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Introduction

As a powerhouse for China’s modern transformation Shanghai was a city of tremendous importance and enormous complexity. In the half century after 1843, when the Treaty of Nanjing opened it to trade with the West, Shanghai rose to become China’s largest city and its leading center for finance and industry, as well as for art, printing, publishing, journalism, popular entertainment, and higher education. Home to the conservative Sino-Western comprador merchants of the nineteenth century, Shanghai in the Republican period (1911–49) was nonetheless the birthplace of radical ideology, mass demonstrations, anticolonial nationalism (with economic nationalism), and political organizations of all stripes, including the Chinese Communist Party.

Although in the last twenty years the city’s social and political institutions have been better understood, not enough has been learned about the cultural milieu of Shanghai as it emerged from a middle-sized county seat to become a cosmopolitan metropolis.\(^1\) We now know a fair amount about the highly differentiated urban society of Republican Shanghai, with its professional classes and modernist values distinguished from the rest of the country, but historians have only roughly sketched out the city’s drastic social and cultural changes brought on after the Taiping Uprising of the mid-nineteenth century. As a result, we can recognize the far-reaching consequences of Shanghai’s cultural developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, yet, given the long process, singularly marked by tension between tradition and modernity, between China and the West, we remain uncertain about where to locate the dynamics of these changes.\(^2\)

One of the best ways to understand the cultural history of modern Shanghai in general and the history of Shanghai School painting in particular is through the study of visual culture in Shanghai. Several scholars have recently attempted to define the term “visual culture” relative to visual images. According to Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, in their introduction to Visual Culture: Image and Interpretations, art is “actively engaged in organizing and structuring the social and cultural environment.”\(^3\) They argue against the practice of a traditional art-historical approach: “It is, in fact, art history’s continuing adherence to a theory of immanent aesthetic value that has prevented historians from fully examining the way in which the work is related to all other institutions and practices that constitute social life.”\(^4\) Although, as W. J. T.
Mitchell has cautioned us, “one cannot simply graft a received notion of visual experience on to a received notion of culture,” it is clear that we can no longer ignore the challenge of the approach of visual culture. As Mitchell has argued, “From the standpoint of a general field of visual culture, art history can no longer rely on received notion of beauty or aesthetic significance to define its proper object of study. The realm of vernacular and popular imagery clearly has to be reckoned with, and the notion of aesthetic hierarchy, of masterpieces and the genius artist have to be redescribed as historical constructions specific to various cultural place-times.” Recent efforts by scholars such as Julia Andrews, Ellen Johnston Laing, Kuiyi Shen, and Leo Ou-fan Lee have begun to address the production and circulation of vernacular and popular imagery in early twentieth-century China.

A part of the field of Chinese history, the study of the cultural history of modern Shanghai has been flourishing. Yet until recently, as in so much of Chinese art history, the study of art in Shanghai has remained, with some rare exceptions, confined strictly to connoisseurship and authentication of traditional Chinese painting. This has been unfortunate, because the production, circulation, reception, and consumption of the visual arts lend themselves particularly well to art historians, cultural historians, social historians, and literary historians for integrative and interdisciplinary study. For instance, the term Haipai (“Shanghai School” or “Shanghai Style”), used as both a noun and an adjective, gained wide usage in Chinese around the turn of the century, both to denote the particular artistic taste and style of life associated with Shanghai’s comprador merchants, and to be contrasted to the Jingpai (“Beijing School” or “Beijing Style”) of the established bureaucratic elites. Identified originally with Shanghai’s operatic theater and art market, the term Haipai was extended to include styles of entertainment as well as patterns of consumption. While it was a matter of status among many of Shanghai’s mercantile elites to live up to the expectations of Haipai, the term in fact carried negative connotations outside the arriviste social circle as a symbol of bad taste and dubious significance. After the 1920s, Haipai also became an object of denunciation by cultural bureaucrats appointed by the Nationalists and later by the Communists. The form and practice of Haipai thus occupied a contested terrain between social classes and cultural allegiance. A study of formal and informal meanings of Haipai, as seen through the paintings of the Shanghai school as well as other media of visual representations, provides us a point of entry into the nexus of relationships that structured the encounter between China and the West as experienced by the treaty-port Chinese in their everyday life. Exploring such relationships gives us a better sense of the ultimate significance of Shanghai’s rise as China’s dominant metropolitan center.

Continuing Stella Yu Lee’s earlier work on art patronage in Shanghai in the nineteenth century, Kuiyi Shen’s essay, “Patronage and the Beginning of a Modern Art World in Late Qing Shanghai,” deals with the social and economic contexts of the Shanghai School of Painting. Like the rapid development of the Chinese economy, particularly in port cities, the patronage of art changed greatly during the late Qing dynasty. Especially in Shanghai, as it was transformed into a new modern metropolis and the hub of southern China’s cultural and artistic activities, art patronage of a new kind emerged from a new class of art buyers, and was associated with a
dramatic increase in the number of shops selling paintings, the emergence of new types of artists’ associations, and the establishment of a thriving market for contemporary art. These features, part of the rapid commercialization of society, changed the styles and subject matters of paintings in Shanghai. By examining these changes in late nineteenth-century Shanghai, this essay suggests that the changed nature of art patronage represents a key feature of modernity in the culture of late Qing Shanghai.

Late nineteenth-century Shanghai witnessed an increase in the available technologies of image production, including photography and lithography. Paralleling this, there was an even greater expansion in the number of subject matters considered worthwhile. In her essay, “Uncommon Themes and Uncommon Subject Matters in Ren Xiong’s Album after Poems by Yao Xie,” Britta Erickson focuses on Ren Xiong’s 1851 album, which, now in the Palace Museum in Beijing, is the largest extant Chinese painting album, containing 120 leaves; this album presages many of the fin de siècle developments just mentioned, since the variety of subject matters and styles assembled in the album is absolutely unprecedented in the history of Chinese painting. Stylistically, the leaves vary dramatically, from detailed, fine-lined brushwork, to bold and expressive brushwork, to archaistic styles. Ren Xiong’s openness to new ideas is reflected in his renditions of unusual subject matters, such as machines and exotic foreigners, and in the likely influence Chinese printed books, European illustrated books, and Japanese prints and paintings all had on him.

Ren Xiong’s album also exemplifies art patronage in the Shanghai School of Painting. The album was a cooperative venture between the artist and his primary patron, Yao Xie. Yao Xie selected a line of his own verse as the subject for each leaf, and Ren Xiong responded with a painting. Yao Xie thus initiated each leaf’s direction, and was responsible for choosing some of the unusual subjects, such as people of exotic ethnicity. He also injected political content into the album, by inscribing lines of verse describing the Opium War, sometimes critical of the Manchu imperial army. Erickson argues that, in expanding and exploring the limits of style and content, artist and patron may have been motivated by more than just intellectual gratification, because the album could have exemplified the possible kinds of paintings that the patron could commission from the artist.

At the height of his artistic career in 1888, Ren Bonian (1840–1896), one of the best-known artists of late nineteenth-century Shanghai, painted a twelve-leaf album on the subject of beautiful women. In “Deliberate Looks: Ren Bonian’s 1888 Album of Women,” Roberta Wue explores the artistic context of the album by highlighting a range of issues significant to Ren Bonian at this time: his relationship to old masters, his development of a more calligraphic style, and his challenging of narrative conventions in painting. She also explores personal issues and themes the album may have had for Ren Bonian during this period, and the possible self-identification of the male artist with his female subjects.

activities of one of the most important traditionalist painters’ organization in Shanghai, the Zhongguo huahui or Chinese Painting Society. Established in 1931 on a culturally nationalist agenda, the group claimed as members many, if not all, of the most important traditional painters in the city. Its members participated in the cultural debates of the period, upholding a traditionalist cultural agenda while remaining fully engaged in the life of modern Shanghai. Andrews and Shen argue that its members’ traditionalism was active, not passive; further, they argue that the promotion of traditional Chinese painting by members of the Chinese Painting Society in Shanghai in the 1930s, in the face of Western influences, might be considered not a reactionary but a progressive and “modern” activity.

In his current research, Jonathan Hay has been concerned with interpreting visual culture in Shanghai in terms of modernity. In his essay, “Notes on Chinese Photography and Advertising in Late Nineteenth-Century Shanghai,” he focuses on the development of photography and advertising and argues that forms of a commercial mass culture in general and visual culture in particular in Shanghai in the first half of the twentieth century were first worked out in the late nineteenth century on a relatively small scale through experimentation with new, but limited, technology. He has attempted to reconstruct the social, economic, and cultural context for the Shanghai art world, of which the Shanghai School painters only formed one part: other professional artists of the time included illustrators, photographers, artisan painters, wood-block print artists, and commercial artists specializing in backdrops and technical illustrations. Hay’s essay demonstrates clearly that, from about 1860 to 1895, Shanghai served as an experimental laboratory for the development of China’s modern commercial mass and visual culture. He further argues that, through an expansion and intensification of preexisting Chinese visual practices on the one hand, and experimentation with imported technologies on the other—an intersecting process also seen in pictorial journalism and the mechanical reproduction of paintings—a new and distinctive orientation for visual culture came into being.

The essays by Yingjin Zhang, Carrie Warra, and Shu-mei Shih, by focusing on the representation of women, further examine the new ways images were produced and received through new visual technologies in a rapidly changing, culturally hybrid, cosmopolitan Shanghai. Zhang’s essay, “Artwork, Commodity, Event: Representations of the Female Body in Modern Chinese Pictorials,” deals with the complicated ways in which the visual representations of the female body circulated and functioned in Shanghai in the late Qing and early Republican period. He focuses on two principal sources: Wu Youru’s lithographs from the Dianshizhai huabao and numerous images from the pictorial Liangyou. To situate his study in the broader context of Chinese visual culture, Zhang also briefly refers to contemporary literary works (e.g., modernist poetry and fiction) as well as other pictorials (e.g., Beiyang huabao) and cartoon magazines (e.g., Duli manhua). He approaches the pictorial representations of the female body in three distinctive modes: as artwork, as commodity, and as event. As artwork, the female body was regarded as embodying the essence of feminine beauty and male aesthetic taste. In this mode, the female body worked to solicit a “privatized” aesthetic gaze and eventually to confirm the male viewer’s self-confidence in erotic connoisseurship. As a commodity, female bodies were offered in graphic
form for public consumption and, obviously, to increase the circulation of the pictorials. Consistent inclusion of photographs and paintings of female nudes in *Liangyou* thus worked both to promote sales of the magazine and to build the magazine’s reputation as a vanguard in modern Chinese art. As an event, the female body was inserted in a threshold where the traditional was forced to admire the modern and the weak fantasized to beat the strong. Inevitably, the female body in this third mode served as a surrogate for the male body and seemed to provide a certain amount of comfort in the latter’s discursive negotiation and symbolic confrontation with the West. Drawing on films and art theory to analyze visual representations in terms of the look, the gaze, and the screen, as well as their exhibitionism, voyeurism, and sadomasochism, Zhang offers a close reading of a select number of pictures and concludes that the female body in the pictorial representations constitutes both a sight for visual consumption and a site for articulating public anxiety and private fantasy in the metropolis of Shanghai.

Carrie Waara’s essay, “The Bare Truth: Nudes, Sex, and the Modernization Project in Shanghai Pictorials,” looks at the representation of the female nude by studying its presence in *Meishu shenghuo* (*Arts & Life*), a prominent art periodical, and other pictorials published in Shanghai. Western fine art nudes as well as paintings, sculpture, and photographs of nude subjects by Chinese artists frequently appeared in these magazines as part of their modernization project: to foster “a commanding view of the world” in order to develop the human ability to control things in terms of truth, rational calculation, authenticity, and/or beauty. Representations of nudes thus secured for the editors vivid credentials of their expertise in translating Western modernity for Chinese society.

Yet this new convention of portraying women in China also presented problems of spectatorship for middle-class women readers. Historically, the female nude presumed the dominant spectatorship of men, long associated with sexuality, voyeurism, and power. The nude’s association with uncontrolled sexuality, prostitution, and the social degeneracy of urban entertainment districts also conflicted with the magazines’ ideology of domesticity. Nonetheless, the editors suggested that the vitality of human sexuality might revivify Chinese art and culture. The treatments of the human subject, clothed and unclothed, by *Meishu shenghuo* and other periodicals were part of a project to create a new, modern cultural identity that redefined Chinese middle-class femininity and masculinity. Waara’s essay constitutes a new understanding of the construction of gender by pictorial magazines produced in Shanghai from 1912 to 1937, when the rise of the pictorial press underscored the power of representation and its relation to Shanghai’s visual culture.

In her essay, “Shanghai Women of 1939: Visuality and the Limits of Feminine Modernity,” Shu-mei Shih explicates the relationship between Chinese modernity and gender by examining the representation of women in advertisements in the 1939 issues of *Shanghai shenghuo* (*Shanghai Guide*). She distinguishes between two forms of modernity: masculine and feminine. When modernity was articulated as a nationalist resistance to imperialism, the empowerment of the modern nation-state of China, it was often presented in masculine terms. But when modernity was articulated in terms of everyday practice, women often embodied it through their dress,
manners, and lifestyles. Within this realm of feminine modernity, modern women were encoded as objects of desire by advertisements encouraging their active participation in consumer activities. Thus, modern women were caught between the supposedly liberating potentials of modernity and the traditional expectations of native patriarchy. Furthermore, as illustrated by the advertisements that encouraged women to buy native Chinese products, their role appears to be restricted only to that of consumer. Shih therefore argues that, whether represented as “Westernized-sexualized-therefore-modern” women, or as patriotic housewives, their advertised images suggest the limits of feminine modernity.

The essays by Ellen Johnston Laing and Lenore Hietkamp look at the hybrid aspects of visual culture in Shanghai. Soon after the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, held in Paris in 1925, strong simple shapes; geometric designs; intersecting squares, circles, and triangles; angular chevrons and zigzags; smooth curves; and stylized representations began to dominate the decorative arts. Art Deco, as it came to be called, quickly became international, appearing particularly in the decorative arts and architecture of Europe, the United States, and Asian cosmopolitan centers such as Shanghai and Tokyo. In her essay, “Art Deco and Modernist Art in Chinese Calendar Posters,” Laing identifies and discusses the influence of Art Deco on the popular calendar posters (yuefenpai) of the 1920s and 1930s, focusing on the decorative borders, the typographic designs, and the domestic interiors rendered as backgrounds for depictions of modern women. Artists designing the calendar posters, which served primarily as advertisements, but eventually as popular art for mass consumption, incorporated not only elements of Art Deco (crisp lines, geometric forms, and flattening of pictorial space) but also patterns and motifs found in traditional Chinese decorative arts. The very presence of Art Deco motifs and modernist styles in the calendar posters brought abstract art forms directly to the streets and homes of Shanghai for all to see.

The calendar posters are an accurate and concrete visual gauge of popular acceptance of cultural developments because, exhibited and sold at street corner stalls, they reached all classes of Chinese society. At another level, by 1930, several art schools in the Shanghai area had established design departments, some with Chinese instructors educated in Paris. When these artists’ designs were published in Chinese popular art magazines, they helped bring the aesthetic ideals of Art Deco to a Chinese art world already sympathetic to Western and modern art styles. Movies also helped spread Art Deco in China. For the ordinary person, the sumptuous and elegant Art Deco clothing and furnishings seen in movies probably represented a level of luxury perhaps admired but acknowledged as unattainable.

Since most of the calendar posters advertised commodities, they embodied the intriguing relationship between commodity culture and modernity. As Garry Leonard has argued, “commodity culture is modern, in part, because it relies on technological advances in visual presentation, such as photography, and improved methods of printing, such as lithography. These advances permitted, in turn, cheap production of the plethora of images and advertising that provided the infrastructure of what we now call ‘mass media.’” Leonard’s comments belong to his study of James Joyce, but are applicable to Shanghai in the late nineteenth and early
twentieth century. Two other essays in this book, those by Shih and Hay, also touch upon advertising, and other scholars, such as Leo Ou-fan Lee and Sherman Cochran, have turned to Shanghai poster calendars in their studies of modern Chinese cultural history. But studies remain to be undertaken on how the mass-produced poster calendars embodied transformations in modern Shanghai: the reconfiguration of desire and pleasure; the social construction of reality, identity, and gender; and the redefinition of the “borders of art.”

The Park Hotel in Shanghai, built in 1934, was a powerful symbol of 1930s China. Designed by the Hungarian architect Laszlo Hudec (1893–1958) and visually compelling from excavation to completion, it far surpassed its rivals on the Bund in height and modernity. At eighty-seven meters (284 feet), it was the tallest building at the time outside of North America, and, until the early 1980s, towered above Shanghai’s cityscape. Hietkamp’s essay, “The Park Hotel in Shanghai: A Metaphor for 1930s China,” is based on a firsthand study of the monument and on drawings, photographs, and newspaper clippings held in the Laszlo Hudec Collection at the University of Victoria, Canada. The combination—Chinese owners, Hungarian architect, and Western style—reflected the cosmopolitan nature and complex social structure of Shanghai in the 1930s. In its height and services, the Park Hotel can be classed with the great American skyscraper hotels. The potential visual impact of the tall structure on Shanghai residents informed the design and the choice of the site for the Park Hotel. Stylistic sources for the hotel can be traced, not only to the contemporary streamlined Art Deco style, but also to the more conservative New York skyscrapers. Hudec was educated in the Beaux Arts tradition of Austria and utilized central and eastern European ideas throughout his career. The hotel’s façade filtered all these influences. The hotel is therefore an important receptacle of stylistic confluences of modern architectural ideas from around the world. The hotel, furthermore, was a symbol not only of the Chinese owners’ ability to help finance the modernization project, but also of the optimism for the future shared by the wealthy Chinese and Westerners in Shanghai. Furthermore, China’s efforts to modernize during the Nationalist regime are echoed clearly in every aspect of the hotel.

Wen-hsin Yeh’s afterword, “The Shanghai Gaze: Visual Culture and Images of Modernity,” gives a thought-provoking overview of the relationship between cultural history and visual culture in Shanghai. The complexity and richness of visual culture in Shanghai, as she sees it, compel us to ask serious questions as we explore the visual dimension to understand Chinese modernity: “How was the Shanghai gaze disciplined either to revere or to dismiss, to engage or to avert, to support or to subvert emerging systems of power? How, conversely, did commercialization and industrialization, colonialism and nationalism, manifest themselves in a new visual culture?” As she puts it, “To make sense of the visual culture in the city, one must thus not only keep in sight the incessant struggles between the high and the low, the near and the far. One must also confront the fragmented nature of the myriad images that were but parts of an evolving whole, and were gleaned from a variety of perspectives.” In short, this volume explores how visual culture in general and painting in particular in Shanghai from the 1850s to the 1930s embodied China’s search for a modern identity, and how Shanghai emerged as the center of Chinese cosmopolitanism.
Notes

An earlier version of this introduction was presented under the title “Visual Culture and Shanghai School Painting” at the International Symposium on Shanghai School Painting, December 2001, Shanghai, and published in Haipai huihua xianji wenji (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Chubanshe, 2001), 1004–24.


4 Ibid.


7 For a recent study of Haipai and Jingpai in literature, see Yang Yi, Jingpai yu Haipai bijiao yanjiu (Xi’an: Taibai wenyi chubanshe, 1994).


12 For recent scholarship on spectatorship as a historical phenomenon produced in a particular cultural moment, see Vanessa R. Schwartz, Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 8–12.


15 For an introduction to German architecture in Shanghai, see Torsten Warner, Deutsche Architektur in China (Berlin: Ernst and Sohn, 1994), 84–139.