Title
Embodying Modernity: Female Nude Advertisements in a Cartoon Pictorial in Early Twentieth Century South China

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Author
Cheung, Roanna

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DURING THE REPUBLICAN PERIOD (1911–1949), the city of Guangzhou (a.k.a. Canton), the capital of Guangdong province in south China, had been regarded as the birthplace of Chinese revolution and known for flourishing political activities. Due to transformation of local gender norms, rising consumerism and a thriving mass culture, Guangzhou was also increasingly westernized and turned into a contested site of the meaning of Chinese modernity. The identification of Guangzhou as a modern city is reflected in a local cartoon pictorial titled *The Sketch* (*Banjiao Manhua*), which provided entertainment for a petty urbanite audience by satirizing the undesirable effects of modernization. Not surprisingly, since the female body was often considered as the symbol of modern society, it became the subject of these cartoonists’ fascination and critique. The following discussion seeks to analyze the use of female body, namely nude images featured in the advertisement section of this cartoon pictorial, in 1930s Guangzhou. The choice of this particular focus is closely related to the proliferation of calendar posters (*yuefenpai*) and nude photographs of women in Republican Shanghai, both of which are well-studied themes in the secondary scholarship but not necessarily the monopoly of Shanghai alone. Instead, like their counterparts in Shanghai, the advertisements in *The Sketch* also displayed the connection between the prevalent use of visual representations of women and the popular imaginary for urban modernity. Women’s body, now blatantly

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exposed to public gaze, enabled the imagination, experimentation, and dispute over the acceptable forms of modern femininity.

Because of the constant warfare among regional warlords and threats of foreign invasion, local intellectuals in the Republican era had been anxiously searching for a cure for China’s perceived weakness. They believed that one of the answers lay in the emancipation of the oppressed female population, whose body had been deformed by the cruel customs of foot-binding and breast-binding and unable to give birth to children strong enough to defend the nation. As a result, Guangzhou activists in the mid-1920s launched a natural breast campaign, which took women’s body from the hidden inner sphere to the realm of public concern and scrutiny. The western, scientific trope of health and hygiene was constantly evoked to highlight the necessity of promoting natural breasts in order to eliminate the insanitary traditional customs that downgraded women to men’s erotic playthings and harmed the health of the nation’s future citizens. Consequently, gender reforms such as the natural breast campaign engendered a new image of women’s body in the public sphere as a statement of progressive modernity, and had possibly justified the common usage of female nude advertisements in *The Sketch* during the 1930s.

The new public awareness for female body had emerged within the context of rising consumerism and identification of Guangzhou as a modern urban space that simultaneously represented the promise of a bright future and concern with the polluting effects of westernization. The warlord Chen Jitang, who ruled Guangdong province between 1929 and 1936 semi-independently from the Nationalist (a.k.a. Guomindang) regime based in Nanjing, was credited for instituting reform that brought about local economic expansion. Since the 1920s, the Guangzhou Municipal Government also tried to modernize the city landscape by building infrastructure, high-rise architecture and parks, all of which were designed not only to accommodate the needs of the expanding urban population, but generate civic consciousness as well. Such developments fostered the rise of a petty bourgeoisie class, who proudly showcased their urban identity by spending their leisurely hours on savoring Western cuisine, enjoying Western-style entertainment such as dancing, film watching and imported music, pursuing after the latest fashion, and reading popular literature and cartoon magazines. Advertisements were concurrently developed as a response to the driving demand for popular consumption and as a site to exhibit the new public image of Guangzhou. Paradoxically, some local intellectuals also bemoaned the dangerous impact of the alluring cityscape. They lamented that these changes were “threatening the moral souls of its inhabitants, and causing environmental pollution, social inequalities, the collapse of traditional moral codes and the demise of simple and harmonious human relations.”

Viewed in this light, the imagery of women also embodied the dual perceptions of modernity, for writers in the 1930s tended to portray women either as the liberated New Woman transgressing the gender boundary to pursue independence and a western life-style, or a *femme fatale* that readily embraced the decadent atmosphere of modern cities and presented a threat to normative masculinity. Predominant use of female imagery in newspaper and magazine advertisements in Republican Guangzhou therefore

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5. Ibid., 63-69.


reflected trends of increased consumerism, an expanding class of petty urbanites seeking entertainment and visual consumption, and the changing conceptions of female body that represented the two faces of modern cosmopolitanism.

Commenting on various phenomena pertaining to the Guangzhou cityscape, *The Sketch* featured simple, crudely drawn comic stories which often played on the theme of gender relations and offered quick and easy access for visual consumption of the female flesh. In contrast to the artistic representation of female nudity in high art journals published by the foreign-educated Shanghai elites, who used these images to “[advocate] a Chinese-style cultural modernism as the key to strengthening China… [and] to develop a commodity-oriented, modernist culture that united the power of advanced printing technology with an ideology of nation building,” the portrayal of female nudes in *The Sketch* seemed to intend no such lofty goals. Instead, their aim was mainly to fulfill the petty urbanites’ sexualizing gaze and constant search for novelty. These images of female nude were treated as reproducible commodities, and would illustrate the expectations and limitations prescribed for modern womanhood, again closely connected to the image of modern Guangzhou as well as the modern Chinese nation-state.

Various use of female imagery, including pictures of nude women, dominated the overall marketing mechanism in *The Sketch* and pointed to the objectification of female body in the visual culture of modern Guangzhou. Similar to the mass produced commodities in an industrial age, female imagery was used over and over again for the advertisement of a given brand in consecutive issues of the magazine (Figure 1). The absence of individuality thus points to the perception and usage of female nude images by the artists as commercial products that could be manipulated by the power of modern printing technology. In addition, resembling the popular Shanghai calendar posters, the advertisements in *The Sketch* shows little interaction between women and the products they sell. A typical advertisement (Figure 2) features the head of a beautiful lady or the full figure of a modern woman, clothed or unclothed, with only several lines of text promoting the effect or allure of the commodity. Women in these images were “equated to the status of a ‘beautiful object’ for purchase [and] as passive as the object she is supposed to advertise.” As a result of the rising consumerism, women’s body, though frequently deployed in the local marketing enterprise, became commoditized and reproducible for visual and commercial consumption.

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10. In addition, most of the advertisements found in The Sketch are for medicines and feature attractive and scantily dressed women, suggesting that “the power of these drugs can bring health and charm to their users, or, in the case of aphrodisiacs, can lead to a successful encounter with a beautiful partner” (Ho, Understanding Canton, 73).


12. Ibid.
Female imagery in these advertisements, particularly the nudes, offered convenient access for the local audience to not only satisfy their sexual fantasy but also their interest with changes in the modern cityscape, sometimes with fascination and other times with fear or disillusionment. One such example can be found in a dermatologic medicine advertisement (Figure 3). Here, a beautiful young woman, with arguably westernized facial features, is portrayed with a high nose and full, red lips, possibly evoking the image of an Anglo-white beauty in popular imagination. Even when naked, this woman still embodies contemporary fashion trend such as the bobbed hairstyle that had been the trademark of the Modern Girl since 1920s, chic makeup, and a bracelet on her wrist.13 Next to this female figure that appears confident and fully in control of her sexuality, however, are big, block characters that seem to convey a different message. “A beauty and sex dermatologic specialty medicine,” the brand promises to cure various types of ills including infected toes, body odor, pimple, and itchiness, all of which might seem unrelated to the pretty young icon at the first glance but could actually have been common problems faced by prosti-

idealized body of whom exhibits “the enduring pattern of athletic energy.”

Even though this male figure’s hair is changed to a slightly oriental style, the implication is clear: like the westernized female imagery, modern Chinese masculinity was expected to be forceful, well-balanced, and equal to the West in physical strength. However, unlike the female nude that embodied the latent threat of moral decline and sexual transgression, the male body seems to convey no such message but only the aspiration of the advertisement artist to a bright and progressive future of the Chinese race. Accordingly, as literary scholar Shu-mei Shih would argue, the Chinese modernity represented by the feminine form had also been necessarily contained and subordinated to that of the masculine.

This paper has explored the visual representations of female nudes in the advertisement section of The Sketch in 1930s Guangzhou, a modern city that saw an expanding consumer economy, emerging civic consciousness among the petty urbanites, and evolving perceptions of the female body. Although the exposed female flesh might have been seen as a progressive leap in the cultural development of the city, the depictions of trendy westernized beauties in the local marketing schemes did not necessarily imply a positive outlook of modern femininity. Rather, their naked body plainly displays the extent to which modern women, a perceived carrier of physical and moral diseases, could endanger the superiority of native patriarchy as well as the spiritual wellbeing of the nation by luring men with their sexual charm. Additionally, Francesca Dal Lago’s study of Shanghai calendar poster girls points out that women’s subjectivity is ultimately overlooked in these renderings of the female body, for these advertisements vis-à-vis the mounting consumerism cast a commoditizing effect on women’s imagery. However, one should not hastily dismiss the destabilizing and emancipatory potential of these female nude images, for there might have been female readers who internalized these twofold messages of modern womanhood. In this case, even if the potential female audience would eventually succumb to the acceptable range of female behavior approved by the public, they might have gained empowerment from the fact that women in these advertisements, with their nude body, visually defy the prescribed gender norms, and thereby rewrite the face of cosmopolitan modernity in Republican Guangzho.

Roanna Cheung is a graduate student in the Department of History. She recently received a CSW Travel Grant to present this research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY