlike most single-panel cartoons, which function as static snapshots or windows onto self-contained moments, Dai Lian forces the viewer to form a hypothesis about what will happen next—after the intruders burst through the door. That second, disastrous scene is what satisfies the demand for closure, and leads the viewer to question any misguided confidence in the security of his or her "domestic" space.

When viewing images like Dai Lian's, it is important to keep in mind that in *Modern Sketch*, depicting negative social realities aimed less to reflect things as they were than to spur positive change by pointing out, with due exaggeration, how things ought *not* to be, thus shaming the viewer to higher consciousness. At the same time, the contributors to *Modern Sketch* did not necessarily feel obliged to take on the grand political crises of their era. Lu Shaofei also encouraged portrayals of simple, everyday misfortunes attributable to modernity in its broadest sense. When it came to sequential cartooning, a recognized master of this approach was the young artist Huang Yao, who won a large following by inflicting good-natured modern mishaps on his pigeon-toed anti-hero W. Buffoon.

In "Call of Tarzan," for example, Huang plays with the ironic disjuncture between the foreign and the local that transpires when W. Buffoon imitates the latest Hollywood blockbuster to hit China's treaty-port cinemas. Rather than taking him for the king of the jungle, the residents within earshot mistake W. Buffoon's bellowing for the arrival of the night-soil collector, and come running with loaded, malodorous wooden "honey buckets."



Huang Yao

"Call of Tarzan"

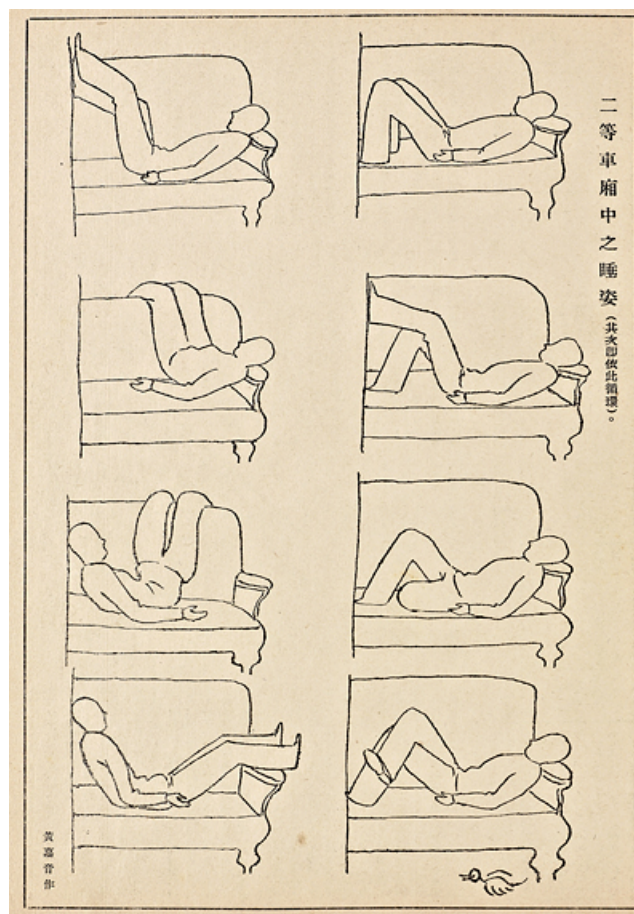
To the housewives and servants of Shanghai's alleyway neighborhoods, comic strip character W. Buffoon's "call of Tarzan" sounds like the daily morning cry of the night-soil collector.

[ms35_044]

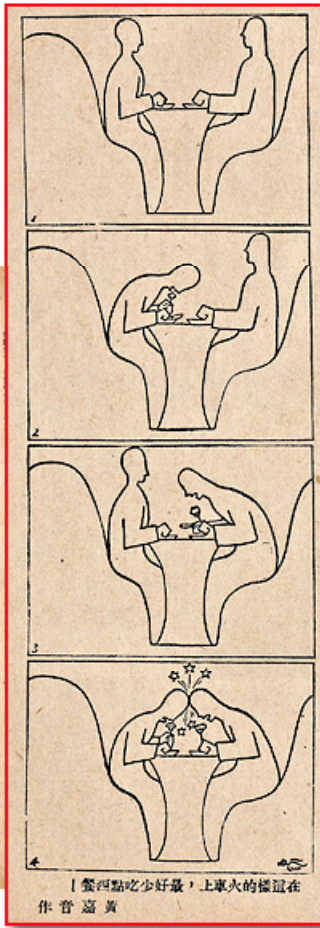
Another accomplished artist of such pantomime sequences was Huang Jiayin, whose work is easily recognized for his trademark bird signature. In "Sleeping Postures in the Second-class Compartment," the abstract, iconic line figure encourages readers to identify personally with the modern-day discomforts of rail travel. The temporal twist here is that Huang parenthetically instructs the viewer to "read and repeat."

Huang Jiayin
 "Sleeping Postures
 in the Second-class
 Compartment"

[ms11_010] detail



Huang extends this theme in a sequence pointing out the hazards of combining rail travel with foreign-style dining.



Huang Jiayin
 “On trains like this,
 best to go easy on the
 Western food!”

[ms14_013]

Such abstract figures had other uses, too, especially when it came to narrating critique below the radar of the censors. Where Huang Jiayin’s sparsely drawn images of train passengers blur identity to portray a lower-middle-class “everyman,” similarly generalized human forms could be used to convey oblique attacks on authoritarianism.

For example, in Xu Ruoming’s “Noisemaking Forbidden,” naively drawn, iconic figures offer several levels of interpretation. For the many student-age readers of *Modern Sketch*, the scholar’s gown that the speaker wears, as well as the smaller body size of the audience relative to the speaker, could suggest that Xu is satirizing a middle-school lecture. But for older readers more familiar with political theater, visual elements such as the microphone, the speaker’s excited gestures, and, of course, the machine gun would bring to mind the practice of political oratory during the Republican period. The purported goal of such public speaking was to mobilize the population, typically for patriotic goals. Xu, however, suggests that citizens’ own expression of political views could lead down a deadly one-way street.



Xu Ruoming

“Noisemaking Forbidden”

(with detail highlighted in red)

[ms32_030]

Panel 6 from Xu's sequence, when placed alongside a photograph of then-Premier of the Nationalist Government, Wang Jingwei, suggests how readers of the time might recognize political realities in abstractly drawn cartoons.

The photograph is from the June 1934 issue of Modern Sketch's sister publication, Van Jan (Wanxiang). The Z's indicating sleep are one among many imported visual conventions in Modern Sketch cartoons.

(details highlighted in red)

[ms413] Courtesy of Shanghai Library
below, left: detail from above [ms32_032]





Beyond its human figures, *Modern Sketch* is also a fantastical menagerie inhabited by seductive snakes, cuckold tortoises, "pheasant" prostitutes, and obsequious, foreign-dominated "running dogs." Conventionalized animal imagery, like that in Zhang Wenyuan's "World of Beasts," was often used in non-narrative, multi-panel galleries of social "types."

This detail from Zhang Wenyuan's twelve-part gallery, "World of Beasts" depicts a nightclub taxi-dancer as a serpentine man-killer.



Each of the 12 images in this gallery of sin plays off a Chinese idiomatic expression, like "patting the horse's ass" (flattery), "skinning a live pig" (extortion), and "inflating a cow skin" (boasting and exaggerating).

(detail highlighted in red)

Visual Narrative: Modern Grotesque

Many streams of artistic influence fed the imagery of Modern Sketch. Where representations of the “modern girl” and “modern boy” drew mainly from stylish American jazz-age magazine illustration, other cartoonists picked and chose from among modern-art movements like cubism, surrealism, fauvism, and dada. Few rules applied to the young, almost totally uninstitutionalized art of Chinese cartooning, and the results could be fascinatingly grotesque.



In sequential cartoons, animal characters could be used for allegorical, yet deliberately ambiguous, narration of political messages. For instance, Liao Bingxiong’s simplistic style might lead some to read the eight-panel “A Wise Man” as a moral fable against animal abuse. Given *Modern Sketch’s* emphasis on representing an era, however, the same cartoon also invites a political reading that aligns the relationship between farmer and ox with nearly any form of oppression, large or small, and its potential outcome: rebellion.^[8]

一個有智慧的人



Liao Bingxiang

“A Wise Man”

[ms25_014]

Paper-cuts, Clippings, and Figurines

The paper-cuts, clippings, and figurines appearing in *Modern Sketch* formed entire new categories of satirical “cartoon” (*manhua*) art. Artists like Zhang Leping—remembered today for his long and celebrated cartooning career—were adept at the handicraft art of papercutting, which he had learned as a child by watching his mother.^[9] *Modern Sketch* gave Zhang the chance to reinvent this traditional skill, giving it a modern, critical impact quite alien to its origins in festival iconography.

Chinese paper-cuts typically featured auspicious patterns with highly conventionalized symbolism.

The crane in this traditional-style paper-cut represents longevity, while the word for deer (lu) echoes the word for “official salary.”

This image comes from a June 1935 illustrated



article on collecting paper-cuts published in the pictorial Van Jan (Wanxiang).

(detail highlighted in red)

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms414]



Zhang Leping's paper-cut "The Mixed-up Ranks of Red and White Terror" plays with double meanings of another kind. During the 1930s, Shanghai's streets could become hopelessly congested by the collision of raucous wedding processions (symbolized by the auspicious color red) with equally noisy funeral processions (traditionally associated with the color white). But red referred to

communism as well, while white denoted the Nationalist Government's program of "white terror" against China's Communist-Party underground. Zhang's paper-cut suggests that these quite different forms of color-coded activity—the ritual and the political—together created Shanghai's own distinct brand of urban chaos.[10]

The bride's sedan chair is visible near the tail end of the procession; the funeral coffin is the foreshortened rectangular shape toward the front. The figure on the platform is a traffic policeman. The diagrammatic figure in the lower right corner is Zhang's signature, with the two characters for his given name "Leping" drawn to resemble a pair of scissors.

[ms09_43]

Modern Sketch contributors also experimented with collages of newspaper clippings and other printed materials. To depict a young couple he describes as "squandering their parents' hard-earned cash on the promotion of urban recreation," Chen Xiaozuo assembled fragments of newspaper articles, photos of cinema marquees, the betting stub from a horse race (at bottom), and what is likely a love letter. The newspaper articles forming the two human figures report stories about love suicides, "human meat markets," home-wrecking taxi dancers, and the like.

Chen Xiaozuo

[ms29_035] detail



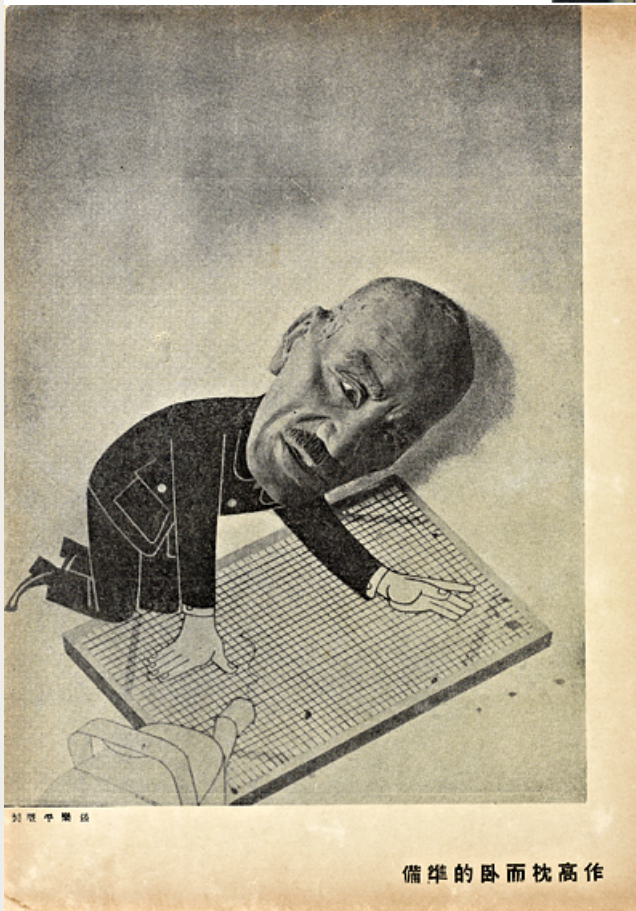
The most unusual medium to appear in *Modern Sketch* were cartoon sculptures and dioramas, called *mandiao*. These miniatures were reminiscent of the traditional handicraft art of clay figurines, but may also have been inspired by the puppet-like "personettes" invented in the 1930s by American cartoonist and commercial artist Russell Patterson for use in fashion advertising and Hollywood films.[11]



In this mandiao diorama, both the God of Wealth figurines and the work's title, "Waves of Wealth Arrive Year Upon Year," belong to the realm of auspicious New Year Festival symbolism. However, the words "Republic of China" above the doorway, as well as the rising sun emblem on the deliveryman's armband and crate of goods, satirize Chinese consumers' appetite for imports from their imperialist neighbor, Japan.

*Ni Zhicheng
 "Waves of Wealth Arrive
 Year Upon Year"
 (detail highlighted in red)*

[ms33_037]



高作枕而卧的准备

Zhang Leping's "Preparing for a Peaceful Sleep" features a sculpted head of Chiang Kai-shek above a Go board bereft of the black and white stones used as playing pieces. Zhang's veiled critique seems aimed at Chiang's hollow promises to resist Japanese aggression. The object protruding from the lower left is a hot-water carrier; used in cities like Shanghai to fetch bath water from neighborhood hot-water shops. Chiang, it seems, will follow the Chinese custom of bathing before bedtime.

*Zhang Leping
 "Preparing for a
 Peaceful Sleep"*

[ms09_030]



The big-eared character in this diorama is Zhu Taoshan, the grotesque alter-ego of cartoonist Wang Dunqing. With a half-empty bottle of tranquilizer at his bedside and news headlines announcing the Japanese takeover of China's northern provinces above him, Zhu Taoshan has just "committed suicide out of despair for the nation."

(detail enlarged, highlighted in red)

[ms26_010]



In this subsequent mandiao diorama Zhu Taoshan is back among the living, sitting happily in his coffin surrounded by his money after being exiled from Hell for being a troublemaker and a scoundrel. Loosely translated, the title reads, "The 'Death' of Zhu Taoshan?"

[ms32_033]

Woodcuts: The True and the Faux

Even though a significant modern woodcut movement paralleled the development of cartooning in China during the 1930s, only three pages of this art form were published in *Modern Sketch*.^[12] It was not that cartoonists looked askance at modern woodcuts (although the opposite may have been true). In fact, *Modern Sketch* published many pen-and-ink facsimiles of the woodcut style, some executed so convincingly that they were mislabeled “wood engraving” (*banhua*) in their captions.^[13] These faux woodcuts, if we may call them that, demonstrate the innovative borrowing and disregard for convention that made Chinese cartoon art so unpredictably eclectic.

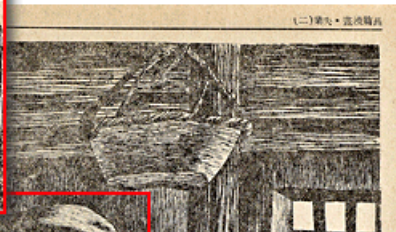
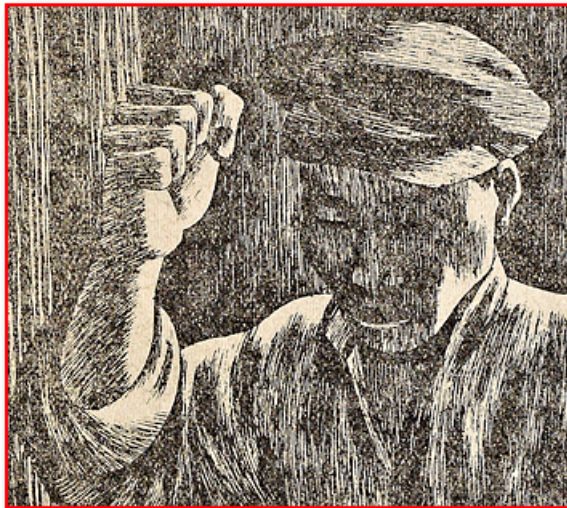


“Woodcut Cartoons of Modern China: A Selection from the National Joint Woodcut Exhibition”

various artists

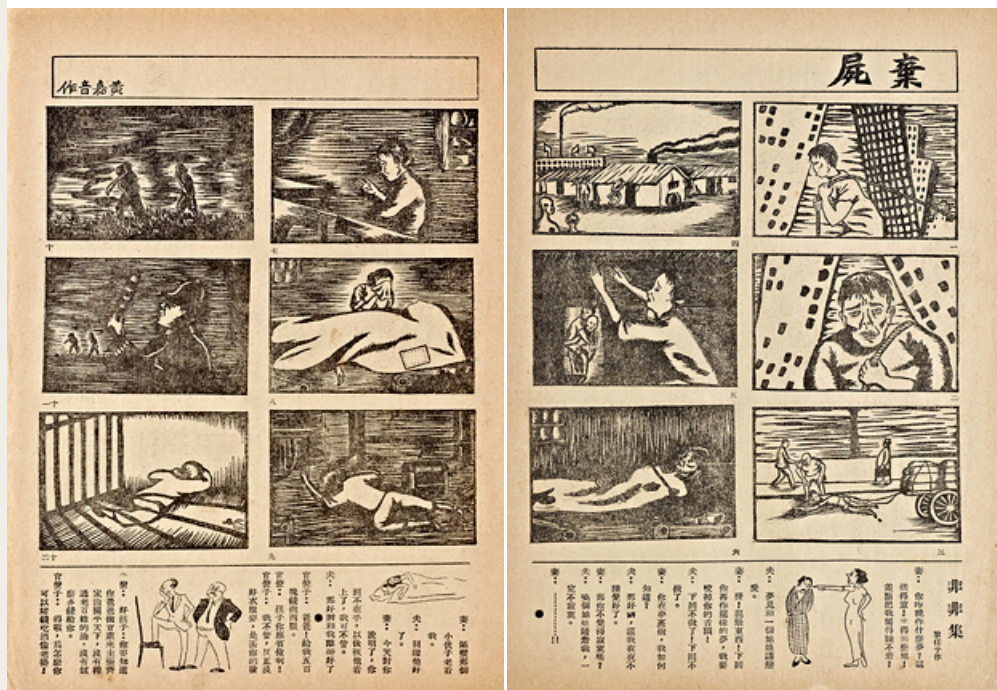
This two-page spread of woodcuts represents the lion’s share of the genre’s appearance in Modern Sketch. Cartoonists did not ignore modern woodcuts. On the contrary, they experimented with their own pen-and-ink reproductions of the expressionist style and proletarian subjects favored by their colleagues in China’s modern woodcut movement.

[ms22_050] [ms22_051]



Detail from the second panel in Hu Kao's five-part graphic narrative "Unemployed" reveals the craftsmanship Hu applied to make his pen-and-ink drawing appear to be a woodcut. The imitation was so convincing that all the images in Hu's narrative were mislabeled "wood engraving" (banhua).

[ms38_15]



Huang Jiayin
"Abandoned Corpse"

Like their contemporaries all over the globe, artists in 1930s China were fascinated by "wordless novels" in woodcut format by European masters such as Frans Masereel (1889-1972). Huang Jiayin's pen-and-ink "imitation" woodcut, "Abandoned Corpse," adapts the graphic narrative genre to the streets of Shanghai. The sequence begins in the upper right and reads down and to the left.

Like many of China's modern woodcuts it reflects the brute realities of lower-class existence; in this case, the dilemma poor migrant laborers faced giving proper burial to a family member. [14]

[ms10_007] [ms10_008]

Photography & Photomontage

Second only to single- and multi-panel cartoons, photography and photomontage were the most common forms of visual satire in *Modern Sketch*. While all the contributors to

Modern Sketch were consumers of the richly visual world of pictorial publications, the editorial staff worked in an environment saturated with photographic imagery. The Modern Publications office in fact had a photo studio on the third floor of its building on Shanghai's Hankou Lu, to which the company would invite celebrities for photo shoots. The company also maintained its photo archive at that address, a resource that the editors of *Modern Sketch* could and did raid for material to be satirically repurposed.[15]



This photo, from the June 1934 issue of Van Jan (Wanxiang), shows a studio shoot of dance and film celebrity Liang Saizhu. The photo is credited to Ye Qianyu, one of the 1930s' most famous cartoonists. The figure in the foreground is probably Ye himself, an avid photographer since the days when he helped edit Modern Sketch's precursor Shanghai Sketch.

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms415]

One example of such recycling can be traced to the June 1935 issue of *Van Jan*, which included a photograph by the artist and filmmaker Dan Duyu of a reclining female model, viewed through her crossed legs, and published along with several other nude and semi-nude photos under the title "Composition in Silver-Gray."



Dan Duyu

"Composition in Silver-Gray"

Courtesy of Shanghai Library
[ms416]

20 months later the photograph reappeared, this time uncredited, in the February 1936 issue of *Modern Sketch* as part of the photo-spread "A True and Authentic Exhibition of National Goods." Movements to promote China's national goods (*guohuo*) had been

ongoing since 1905 as a means to resist foreign domination of the Chinese economy. Led by patriotic elites, efforts to encourage people to buy Chinese-made versions of imports proved largely ineffective, with consumers tending to prefer foreign-made products over frequently shoddy domestic items.^[16]

The *Modern Sketch* lampoon of national goods takes such patriotic hypocrisy to task, labeling a pair of coins “Our Binoculars,” a female dwarf “Our Typical Beauty,” a beggar chalking his sorrows on the sidewalk “Our Great Literary Giant,” a caged songbird “Our Modern Woman,” and an exhumed skeleton “Our Everlasting Hero of the Resistance.” Juxtaposed photos of race-course gamblers and soup-kitchen refugees are described as “Our Two Types of People,” and, finally, Dan Duyu’s photo is revisited with a dose of acid humor under the caption “Our Film Star.”



“A True and Authentic Exhibition of National Goods”

The editorial team at Modern Sketch frequently repurposed file photos for humorous and satirical ends. This spread takes a cynical dig at the “national goods” movements promoted during the early decades of the 20th century, labeling a caged bird “Our Modern Woman,” an exhumed skeleton “Our Everlasting Hero of the Resistance,” and so on. The pseudonymous credit “Yi Liu” plays on a homophone for the word “top quality”—a backhanded reference to the shoddiness of some of China’s domestic manufactured goods.

(detail highlighted in red)

[ms26_011]

The meaning of photographs could also be destabilized through juxtaposition, most frequently by mounting one half-page image atop another and adding a droll title. One of the more striking examples of this technique is "40 Years of Chinese Women's Liberation: Before-and-After," which sets a late-Qing dynasty photographic portrait of a courtesan above a 1930s image of a celebrity songstress, the latter simpering for the camera while cradling an instrument then popular in the U.S. and Europe, a mandolin-banjo.



"40 Years of Chinese Women's Liberation: Before-and-After"

[ms36_036]

Courtesans—young women trained as professional entertainers to attract the patronage of elite urban men—were among the first in China to exploit the commercial potential of photography, using their portraits as a means of advertising during their heyday in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.^[17] Foregrounded here, of course, are the many continuities between the old and new images, prompting the viewer to question what lay underneath the flashy and alluring, but often very thin, veneer of modern Chinese urban life.



For contributors to *Modern Sketch*, the shallow, uneven experience of modernity was most

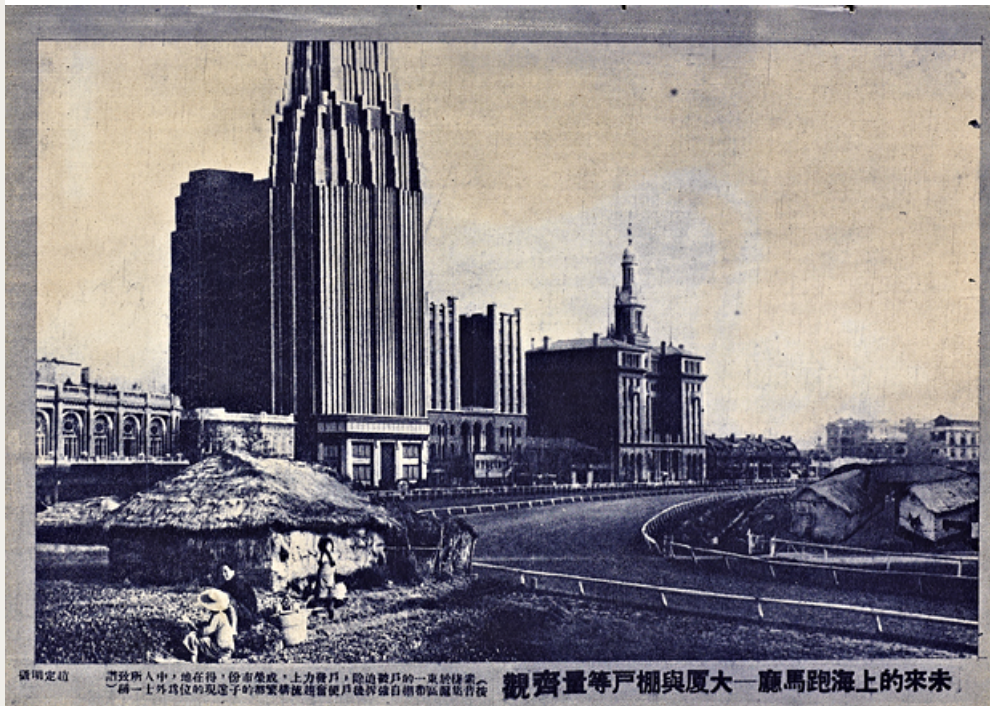


evident when comparing city to country. If the courtesan-starlet pairing points up ironic correspondences across time, the over-under shots entitled "Female Immortals Among Us" stress the vast gap between urban and rural lives by juxtaposing a constellation of bathing beauties, arrayed on a modernistic stage set, with a grim tableau of destitute refugee women.

"Woman Female Immortals Among Us"

[m11_015]

The cut-and-paste approach of photomontage also lent itself to the satirical manipulation of geographic space within the city itself. Zhao Dingming's montage "The Future Shanghai Racecourse: Equal Treatment for High-rises and Hovels" artificially closes the yawning economic gap that separated Shanghai's prosperous central thoroughfare, Bubbling Well Road (today's Nanjing West Road), from the sprawling shantytowns on the city's margins. The tongue-in-cheek caption adopts a journalistic tone, reporting how "Chinese and foreigners alike praise the slum-dwellers' energetic efforts to become members of the flourishing city after being forcibly removed from the eastern district."



請明定這 謂我斯人中，地在得，份市榮成，上力費打，除過難戶的一東於樣業 一稱一上外為位的現這子的物繁華讓這當便戶後得強自備帶區屬更升後 觀齊量等戶棚與廈大一廳馬跑海上來的來未

The four landmark buildings in the background of this photo still stand in Shanghai today. Built between 1926 and 1934, they are, from left to right, the Grand Theater; the 22-story Park Hotel, the foreign YMCA, and China United Apartments. The shacks have been pasted onto the race course, now the site of

People's Park.

[ms38_011]

As we have already seen, *Modern Sketch* made extensive use of images of women to expose social contradictions. More often than not, women represented the excesses of urban life, often in harsh contrast to the deprivation of China's interior.

Images of women in the earlier issues of Modern Sketch, as in this July 1934 photospread, were almost pure cheesecake. The woman lying on the sand is China's 1930s swimming star Yang Xiuqiong.
(detail highlighted in red)

[ms07_016]

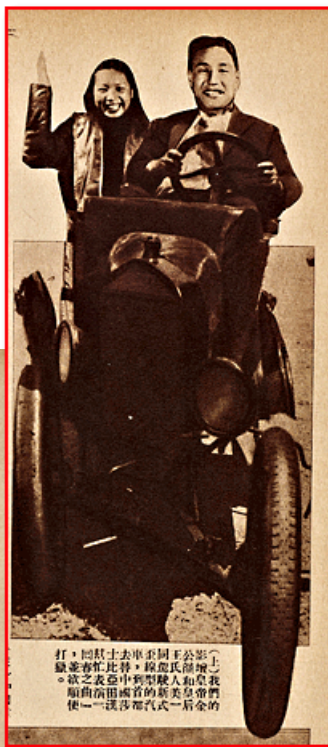


When it came to photomontage, stock images of beautiful female celebrities were ripe pickings for this kind of treatment, especially in the magazine's later issues. For instance, an image of China's aquatic sports star Yang Xiuqiong that appeared in a cheesecake spread in 1934 reappeared in a quite different context three years later. A pair of scissors, a pot of glue, and access to the Modern Publications photo archives was all it took to transport her from a warm sandy beach to the parched earth of the drought-stricken, inland province of Sichuan.



“Sorrrows of a Sichuan Mermaid!”
From Modern Sketch, April 1937.
The image is speciously credited
to the “China Wireless
Photographic News Service.”

[ms37_010]



Photomontage was also used to manipulate identity. The motive for doing so could be purely frivolous, as when the heads of Chinese film stars Jin Yan and Wang Renmei were glued onto what was probably a still image of Laurel and Hardy driving a beat-up Model-T Ford.

photomontage
(detail highlighted in red)

[ms26_035]



But montage artists also took aim at larger targets, including modern Chinese identity itself. By far the most ambitious example of photomontage in *Modern Sketch* was the anthropomorphic cut-and-paste catalogue of the era's ills and anxieties, "The Typical Chinese Person."



"The Typical Chinese Person"

[ms25_020]

Imperialism, censorship, war, Chinese heritage, Western imports, industrialization, money-worship...all are pictured here in an absurd but arresting assemblage, one that challenges the viewer to separate calamity from humor, indignation from amusement, and the trauma of victimization from the pleasures of clever invention. If any one image can represent the motley democracy of forms that is *Modern Sketch*, this would be it. Nothing quite like this magazine, or the era it sought to portray, has been seen in China since.

Visual Narrative: Eroticized Women


Almost every major cartoonist who contributed to *Modern Sketch*, including the editor Lu Shaofei, tried his hand at erotic depictions of women. "Eating ice cream with the eyes" was the local slang expression for viewing such images,

which in many ways resonated with the golden age of pin-up girl illustration in the United States that was happening at the very same time. Often these nude and semi-nude images came with a political subtext. Sometimes they were simply attention-grabbing ploys to increase circulation. For all their diversity of style, and whatever their ultimate intent, these erotic illustrations and photographs leave no doubt that Modern Sketch was very much a magazine by and for men.



On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: [click here](#).

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China's Modern Sketch—1

The Golden Era of Cartoon Art, 1934-1937

by John A. Crespi

The Turbulent
'30s

Windows
on an Era

Graphic
Variations

Sources
& Credits

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NOTES for Chapter 1

1

Modern Sketch was suspended from publication, and Lu Shaofei detained, from March through May of 1936 after the front cover illustration of February's issue 26 offended the authorities with an unflattering depiction of China's ambassador to Japan, Xu Shiyong. The magazine *Modern Puck* (Manhua jie), nearly identical to *Modern Sketch* except for its name and editor (Wang Dunqing), filled the three-month gap and then continued to run independently through the end of 1936.

2

For a discussion of *shidai* and the idea of the modern in early-20th-century China, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, "In Search of Modernity: Some Reflections on a Mode of Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Chinese History and Literature," in Paul A. Cohen and Merle Goldman, eds., *Ideas Across Cultures: Essays on Chinese Thought in Honor of Benjamin I. Schwartz* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1990), pp. 109-135.

3

These demographic statistics are from Edward Denison and Guang Yu Ren, *Building Shanghai: The Story of China's Gateway* (Chichester, England and Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Academy, 2006), p. 251.

4

For more on Shao Xunmei's career in the Shanghai cultural scene, see Jonathan Hutt, "La Maison D'Or: The Sumptuous World of Shao Xunmei," *East Asian History* 21 (2001), pp. 111-142.

5

Shanghai Sketch was in fact merged with the pictorial magazine *Modern Miscellany* (Shidai huabao, or Shidai for short) in 1930. Both magazines were produced by the forerunner of Modern Publications, China Fine Arts Periodicals (*Zhongguo meishu kanxing she*). This connection made for a direct lineage to *Modern Sketch* four years later in terms of both brand name and editorial staff. The word "sketch" in the title of both magazines was probably borrowed from the British high-society weekly *The Sketch: A Journal of Arts and Actuality*. As John A. Lent points out, borrowing names from foreign periodicals, like "Puck" and "Punch," was common practice in Asian publications of the era. See John A. Lent, ed. *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humor Magazines, and Picture Books* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), p. 4.

6

All reproductions of images from *Shanghai Sketch* in this unit are from the two-volume photocopied version released by Shanghai Shudian Chubanshe in 1996.

7

Zhang Kebiao, "Haishang caizi gao chuban—ji Shao Xunmei" (A Shanghai talent takes up publishing: remembering Shao Xunmei), *Shanghai wenshi* 2 (1989), p. 7.

NOTES for Chapter 2

1

"Shidai Manhua tougao jianyue" (Guidelines for submissions to *Modern Sketch*), *Modern Sketch*, no. 16 (April 1935).

2

[editor's note], *Modern Sketch*, no. 8 (August 1934).

3

This observation regarding the two artists' Modernist styles is Lu Shaofei's, who noted in particular Zhang Guangyu's careful study of the Ming dynasty painter Chen Laolian (1598-1652), best known for his human figures in woodblock book illustrations. See Lu Shaofei, "Ji dacheng er gexin" (From achievement to innovation), *Zhuangshi (Decorative arts)* 54 (1992), p. 6.

4

Chinese cartoonists of the 1930s had no compunctions about recognizing specific foreign "masters" (*shifu*) whose work caught their eye in foreign periodicals, and which they would copy in the process of learning their art. See Xu Chengbei, "Manhua jia de shicheng" (Cartoon masters and their disciples), *Lao manhua (Old cartoons)* 1, pp. 115-118.

5

Modern Sketch, no. 20 (August 1935).

6

Contributions sent from Hong Kong were probably included under the category "South Seas." Also, it is not clear if the list refers to contributors whose work was actually published or to all the individuals who contributed, successfully or unsuccessfully. Exaggerated figures on circulation and readership were rife in Shanghai's highly competitive magazine market. However, guilty parties in such misleading practices were mainly promoters of new periodicals yet to gain a market foothold. *Modern Sketch* had been in print for three years when these statistics were published, so we can take these data as reliable, if not fully precise.

7

For more on the fascinating but little-known artistic trail blazed by Huang Yao, see [the Huang Yao Foundation website](#).

8

See Wang Yuyun, "'Hai He fushi an': yixiang jiyu Dagongbao de Shuli" (The case of floating corpses in the Hai River': based on a review of L'Impartial), *Qianyan (Forward position)*, 7 (2010), pp. 122-125, cnki.net.

9

Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849-1949*, translated by Noël Castelino (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 84. See also Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 55-56.

NOTES for Chapter 3

1

Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practice from the Legendary Cartoonist* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), p. 26.

2

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 67. The discussion of closure below relies upon McCloud's analysis in chapter three of his book, especially pages 60 to 72.

3

Wang Dunqing's first *Modern Sketch* article on the art of cartooning, published in the September 1934 issue, discussed sequencing as a way of making modern cartoon art more comprehensible, and thus more accessible, to the general populace. It is safe to assume that by 1934, educated urban readers in China would have been familiar with the conventions of sequencing, as foreign comic strips had been appearing in newspapers and magazines for several decades by then, with Chinese strips following

closely behind. Wang's article was aimed more at potential contributors to *Modern Sketch*, but does address the education gap. Specifically, he recommends that would-be cartoonists purchase a copy of Flemish artist Frans Masereel's wood engraving series, *25 Images of the Passion of Man*. Wang urges readers not just to learn from Masereel, but also to show the book to their servants and rickshaw drivers so that they, too, might be edified by the art of sequenced images.

4

On the opium-related criminal collusion among gangs, foreign concession governments, and the nationalist government, see Frederic Wakeman Jr., *Policing Shanghai, 1927-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 260-275.

5

The Modern Girl around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, et al (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008). On cartoon representations of the modern girl in China in that volume, see Madeleine Dong Yue, "Who is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?" pp. 194-219.

6

On the transformation of female film roles in the early 1930s toward a proletarian model, see Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 244-267.

7

The photo-spread in *Modern Miscellany* is "Twenty-four Hours of a Modern Lady (from Morning to Evening)," reproduced in Francesca dal Lago, "Crossed Legs in 1930s Shanghai: How 'Modern' the Modern Woman?" *East Asian History* 19 (2000), p. 109.

8

On the global history of the cartoon image of the cow as symbol of exploitation, see Rudolf Wagner, "China 'Asleep' and 'Awakening.' A Study in Conceptualizing Asymmetry and Coping with It," *Transcultural Studies* 1 (2011).

9

Zhang Leping, *Wode manhua shenghuo (My life of cartooning)*, (Beijing: Zhongguo lüyou chubanshe, 2007), p. 2.

10

On Shanghai's street wedding and funeral processions, see Lu Hanchao, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 303. On Shanghai's violent political struggles of the same period, see Wakeman, *Policing Shanghai*, pp. 132-160.

11

See Alex Chun and Shane Glines, ed., *Top Hats and Flappers: The Art of Russell Patterson* (Fantagraphics, 2006), pp. 27-29.

12

For a rich and comprehensive treatment of the modern Chinese woodcut movement through the 1930s, see Xiaobing Tang, *Origins of the Chinese Avant-garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

13

Thanks to Paul Bevan for pointing this out to me in the case of Hu Kao's graphic narrative "Unemployed."

14

Historian Christian Henriot carefully details the grim issue of dealing with abandoned corpses in his article "'Invisible Deaths, Silent Deaths': 'Bodies Without Masters' in Republican Shanghai," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Winter 2009), pp. 407-437.

15

Ye Qianyu, *Ye Qianyu zizhuan: xishu cangsang liunian (Autobiography of Ye Qianyu: a detailed narration of vicissitudes through fleeting time)* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006), pp. 72.

16

Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 39-44.

17

Pang Laikwan, "Photography, Performance, and the Making of Female Images in Modern China," *Journal of Women's History* 17 no. 4 (Winter 2005), pp. 60-63. For an overview of Shanghai's courtesan culture of the late Qing and early Republican periods, see Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai* pp. 21-72.

APPENDIX

Selected biographical information for *Modern Sketch* contributors appearing in this unit

Cai Ruohong 蔡若虹, (1910-2002)
Cao Hanmei 曹涵美, (1902-1975)
Chen Baoyi 陳抱一, (1893-1945)
Chen Huiling 陳惠齡, (1916-)
Chen Juanyin 陳涓隱, (1897-1986)
Dou Zonggan 竇宗淦, (1915-1992)
Feng Di 馮棣, (1907-1983)
Guo Jianying 郭建英, (1907-1979)
Hu Kao 胡考, (1912-1994)
Hua Junwu 華君武, (1915-2010)
Huang Jiayin 黃嘉音, (1913-1961)
Huang Weiqiang 黃偉強, (1918-)
Huang Wennong 黃文農, (1901[?]-1934)
Huang Yao 黃堯, (1917-1987)
Jiang Mi 江敫, (1912-1989)
Liao Bingxiong 廖冰兄, (1915-2006)
Liang Baibo 梁白波, (1911-1967)
Lu Shaofei 魯少飛, (1903-1995)
Lu Zhixiang 陸志庠, (1910-1992)
Pang Xunqin 龐薰棻, (1906-1945)
Shen Yiqian 沈逸千, (1908-1944)
Sheng Gongmu 盛公木 (Te Wei 特偉), (1915-2010)
Tao Mouji 陶謀基, (1912-1985)
Wang Dunqing 王敦慶, (1899-1990)
Wang Zimei 汪子美, (1913-2002)
Yan Zhexi 嚴折西, (1909-1993)
Ye Qianyu 葉淺予, (1907-1995)
Zhang Ding 張仃, (1917-2010)
Zhang Guangyu 張光宇, (1900-1965)
Zhang Leping 張樂平, (1910-1992)
Zhang Wenyuan 張文元, (1910-1992)
Zhou Duo (1905-?)

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