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CROSSED LEGS IN 1930s SHANGHAI:
HOW ‘MODERN’ THE MODERN WOMAN?

Francesca Dal Lago

Calendar Posters (yuefenpai 月份牌) portraying beautiful pin-ups in modern garb produced in Shanghai, Canton and Hong Kong during the first part of this century have recently come to public attention as highly collectible items in the Chinese antique market (Figure 1). Their nostalgic art-deco style has turned them into early icons of Chinese modernity, now exhibited as decorations on anything from the walls of recently opened ‘Old Shanghai’ restaurants (Figure 2) to the clothing and accessories of cutting-edge designers such as Vivienne Tam or Alan Chan. This trend for retro-chic is in fact just one of the forms

Originally written as a Master’s thesis, an earlier version of this article was presented under the title “Modern looking and looking modern: ‘modern woman’ as a commodity in 1930s Shanghai calendar posters” at a Workshop on Visual Cultures and Modernities in China and Japan, held in October 1996 at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Jonathan Hay, for his suggestion to analyze the rich yuefenpai material from the perspective of a specific bodily posture, and my colleague Roberta Wue for her advice on the presentation of the original paper. Professor Federico Greselin gave invaluable support in digitizing and forwarding some of the visual material for publication. Simona di Pasquale and Maria Clara Parente kindly provided the photographic images of courtesans and some bibliographical references for the most recently published Chinese material. Finally, my thanks to Helen Lo, whose layout has graphically and significantly highlighted the visual argument proposed by this text.

The following explanation appears on the labels attached to all Alan Chan’s garments and products: “All designs capture the unique local flavor of modern and nostalgic themes mainly from Hong Kong [sic]. This splendid taste of the legendary lifestyle of the Orient is made available to you exclusively from Alan Chan Creations.”
Card of the restaurant Moon Shanghai (Ye Shanghai) in Beijing, reproducing a poster by Xie Zhiguang originally designed in 1929 (see Yi Bin, Lao Shanghai Guangao, p.88). The restaurant, located in the fashionable Sanlitun area, is decorated with other reproductions of yuefenpai posters.


Yuefenpai were related to traditional ‘New Year prints’ produced at the beginning of the new year for auspicious and decorative purposes. According to Pu Ji, the term itself existed before it came into commercial use, indicating a genre of New Year print with an image in the center and one or two years’ calendar on the sides. With the introduction of marketing and advertising from the West, traditional yuefenpai became an item that major companies would distribute to their clients as a gift at the beginning of the year. Yuefenpai would often be given away with the product, as in the case of cigarettes where the customer would receive one poster for a 50-packet carton. See Pu Ji, “Jiefang qian de ‘yuefenpai’ nianhua shiliao” [Historical material on pre-liberation yuefenpai New Year pictures], Meishu yanjiu 2 (1959): 51.

Hybrid character of this kind of commercial art combining, as it does, elements of folk art, commercial advertising, and Chinese and Western graphic design make calendar posters a good example of that ‘urban exoticism’ that Heinrich Fruehauf has discussed in his dissertation “Urban Exoticism in Modern Chinese Literature” to indicate the particular cluster of visual and cultural associations with an-Other reality (in this case Western) which was an ordinary experience in pre-war Shanghai. As Fruehauf writes:

In an Oriental context, exoticism always bears the double-features of ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ aesthetics: at one end the term was associated with avant-garde trends ... and at the other end its connotations are firmly rooted in the realm of popular culture.

Figure 3

Advertisement for the insecticide Earth. Notice the contrast between the elegant setting and lacy clothing of one of the women, and the dead bugs plummeting down beside the stylish figures. One of the women is holding a pesticide spray-can, in a not-so-common example of product consumption.

Figure 4

Advertisement for Double Crane Cigarettes produced by the British-American Tobacco Company, featuring two women smoking. Notice the voluptuous arrangement of the figures who are rarely shown in the act of smoking in cigarette advertising.

Designed to market Chinese and Western commodities to an emergent urban middle class, calendar posters were in fact capitalizing on the experience of the ‘exotic’, provided to consumers through their formal values and the up-to-date nature of the products they were accustomed to advertise. The posters did not claim a high artistic status and were produced solely as mass-cultural ads, flourishing in a space largely unfettered by the the ideologies of representation associated with the cultural élite.5

But there is another iconographical feature that makes the posters particularly interesting to our twentieth-century theory-obsessed, analytical gaze: as early examples of Chinese commercial advertising they exclusively portray woman as the conveyor of modern marketing messages. The way in

which these images are constructed and their different, often contrasting, layers of significance provide a unique entrée into the system of gender representation active during the Republican period when ‘woman’ for the first time attained an important position in public cultural discourses.

Women were almost the sole subjects of the advertising campaigns for an extremely large range of items, from cigarettes to liquor, from cosmetics to pesticides (Figure 3). From this plethora of products I selected images of single women both for their prominence within the genre and for the specific theoretical possibilities offered by this type of representation, ignoring images of women in pairs, women with children and women portrayed as historical and mythical characters, which were also very popular at the time.

**Figure 5**

Cigarette advertisement by the Zhiying Studio 稚英画室 showing a woman with two children in a well-appointed Western-style park. Despite the maternal undertones highlighted by the presence of the two children, the woman’s qipao slit reaches up to her thigh, coquettishly allowing a glimpse of her lacy underwear.

**Figure 6**

Advertisement for Pirate cigarettes by Liang Dingming 梁鼎铭 showing a beautiful lady in traditional dress. The image is inspired by the famous Eastern Jin masterpiece “The Nymph of the Luo River” (Luo shen fu 洛神赋), attributed to Gu Kaizhi 顾恺之.
(Figures 4, 5 and 6). Finally, I have chosen the period from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s for formal reasons, since it is during this time that calendar posters attained their most mature and distinctive artistic character before being replaced by photography (Figure 7).

Within this selection of images, I have focused on pictures of women seated with crossed legs, a specific bodily posture that, both in China and in the West, can be read both as a signifier of modernity and as a possible reminder of sexual availability (Figure 8).

As suggested by a 1930s article in the magazine The Modern Lady (Jindai Funü) entitled “Do you know how to sit, stand and walk?,” correct bodily posture could in fact constitute an important element in the image of a modern lady. The article provides specific suggestions on what could be defined as a kind of ‘modern postural etiquette’, that is, how to sit, walk and stand on the many social occasions offered to women in contemporary life.
The contemporary woman has to mix with crowds in large halls, and must therefore be aware that her every action and movement will produce a certain effect—so she must practise striking elegant poses. In the past, attention to feminine beauty only focused on details, but now it embraces everything. Moreover, female clothing used to consist of voluminous gowns and long skirts or pants, and apart from the head, the hands and the feet that could hardly be glimpsed under such enveloping garments, the body was as if encased in a box, with most parts remaining hidden. But now, with the change of fashion, the beautiful shape of the body and an elegant figure are revealed. If we think about it, our clothes today have shortened to reach just below the knee, and arms are mostly completely exposed so that the shape of the bust is clearly revealed in all our actions and movements: what other possibility of concealment then remains?

The article goes on to give explicit examples of the postures befitting the modern woman, warning that “crossed legs are not appropriate in crowded halls” (Figure 9). Its general intonation suggests that women, exposed for the first time in centuries in their “every action” to the gaze of the crowd, have become a prime and exotic object of public scrutiny. Even a bodily posture may signal an achieved status of modernity, highlighting with its visual and moral connotations the constructed image of the new woman.

The choice of this specific bodily posture is supported by the argument proposed in this paper, centered on the discussion of the ambiguous character of gender representation in yuefenpai posters. On the one hand, in fact, the ‘Modern Girl’ or ‘Modern Woman’ in these posters was presented as a symbol of progress mirroring the way in which she was generally portrayed in popular magazines and literature; she would thus establish a ‘model’ that fed on contemporary mass cultural discourse, initiating a process of emulation among middle-class women (Figures 10 and 11). Her portrayal as a symbol of modernity was used for marketing purposes to create a fashionable
A photo-spread entitled "Standard Women" published in the pictorial "Liang you 良友 (no.99, 1 Dec. 1934, p.22). The target/boroscope-shaped circle includes a whole set of suggested new female models (from upper center, counter-clockwise): the swimmer Yang Xiuqiong 杨秀琼, the dancer Zheng Lixia 郑丽霞, the film star Hu Die 胡蝶, the billionaire wife of Silas Hardoon 哈同 Song Tai Furen 宋太夫人, the "virtuous and caring wife" Song Meiling 宋美龄, the painter He Xiangning 何香凝, the "courageous spirited" aviatrix Lin Pengxia 林鹏侠, the filial daughter Hu Mulan 胡木兰, and the writer Ding Ling 丁玲.

A photographic spread entitled "Twenty-four hours of a modern lady (from morning to evening)," published in the pictorial magazine "Shidai huabao 时代画报," early 1930s.
Figure 12 (right)

An episode from the cartoon “Ms Honey” (Mifeng xiaojie 梅 蜂小姐) designed by the woman cartoonist Liang Baipo 梁白波 and published by the Shanghai journal Li bao 立報 in 1935. Ms Honey, a fashionable and often comically-portrayed Shanghai girl, is shown here on a shopping spree, a recurring activity often associated with the figure of the modern woman (reprinted in Wei Shaochang, ed., Mifeng xiaojie [Tai’an: Shandong Chubanshe, 1998], p.10)

Figure 13

Cartoon from the series “The Pictorial Story of A’Tou,” a satirical commentary on contemporary Chinese society by cartoonist Gao Longsheng 高龙生 (1903-77), published in 1935. The episode, entitled “Everything for love,” portrays a materialistic Modern Girl—the ultimate object of desire for poor A’Tou—who shows no interest in his romantic propositions and final offer of self-sacrifice, preferring instead the monetary thrill offered by the richer man (reprinted in Wei Shaochang, ed., A’ Tou huaizhuan [The pictorial story of A’ Tou] [Tai’an: Shandong Chubanshe, 1998], p.15)

On the other hand, this use of her image was aimed at creating an ideal association with luxurious commodities, thus undermining the significance of women’s emancipation and endorsing their condition as ‘objects’ of social and economic desire (Figure 13). Crossed legs in specific representational conditions would then become a motif implying the woman’s lack of a sense of morality and possibly signal

Concerning the growing representation of women in European fin-de-siècle commercial advertising Felski has remarked how “advertising at this time began to develop increasingly sophisticated marketing techniques, promoting repertoires of identities and lifestyles to which the consumer was encouraged to aspire. Given an extant gender division of labor which identified shopping as women’s work, it was women above all who were interpellated in this way through mass-produced images of femininity, even as middle-class women’s dependence upon the economic support of men required them to invest far more heavily in modes of fashionable adornment and self-display.” Rita Felski, The gender of modernity (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.64.
loose sexual behavior (Figure 14). In short, I will argue that this particular posture was used both to debunk and to endorse the veneer of modernity paraded within the trendy and stylish representations of the New Woman, who was in turn hailed as one of the most visible and successful results of modernization. This ambiguous process could also be read as an attempt to regulate the social impact unleashed by the new role of woman as consumer and her increasingly visible presence in public discourse (Figure 15).

To support my argument images selected from popular magazines and satirical cartoons have been used to disclose the different layers of meanings elicited in public opinion by the glamorous representations of the ‘Modern Woman’. It will be argued that calendar posters contributed to create a hybrid format of gender representation where women are portrayed simultaneously as both subject and object of market and sexual consumption, and more precisely where “the boundaries of subject and object, active and passive, owner and owned, unique and general, break down in an endless reflexive interplay of consumer and consumed” (Figure 16).

Figure 15

A satirical sketch by Zhang Pengfei 张鹏飞 entitled “The Way to Fame” published in Liang you 88 (May 1934), illustrating the very practical means to stardom opening up to women with a will to emerge in the modern world.

Figure 14

Magazine advertisement for the medicine Bushiming. Remarkable in this composition is the lack of any apparent link between the sophisticated and “unchecked” pose of the woman with its overt sexual undertones, and the innocuous product advertised.

Figure 16 (right)

The equation ‘woman = luxurious commodity’ is more than explicitly underlined in this cartoon by Zhang Hancheng 张汉澄 entitled “Parcel Goods” (in Chinese, “Sealed Goods”) (Liang you 76, 31 May 1933).

In her book *The Gender of Modernity* Rita Felsky discusses women's greater visibility in late-nineteenth-century European literature as "a powerful symbol of both the dangers and the promises of the modern age," an argument that can equally apply to Chinese popular media and to literature during the first part of the twentieth century. Felsky states:

In the early twentieth century the figure of the New Woman was to become a resonant symbol of emancipation, whose modernity signaled not an endorsement of an existing present, but rather a bold imagining of an alternative future. It is not surprising that the subject for the cultural and commercial negotiations at work within the calendar posters should be the figure of woman. Women were exhibited as the most visible and direct beneficiaries of China's...
economic and social progress, and the modernized image of woman \(^{11}\) soon became the embodiment of a new, progressive and modernized nation, “configured as a new object of modern knowledge and as a new subject of potential social change” \(^{12}\) (Figure 17).

This phenomenon had in fact an historical raison-d’être. Since the first attempts at political reform in the late nineteenth century, women’s emancipation had been a central issue in reformers’ agitation aimed at rescuing China from what was perceived of as being an advanced stage of economic, cultural and moral decline. One of the first successes of women’s emancipation was the abolition by imperial decree in 1919 of the brutal practice of foot-binding. Soon, reformers started advancing the cause of women’s education, albeit for reasons instrumental to the emancipation of the Chinese population as a whole. In 1919 the first woman was granted

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**Figure 18**

*Photo-spread published in Liang you 96 (15 Oct. 1934), pp.20-1. The essay portrays the stark differences in lifestyle and habits between a poor peasant woman and a glamorous city lady. Notice the visual metaphors created by juxtaposing the daily activities of the two women and comparing their similar bodily postures. Legs and feet are the subject of two of the comparisons (see lower part of the pages)*
permission to attend Peking University and after the demise of the imperial system in 1911, women’s suffrage alliances were founded all over China: in 1922, for example, women finally obtained the right to vote in Hunan Province. Industrialization provided women with employment and thus the possibility of an independent income. For the first time women assumed the role of wage-earning individuals and were therefore granted a higher status in the family’s economy. In such a context, hailing the New Woman became such a recurrent trope in the popular media of the 1920s and ‘30s that the stereotype of the independent woman soon obscured what in fact were the still ‘unglamorous’ conditions of the majority of the female population (Figure 18).

One could easily argue that after 1911 little had changed in women’s status in the countryside, with the exception perhaps of the banning of foot-binding. In some rural areas, as a result of the deepening of the economic crisis and local warfare, women’s status might actually have worsened. Peasant girls were often sold to hawkers for a life of indentured labour in the factories of the big industrial centers or sold to brothels in the sprawling red-light districts of cities like Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou (Figure 19).

In the urban centers the progressive status of educated and working women was still much tainted by the restrictive ideology of the traditional Confucian system (Figure 20). In a quite revealing statement, originally published in 1931 on the occasion of a “Symposium on Chinese Culture,” a certain Miss P. S. Tseng reviews the social history of women in China with a clearly feminist approach, yet displaying many of the contradictions still existing between self-emancipation and reliance on traditional values. She ends her speech with the following statement:

Therefore, for the modern Chinese woman, let her freedom be restrained by self-control, her self-realization be coupled with self-sacrifice, and her individualism be circumscribed with family duty. Such is our new ideal of womanhood, and to realize this is our supreme problem.  

The functional role of the Modern Girl and her relevance to general
HOW ‘MODERN’ THE MODERN WOMAN?

Cultural discourses has been extensively discussed in relation to genres such as literature and cinema. Concerning the trope signified by the term nüxing 女性, prominent in May Fourth literature, Tani E. Barlow has written:

*Nüxing* was not a self-reference. It was not initially an ‘identity’ for women at all. Like the recuperation of nü ‘woman’ as employed before the May Fourth movement] as a trope of nationalist universality in masculinist discourses, *nüxing* was a discursive sign and a subject position in the larger, masculinist frame of anti-Confucian discourse . . . .

The subordinate fate of women—either servants or the daughters of a wealthy family—is poignantly portrayed by Ba Jin 巴金 in his 1935 novel *Family* (Jia 家). The novel describes the tragic story of the young in a rich landlord family in Sichuan, where women, despite the emancipated veneer of education and bobbed hairstyles, are still very much pawns in the game played by their male partners.

Even their recently-acquired and much-publicized job independence might in fact be considered nothing more than a myth, judging from the

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**Figure 20**

“Preliminary Lessons for the Housekeeping Bride” (in Chinese, “Housekeeping Lessons”), a two-page essay—photography by Chen Jiazhen 陈嘉震 and layout by Ye Qixun 叶秋心—describing the basic rules a proper wife should follow within the house. The set of admonitions is focused on how to while away the day at home awaiting the climactic return of “him”—the husband. Point 2 suggests that “No matter what, do not allow other people to rearrange his study.” In point 7, entitled “He is back,” the text mimics the wife: “Is it cold outside? Today I made you a very good Western dish, the kind of thing you really like to eat. Try to guess what it is . . . .”

Liang you 101 (Jan. 1935), pp. 40-1
“At the Back of the Individualist”—a revealing cartoon graphically portraying what may have been a commonly-shared opinion on the figure of the Modern Woman and her often displayed ‘independence’. The cartoon, signed by Wu Yuguang, was published in the January 1930 issue of the magazine Modern Miscellany. It portrays a fashionable modern girl with permed hair, short qipao and high-heeled shoes, declaring herself to be an “individualist” while a man hiding at her back contradicts her statement proving the definition—often used at the time in reference to modern girls—to be just a fashionable term to attach to the image of woman for glamorous display (reprinted in Shangjiang and Yun Yuan, eds., Lao Manhua [Old cartoons] [Shenyang: Liaoning Huabao Chubanshe, 1999], vol.4, p.27).

Figure 21

“Ah—” rasped the manager. Miss Huang felt he was looking at her. She lowered her head, a bit flurried. … The interval probably wasn’t very long, but Miss Huang thought it would never end. Suddenly a hand fell on her and she looked up with a start. … As Fatty pointed out various items on the document he was giving her, his beady black eyes travelled up and down her body. Appraising her clerical ability, no doubt. “You understand it all?” Fatty asked formally, in conclusion. Then, still smiling faintly, he suddenly inquired, “Tell me, Miss Huang, are you living alone or with your family?”

The obvious contradiction established between a seemingly liberated representation and the subordination to the rule of a paternalistic society clearly emerges in films focusing on the new possibilities available to a contemporary woman (Figure 22). In early 1930s movies such as Wild Flower (Yecao xianhua 野草闲花, 1930), Three Modern Women (San’ge modengnuxing 三个摩登女性, 1933) and New Women (Xin nuxing 新女性, 1934), the narrative focuses on the different choices offered to the ‘Modern Woman’, but all efforts to attain real autonomy, as regards both career and love-life, are doomed to failure. The subversive character of these emerging ‘independent’ subjects is contained by either re-absorbing the woman’s role within the traditional family structure, annihilating her transgressive behavior through violent death or suicide, or channeling her hopes for ‘personal’ emancipation into the emerging discourse of leftist ideology.

On the other hand, the figure of ‘woman’ had become the symbol of the high degree of urbanity that was to be found in modern Chinese cities, the very embodiment of ‘modernity’. In Ye Lingfeng’s 叶灵风 The Girl of the Modern Era (Shidai guniang 时代姑娘), a serialized short novel published in 1932, the protagonist Lily is a sexually-liberated, scandalous modern girl who casually shifts from one lover to the other with clear exhibitionist intent. Her character—constructed with the specific purpose of offering her up for visual display—creates the ultimate representation of the modern girl, constantly pursuing the latest fashion in all activities of her life, from clothes to sex. The voyeuristic description of the erotic ‘modern girl as femme fatale’ constantly emerges in the fiction of the neo-
sensationalist writers Liu Na’ou 刘呐鸥 (1900–39) and Mu Shiying 穆时英 (1912–40). As a trope of the intoxicating urban experience the women in these novels are generally defined by an unrestrained and high-speed lifestyle, promiscuous sexual behavior, obsession with the latest fashionable trends and an extremely erotic appearance.20 Leo Ou-fan Lee has remarked how these figures are mostly constructed with the sole purpose to convey the author’s ultimate fascination with the city and the urban spectacle. “‘Modern Girl’, like her male suitor, is but a narrative figure in a staged urban landscape. ... She is made to serve the larger purpose of representing the city.”21

The construction of the figure of the modern woman thus became the perfect symbol to represent both the head-spinning, transgressive experience offered by the city and an exotic type of modernity, often conflated with the idea of loose sexual behavior. In such terms, woman was turned into the perfect Icon to advertize the markers of modernity provided by new industrial commodities. Because women were, in a certain sense, a marketable and disposable merchandise, their association with luxury items was a natural consequence22 (see Figure 16).

Figure 22
Another episode from the cartoon “Ms. Honey” by Liang Baipo. This time Ms. Honey has finally found an ‘independent’ job as a waitress, but in the face of repeated harassment by her clients she eventually decides to sell kisses as an additional café service—a biting comment on the possibilities of self-reliance offered to women in the job market (see also Figure 15). (Reprinted in Wei Shaochang, Mileng Xiaojie, p.26)

18 Zhang, The city in modern Chinese literature and film, pp.185–231.
19 Ibid., p.215.
20 “Liu’s fiction ... bears a certain resemblance to visual materials. This is especially true of Liu’s portrayal of heroines, which draws directly from the female figures in the photos and on magazine covers as well on calendar posters, to say nothing of the movies.” Lee, Shanghai modern, p.194.
21 Lee, Shanghai modern, p.209.
There is a venerable tradition of using women as the subject matter for artistic representation. The genre of *meiren* 美人 or 'beautiful ladies' recurs constantly in Chinese painting, where women could be depicted alone or in groups, attending to feminine chores or just displayed as beautiful objects giving visual pleasure. Female figures were also the main subjects of erotic paintings, a genre which has an equally long and sophisticated tradition in China.

As Paul Ropp remarks in an essay on the condition of women in the early and mid-Qing period, “women were seen first as extensions and servants of men, and secondly as potentially attractive physical objects and producers of the race.”

*Meiren* paintings would most often represent women as subjects of romantic love, that is, women that a man could be in love with, aside from his wife. As extensively demonstrated by James Cahill in his series of unpublished lectures on the representation of women in late Chinese painting, the majority of images of women produced during the Qing dynasty were actually portraits of courtesans and concubines, whose representation was indexed with codified erotic symbols and provided a source of sexual excitement for the male viewer.

The analysis provided by Robert Maeda of a painting in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University, “Portrait of a Lady” (Figure 23), is illuminating in this context. In the lascivious posture of the woman who sits with one leg raised on the side of a bed, Maeda identifies the depiction of a morally unchecked attitude, in China often associated with prostitutes and women of the demi-monde.

In erotic art ... an artist would use certain motifs as well as figure stance to indicate the character of the subjects ... . The manner in which a figure was posed in Chinese figure painting could often be a subtle but important clue to determining that figure's social status.

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According to Maeda, the pose—"unwelcome to high-class Chinese women"—combined with the frank and bold look of the sitter, could be taken as a signifier in the representation of women of loose morals.

Classic Chinese love poetry provides some specific references for the representation of women in Chinese traditional culture. Anne Birrel has remarked that in poetry women are mostly described as being in a confined situation, waiting and longing for a reunion with their departed or estranged lover being the only excitement granted to their secluded life. Likewise, in late Chinese painting women are mostly represented in a sheltered environment, be it a room, a terrace or a walled garden. Such representations suggest a voyeuristic glimpse into a world normally hidden from view. By creating an ideal juxtaposition between the open space of the viewer and the inaccessible space of the sitter, these paintings evoke the idea of 'visual penetration' and erotic fantasies.

A later occurrence of the ankle-over-the-thigh position is found in an anonymous early eighteenth-century album, auctioned in New York in 1991 (Figure 24). In a luxuriously-decorated boudoir, a woman, seated on the edge of her canopy-bed with right leg spread across left knee and her robe partly open, pulls her companion toward her, explicitly linking her pose with the act of lovemaking.

Other similar examples include late-Qing decorative paintings where the subject of beautiful women is executed in an extremely realistic style, based on Western painting conventions that were adopted in professional circles after


26 The authorship of this painting, assigned by Maeda to Wu Zhuo, is dismissed by Cahill precisely on the basis of its descriptive modes. Cahill in fact argues that the 'real' Madame Hotung—a courtesan raised to the level of wife of a renowned literary man of the time—would never have consented to be represented in a pose explicitly referring to her courtesan past. Cahill, lecture 1, p.3.


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29 In reference to the representation of the woman in her luxurious boudoir against the background of a telescopically receding space Cahill states: "the elaborately detailed interiors ... offer experiences to the exploring eyes that are themselves sensual to the point of eroticism. Visual penetration to depth beyond depths is an obvious sensory analogue to sexual penetration." Cahill, lecture 1, p.27.
Their introduction to China by foreign missionaries in the early eighteenth century. The realistic style became quite common in ‘low’ art thanks to its highly descriptive, ‘hands-on’ character. Cahill has remarked how this style would actually conform with the purpose of these images, where women “offer themselves as accessible objects of sexual desire, and are presented for inspection and visual enjoyment along with their settings.”

The ‘ankle-over-the-knee’ position often recurs in this style, with the woman facing the viewer and resting one leg over the thigh, thus exposing her tiny lotus foot (Figure 25). The posture is explicitly marked as erotic when coupled by partial nudity, such as in two paintings where one of the women is coquettishly arranging a flower in her hair in an extremely seductive pose (Figures 26 and 27). The specifically erotic connotations of this position are revealed by a 1948 cartoon by Zhang Guangyu representing the sexiest female character in the history of Chinese literature, Pan Jinlian 潘金莲, the protagonist of the famous erotic novel Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅 (Figure 28).

Crucial to these compositions is the resulting close-up exposure of the bound foot, one of the most intensely erotic signifiers of Chinese sexual practice. In terms of self-presentation these images could be related to the photographic portraits of famous Shanghai courtesans circulating during the early part of the century, such as those published in the 1917 collection A record of Images of Shanghai Flowers (Haishang huaying lu 海上花影录) by Qi Xia and Dan Ru (Figure 29). Another visual source is provided by ‘New Year prints’ (nianhua 年画), the popular genre that is most closely associated with calendar posters. New Year prints, colourful woodcuts pasted on doors and walls for auspicious and decorative purposes at the beginning of the new year, often include beautiful ladies as one of their traditional subjects (Figure 30). In a late nineteenth-century Taohuawu 桃花坞 print (Figure 31) traditional references pack the composition where the richness of detail symbolizes auspicious prosperity. In this image, the lady is lying on her bed, her tiny lotus feet in sight and surrounded by several erotic signifiers. The elaborate lattice door, the parrot, the books on the table, the banana tree and the general profusion of luxury objects indicate the persistence of traditional

Figure 25

“Beauty”—anonymous, late-Qing, gouache on paper, 52 cm x 39 cm (China Art Gallery, Beijing)

30 Cahill, lecture 3, p.48.
31 For the fetishistic overtones of the representation of a woman’s foot, see Birrell, New songs, p.13.
See Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), p. 83. Anne Birrell, in her anthology on early Chinese love poetry, remarks how women in love were generally portrayed in luxurious settings. "The court poets reveal a fascination for the opulent minutiae of feminine fashion. The typical portrait shows woman adorned with fine jewels, costly silk clothes, and elaborate make-up. She indicates her beauty and worth in a very material way through the sheer opulence of her personal decor.... What this amounts to is an aesthetic convention of courtly love poetry: woman is adored when adorned." *New Songs*, p. 10.

The genre of beautiful ladies in the *mianhua* iconographic tradition is often called *shina*仕女. Lust defines it as follows: " Beauties. The Dream of Fair Women in China, a category of old art, to appear in the theatre, fiction etc. and as Immortals. There were the slender, ethereal, etc. already in the art of the 4th century BC, and the observed, modeled on life.... Qing prints have ideal and observed, and the later Shanghai fashion scene. There are two sorts: (1) The mistresses of gentry households; (2) Serving girls (on contract, married off when the time came). The prominence of the Beauty related to her place in society. Young women could move into marriage markets, or be recruited for the court for a spectacular career, where a poet could observe fretting young concubines, cooped up in palaces in the spring...." John Lust, *Chinese Popular Prints* (Leiden, New York and Köln: E. J. Brill, 1996), pp. 282–3.

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Photographic portraits of Shanghai courtesans (from Qi Xia and Dan Ru, eds, A record of images of Shanghai flowers (Haishang huayiing hu, 1917)

"Two Beauties"—New Year print, Yangliuqing late-Qing period, 97 cm x 52 cm. Notice the exaggerated size of the two ladies' heads, characteristic of much of the later yuefenpai production

artistic motifs employed both in poetry and painting. In other late Qing–early Republican Mianzhu 绵株 prints, we see popular versions of the Modern Girl: a women adjusting a vase of flowers in a coquettish pose with a bent leg, or even riding a bicycle (Figures 32 and 33).

Finally, the immediate predecessors of the calendar posters vis-à-vis the representation of 'modern' women are probably to be found in the litho-
graphic illustrations of designers such as Wu Youru 吴友如 (d.1893) and Dan Duyu 但杜宇 (1896–1972). Wu Youru was the journalistic illustrator of *Dianshizhai huabao 点石斋画报* and the author of the collections of images of beauties *Haishang baiyan tu 海上百滟图* (Images of a Hundred Shanghai Beauties) and *Gujin baimei tu 古今百美图* (Images of a Hundred Old and Modern Beauties) where women are depicted engaged in modern activities such as looking through binoculars, using a sewing machine, or in the act of being photographed (Figure 34).34 Similarly, Dan Duyu in the early Republican period produced a collection of images representing women engaged in all sort of ‘exotic’ new activities and collected in publications such as *Baiwei Tu 百美图* (Images of a Hundred Beauties) and *Meiren shijie 美人世界* (The World of Beautiful Women).

While these earlier representations often suggest an idea of erotic transgression, the raised/crossed-legs position could be read as a sexual marker which, paired with the realistic style of the images, would stimulate the visual consumption of these beautiful objects of desire.

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34 These have recently been republished by Hunan Meishu Chubanshe. See *Haishang baiyan tu* [images of a hundred Shanghai beauties] (Changsha: Hunan RenminMeishu Chubanshe, 1998); *Gujin baiwei tu* [images of a hundred old and modern beauties] (Changsha: Hunan Meishu Chubanshe, 1998).
Figure 32 (above)

"Student Girl"—Mianzhu woodblock print, early twentieth century, 54 cm x 40 cm (from Gao Wen, Hou Shiwu, and Ning Zhiqi, eds., Mianzhu nianhua [Mianzhu New Year prints] [Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1990], pl.92)

Figure 33 (below)

"Woman Riding a Bike"—woodblock print, late-Qing–early-Republican period, 54 cm x 40 cm (Mianzhu nianhua, pl.87)
Figure 34
Lithographic print by Wu Youru of two ladies being photographed (from the collection Haishang baiyan tu [Images of a hundred Shanghai beauties] [reprint edition, Changsha: Hunan Renmin Meishi Chubanshe, 1998], p.33)

Figure 35

Yuefenpai by Zheng Mantuo, early 1920s, gouache on paper (China Art Gallery, Beijing)

Women as Commodities in Calendar-Poster Representation

Before analyzing some examples of Yuefenpai, it is important to expend a few words to describe the particular technical character of this artistic method, which certainly justifies its characterisation as a medium. Yuefenpai demonstrate a hybrid technique that employed elements derived from both Chinese and Western artistic practices, creating an expressive form that is among the most original contributions of twentieth-century Chinese art. A proof of its success is the later adoption of the genre by the Communist regime who appropriated it for propaganda purposes and turned it into a highly efficient and accomplished mode of visual representation.\(^{35}\) The technique, with its heightened realism and tactile depiction of flesh, was certainly a crucial factor in the enormous popularity enjoyed by this genre. It was introduced in the first decade of this century by Zheng Mantuo 郑曼陀, a seminal figure who is considered the originator of the \textit{cabi dancai} 描笔淡彩, or \textit{cabi shuicai} 描笔水彩, technique (“rubbing and applying pale washes of color”) combining Chinese \textit{gongbi} 工笔 and photographic retouching techniques. Originally employed in the genre of ancestor-photographs, the technique was then successfully developed for mass advertising by Zheng through the addition of watercolor shades similar to the color washes applied in traditional Chinese \textit{gongbi} painting to a charcoal sketch. The face—the central and starting point of each composition—would be first rendered with a three-dimensional effect through a process of rubbing, shading and erasing charcoal powder with the use of a cotton wad or a paper tortillon. This would create a soft, illusionistic effect without the use of line-drawing. A pale wash of watercolor would then be added to create the look of the rouged skin, mainly on the cheeks and the forehead.\(^{36}\)

An archetype of the beautiful lady in the crossed-legs position is seen in an early image by Zheng\(^{37}\) (Figure 35). The close resemblance of the hairstyle and

\(^{35}\) For this explanation I am indebted to Huang Suning, a Chinese woman artist specializing in folk art and living in New York. Later on Yuefenpai would often be executed in a collective manner, with artists specializing only in the rendering of the face. See Zhang Yanfeng, \textit{Luo yuefenpai guanggao hua}, vol.2, p.70, and Wu Hao et al., \textit{Duhui modeng yuefenpai}, pp.11–12. See also Nian Xin, ed., \textit{Shanghai yuefenpai New Year pictures} (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1983).

\(^{37}\) Zheng Mantuo (1888–1961) was born in Anhui, studied portraiture in Hangzhou and was eventually employed at the Erwoxian. /OVER
clothing in this painting to that of the courtesans whose portraits are included in the 1917 collection by Qi Xia and Dan Ru (Figure 36) suggests it was made in the early 1920s. The figure represents an interesting transition between the genre of the early professional paintings of women executed in realistic style (see Figure 24) and the later *yuefenpai* genre (Figure 37). Zheng Mantuo’s image also functions to support the idea of a possible association between the *yuefenpai* girl and the figure of the prostitute or woman of the demi-monde. Apart from the formal resemblance of this work to the photographic portraits used by courtesans to increase their visibility in the new urban context, the bunch of flowers strategically but unrealistically placed on the bent leg suggests an additional layer of meaning. ‘Flower’ in Chinese is a term often used as an euphemism for prostitute (*hua guniang 花姑娘*). In addition, flowers—fresh or in the form of jewelry—were often used as standard items of decoration by courtesans in brothels, as Gail Hershatter remarks in her detailed study.
Photographic Studio in the same city. There he learned the photographic retouching process that would form the basis of his ‘revolutionary’ invention, the cobi dancai technique which turned into the very essence of the yuefenpai genre and which made it extremely popular. In 1914 he moved to Shanghai. He was then discovered by Huang Chujiu 黃楚九, a pharmaceutical magnate who understood the potentials of this style on prostitution in twentieth-century Shanghai. Generally speaking, flowers are a recurring decorative item for the yufenpai girl, figuring prominently both on her clothes and/or around her figure (Figures 38 and 55). While it would be far-fetched to suggest that all the figures could be read as representations of prostitutes, it is necessary to remark how many of the attributes and visual traits employed in this genre could, in fact, equally be related to the world of sexual pleasures and the market of women.

An advertisement for a banking institution stylistically datable to the late 1920s provides another early example of yufenpai signed by Zheng Mantuo (Figure 39). The woman, pictured alone in a modern interior, sits nonchalantly on a brightly-covered armchair, her body arched and gently turned, looking out at the viewer. She has a stylish, wavy hairstyle and her foot is crossed behind her leg. Her fashionable, short dress allows a peep at her feet, sporting a pair of up-to-date, high-heeled leather shoes. Certain iconographical references in the picture could be associated with the scopophilic tradition of meiren painting. For example, the large hibiscus plant—which provides a foil for her body by mimicking her arched position—is commonly associated with sexual imagery because of the color and the carnal sensuousness of the flowers. The interior of the room is decorated with a flowered art-deco armchair and a Western-style painting on the wall; the window of panelled glass affords a view of a park: the whole place is imbued with a sense of modern luxury. This type of representation calls to mind a recurring trope of Chinese love poetry—the lonely woman imprisoned in a luxurious boudoir awaiting for the return of her lover. Anne Birrell describes this poetic motif thus:

A woman in love is typically shown to be in her boudoir, not only isolated from her lover but also from all human contact … . She spends her idle hours in luxury reminiscing about the past, dwelling on memories stimulated

Figure 38
Hang Zhiying Studio, yufenpai advertisement for Shandong Tobacco, 1930s. Notice the exaggerated foot. The ‘unfeminine’ position strikingly reminds one of the ‘woman exposing her foot over the knee’ type of composition recurrent in the late-Qing period (see also Figure 24)
by certain boudoir objects ... she is not free to leave, nor free to love another man, nor free to rid her mind of obsessive love .... The boudoir symbolises imprisonment.\(^{41}\) (Figure 40)

Along these lines Zheng Mantuo's image could be considered as a contemporary 1920s version of the 'modern woman in the luxurious boudoir'. The fashionable clothing, the hairstyle and the bourgeois interior that construct the modernity of the representation are framed by the close

\(^{39}\) In *Shanghai modern*, Leo Ou-Fan Lee posits a similar relationship between the figure of the new and modern woman with that of the traditional courtesan, via the genre of courtesan literature. "Courtesan literature, in fact, did not fade from modern Chinese publishing; only its public image was displaced by photographs and paintings of modern, and more respectable women. Thus the display of the female body either as a work of art (Western) or as an embodiment of physical health marked the beginning of a new discourse which was made problematic precisely because it was derived from the courtesan journals, in which female bodies indeed carried a market value." Lee, *Shanghai modern*, p.73.

\(^{40}\) In Wu Hao et al., *Duhui modern yuefenpai*, the poster is dated 1931 (p.77). On stylistic grounds it is comparable with other images by the same author, such as the advertisement of a pharmaceutical company bearing a 1924–25 calendar (p.57) and thus I am inclined to attribute this painting to an earlier period, such as the late 1920s.

\(^{41}\) Birrel, *New songs*, p.19. She also remarks how the different representation of men and women in poetry conventions are generally marked by the fact that while the woman remains constantly behind, often by a window—the only outward opening from where to see and be seen—the man, on the contrary, "is free to walk down the highways and byways of life" (p.20).
Figure 40
Decorative design published in Liang you 110 (Oct. 1935), p.55. A woman is portrayed in solitude, waiting by the window for somebody to come. Notice the effect of visual penetration created by the overlaid juxtaposition of the tree, the moon-shaped gate and the lattice window.

Figure 41 (below)
Yuefenpai for Nanyang Tobacco by Zheng Mantuo portraying one of his trademark 'archaic' type of 'traditionally-shaped' women sitting on a low wall with legs only partly crossed—stylistically datable to the late 1920s.


Zheng Mantuo's women are generally portrayed as long and lanky figures where a certain disjunction exists between the rounder traits of the face and the more ethereal, seemingly asexual body. A relevant feature in these earlier images (Figure 41) is their transitional character in the representation of the body from the traditional 'fleshless' kind—what John Hay has defined as "the absent body, a body lacking an objectified and solid quality"—to the later Westernized and plumper features (see Figure 8).

A better-fleshed-out example of the 'crossed-legs motif' is provided by an early-1930s advertisement for the Nanyang Tobacco.
An early 1930s yuefenpai advertisement for Nanyang Tobacco by Xie Zhiguan. Notice the photographic effect of fading on the lower side of the image.

Figure 42

Advertisement for Skinner’s Crepes, Harpers Bazaar, October 1930

Figure 43

Brothers Tobacco Company signed by Xie Zhiguang 谢之光, an established author of yuefenpai advertisements (Figure 42). The iconic figure poses in what can be recognized as a more ‘Westernized’ stance: dressed in a bright red qipao 旗袍, the woman sits comfortably in profile crossing her legs and leaning against the back of the armchair with a raised arm and a seductive, self-conscious look. The absence of decorative props and the photographic effect of fading on the borders of the image reveal a close relation to Western advertising styles. The only concessions made to Chinese representational modes are the dress and the red, fleshy flower that she holds and with which she is visually identified. The relaxed elegance and the overall simplicity of the composition focused on the curvy arrangement of the body are a recurring trait in contemporary Western advertisement (Figure 43). In a 1930 example from Harper’s Bazaar the woman sits in a similar three-quarter pose wearing a luxuriously-tailored silk robe and looking sideward intently.

44 In Wu Hao et al., Duhui modeng yuefenpai, the poster is attributed to the late 1920s (p.54). Again, based on stylistic assumptions in the execution of the woman’s body and the style of her dress, I would suggest a later period, such as the early 1930s.
46 Xie Zhiguang (1900–76) was born in Zhejiang and subsequently moved to Shanghai. He studied painting with Zhou Muqiao 周慕桥 and...
Figure 44

*Nude photograph by Chen Bingde, published in* Liang you Annual, 1933–34 (Dec. 1934). Note the self-conscious expression of the woman, looking up with pride while squeezing her own breasts.

He also took courses at Shanghai's most prominent art school, the Shanghai Art Institute (Shanghai Meizhuan 上海美专). After graduating, he was hired by the Advertisement Department of the Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company, of which he eventually became director. According to Zhang Yanfeng, his studies in scenography influenced the careful staging of his *yuejenpai* scenes and the dramatic sense with which he liked to imbue his figures. He began painting *yuejenpai* in 1922 and continued until the late 1930s. Like Zheng Mantuo he concentrated on several themes, including historical and mythological scenes. See Zhang Yanfeng, *Lao yuejenpai guanggao hua*, pp.93–4, and Pu Ji, "Jiefang qian de 'yue­j­enpai' nianhua shiliao," pp.52–3.

Compared with the thin and tall figures of Zheng Mantuo, the body traits of Xie Zhiguan's beauties show a more realistic approach that asserts a clear morphological shift toward a distinctively Caucasian type of body: the cheeks are rounder and softer and the exposed flesh acquires a tactile feeling. Only the bosom, conventionally flattened, recalls the dependence on Chinese traditional figures. With the modes of consumption progressively defined by Western standards, even the body of woman was opened to a process of adaptation to new aesthetic principles. Breasts, buttocks and thighs, which in previous representations would be flattened seamlessly, began to be shaped in accordance with a more Western—and apparently more sensual and healthier—idea of feminine beauty (Figures 44, 45 and 46).

A more revealing and seductive pose is featured by the girl in an advertisement datable to the early 1930s for Hatamen 哈大門 cigarettes of the latest tight-fitting fashion in Western dress, which, in contrast to its Chinese counterpart, was so designed that the breasts and hips of the female body were invitingly outlined. Virgil Kit-yiu Ho, "The limits of hatred: popular attitudes towards the West in Republican Canton," *East Asian History* 2 (December 1991): 92. About the 'healthy' new body of the Modern Girl, see Lee, *Shanghai modern*, pp.73-4.
produced by the British-American Tobacco Company (Ying-Mei Yancao Gongsi 英美烟草公司) (Figure 47). The original work is by Hu Baixiang 胡伯翔, an artist active in many media who had studied with the traditional painter Wu Changshuo 吴昌硕. The representation is more openly flirtatious than those analyzed so far—as often appears to be the case for cigarette advertisements—and displays certain signs that endow the figure with a sexually easy-going attitude: the relaxed self-consciousness and the ‘open’ presentation of the self underlined by the body—the fleshy, soft texture of the pink peony pinned just above the breast and close to the folding sleeve, traditionally considered one of the erotic zones of access to more intimate body parts, the legs wrapped in sheer silk stockings. The most revealing detail is the enticing posture of the woman, seductively leaning against the covered armchair and exposing both her armpit and her legs up to the knees.

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Figure 46

From the cover of Liang you 66 (June 1932), a retouched photographic portrait of a healthy and sportive swimmer

Figure 47

Yuefenpai advertisement for Hatamen cigarettes by Hu Baixiang, 1930s

48 Hu Baixiang (1896–1989) was born in Nanjing and specialized in yuefenpai with landscape subject matter. He had a traditional training under the famous Shanghai School painter Wu Changshuo. He was also versed in Western techniques such as graphics, watercolors and photography. Zhang Yanfeng, Lao yuefenpai guanggao hua, p.93.

49 See Birrell, New songs, p.13.
A comparison with similar images (Figures 8, 26, 28 and 48) confirms the recurrence of this specific bodily posture (what we could call the ‘crossed-legs exposed-armpit position’) as an iconographical feature intended to generate erotic stimulation.

To attempt to reconstruct the erotic impact that exposed legs might have had on the Chinese viewer at the time, it is useful to compare these images with Western advertisements of roughly the same period. A survey of two major American fashion magazines50 has revealed a recurrent focus on women’s legs in numerous advertisements (Figures 49 and 50). While the immediate justification for this new type of subject matter is to be connected with the recent raising of skirt hemlines to the knees and the subsequent marketing of rayon stockings,51 the obsessive recurrence is nonetheless disquieting. Its fetishistic implications become quite evident in images such as Figure 51 where arousing undertones in the composition are suggested by the close juxtaposition of the legs of the standing male with those of the two seated women. Whether or not the depiction of ‘Chinese’ legs is directly influenced by this type of representation, by exposing the legs to the knee and displaying them in such a yielding position, the Hatamen cigarette advertisement conflates a set of meanings where the modernity of the posture is linked with fetishistic implications supported by the fresh memory of erotically stimulating bound feet.

Two photo-collages published in 1934 and 1935 in the pictorial Friendly Companion (Liang you良友) demonstrate the significance attached to the image of a woman’s crossed legs. In a photo-reportage in the May 1934 issue entitled “Such is Shanghai: Shanghai’s High, Wide and Big” (in English, “Outline of Shanghai”), legs are displayed as one of the city’s attractions, together with double-decker buses, movie theaters, a memorial tower, neon cigarette advertisements, traffic lights and others modern wonders (Figure 52). They are fetishistically removed from the woman’s body and depicted with an even more revealing caption, “Men look at women’s high heels not just as an expression of beauty, but as a symbol of authority” (translated in English as “symbol of household authority”). The image thus comes to represent both the temptations and the threats offered by the mesmerizing experience of the city, but it is still accepted as an idiosyncratic, characteristic ‘thing’ of Shanghai, one of the metropolis’s inherent attractions. In another image in the February 1935 issue of the same periodical, a seductive urban lady appears in a similar collage this time describing the “Excitements of the metropolis” (the Chinese title of the photo-spread is “Intoxicated Shanghai”). The caption to this photo

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Figure 50
Advertisement for Phoenix Hosiery, Vogue Magazine, November 1927

Figure 49
Western advertisement for Van Raalte silk stockings, late-1920s

Figure 51
Western advertisement for Van Raalte silk stockings, Vogue Magazine, November 1928
Another interesting clue to the possible reading of such images regarding their bodily posture is provided by theories of nonverbal communication. Nancy Henley explains how loose body positions in a woman are generally perceived as "a lack of accepted control over her sexuality." She also describes what are generally understood as invitational gestures specific to women in "quasi-courting" situations: "crossing the legs, exposing the thigh, placing a hand on a hip, exhibiting the wrist or palm, protruding the breast, and stroking the thigh or wrist." This set of "feminine" postures function as "heavier gender identification signals by women in the presence of men." Nancy M. Henley, *Body politics. Power, sex, and nonverbal communication* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp.91, 140.

indexes the increasingly seductive fashion of the time with the words "And the qipao slit grows higher ..." (in English, "The latest fashion for girls"). Here the image is surrounded by the photos of other 'excitements'—American movies like "King Kong," the racecourse, variety shows, skyscrapers and jazz bands. Whatever the context, woman and her legs have become an intrinsic symbol of the city's modern appeal (Figure 53).
On the arousing power of feet and legs a revealing passage is found by a 1928 short story by Ding Ling, “A Woman and a Man.” The story describes the encounter between Wendy, a modern and sexually-liberated married woman, and her prospective lover:

Ouwei Ou kicked lightly at the gravel on the pathway with the tips of his shoes. His feet were numb and it was still cold. Once more he caught sight of her two little feet encased in leather shoes. Her two well-rounded calves were hugged by sheer, flesh-tinted silk stockings which reached up to her knees. Once again he saw how charming they were, and felt like rubbing them.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

Wendy shook her head. When she noticed where his gaze was directed, her smile broadened.52

We have already observed how in Chinese traditional culture outstretched postures and a seeming lack of control over one’s body could be associated with loose moral habits.53 It is therefore not unrealistic to assume that the use of Western-inspired casual positions associated with the traditional Chinese representation of loose women could overlap in images such as the one just introduced to create a distinctive sense of ‘modern’ sexual availability. The woman exhibits her body and legs for the consuming gaze of the beholder who will enjoy the Hatamen cigarette with the pleasurable associations suggested by the images of this seemingly ‘available’ beauty.

Another ‘type’ of figure which became a recurrent model for many 1930s female representations was that of the prostitute, sing-song girl or high-class call-girl. She, more than any other, could in fact ‘wear’ the clothes of modernity, providing a direct visual reference for the images disseminated by yuefenpai

Figure 53
“Intoxicated Shanghai”—a two-page photo-essay by Chen Jiazhen, Liang you 85 (Feb. 1934): 14–15
Figure 54
"The Feet of the Fair Sex"—an "art photograph" (as stated in the accompanying caption) by Fu Bingchang. Once again the picture focuses on a woman's legs and feet for no other reason than an "appreciation of beauty" (Liang you 73 Jan. 1933)

54 On the subject of guides to prostitution see Hershatter, Dangerous pleasures, part 1: "Classifying and counting," pp.34–68.

55 "Upper-class prostitutes (or prostitute-entertainers) in cities were expected not just to mirror but to be on the cutting edge of ... change. Female entertainers were expected to titillate with their modernity. Their flaunting of daring western dress, hairstyles, makeup, cigarettes, and liquors was intended to attract male customers." Gronewald, Beautiful merchandise, p. 58.


57 The Zhiying Studio was founded around 1923 by Hang Zhiying, a native of Zhejiang (1901–47) who in his early years had been employed in the advertising department of the Commercial Press in Shanghai. Hang made his fortune thanks to his superb technique and the organizational skill with which he managed the Studio.

58 Contrary to common practice, he started portraying women only from the neck or shoulder up, a form previously avoided because it was associated with bad luck. Profiting from the increasing changes in visual habits brought about by industrialization and new popular media such as movies and photography, Hang started depicting "women with big heads" in a startlingly illusionistic and Westernized fashion that became his studio's trademark. Another factor that contributed strongly to his success was the industrial organization of his
HOw 'MODERN' THE MODERN WOMAN?

movies, and mandarin-butterfly stories. The distinctive taste for ‘modern’ and Westernized items of consumption that characterized 1920s and 1930s urban culture equally affected the demand for sexual services and the way femininity was constructed. Prostitution in fact had become “a sign of China’s participation in universal human history” making Shanghai just like Paris, and was therefore an important symbol of its acquired modernity. Finally, prostitution was the most direct way in which women could acquire monetary value as items of consumption. 55

The high-class prostitute became a recurrent subject of both realist and experimental literature. In the 1935 play by dramatist Cao Yu 曹禺, “Sunrise” (Ríchū 日出), the main female character, Chen Bailu 陈百露, is an ex-country girl who becomes a shrewd and cynical courtesan kept by several wealthy men in a luxury hotel.

The short story “A Vision” by Lao She centers around the figure of an educated woman who, after the bankruptcy of her family, has no choice but to turn to prostitution to make a living. After many years of separation the unconfessed lover of her youth returns to discover the truth about her new profession:

My tentative questions as to how she was managing were brushed aside as, lighting a cigarette, she exhaled smoke like an adept, leaning back with crossed legs to watch the smoke wreaths, the picture of empty-headed brashness. 56

The somewhat depraved but enticing morality associated with the figure of the high-class courtesan and/or sexually unrestrained girl provides the probable context for a mid-1930s advertisement for Nanyang Cigarettes by the professional Zhiying Studio (Figure 56). 57 The woman sits alluringly in the imagined setting of a Chinese garden. She wears a vampish qipao outlining the curves of her body, which is clothed with a flowered fabric and surrounded by flowers. Her legs inevitably crossed, there are no feet in sight. She sits straight and composed, but the detail of her lacy underwear, the highly self-conscious glance, the rouged cheeks and the flaunted cigarette closely recall contemporary representations of taxi-girls (Figure 57).

Figure 56
Yuefenpai advertisement for Nanyang Cigarettes by the Zhiying Studio, mid-1930s

Figure 57
Cartoon by Hu Kao 胡考 from the series “Shanghai Girls,” originally published as a volume of images in 1936. This one is called “Taxi Girl,” one of the many categories of position open to prostitutes. The image was supplemented by a brief text by the author bemoaning the sad fate of these girls and their lack of choice in ways to make a living (Hu Kao, A booklet on contemporary characters [jinan: Shandong Huabao Chubanshe], 1998, p.13)
workshop where up to eight artists and several assistants would churn out more than eighty paintings a year. Among them one of the best-known teams was that of Li Mubai, who painted the figures, and Jin Xuechen 林雪生 (1904–), who specialized in landscape and interior settings. In a later period Hang Zhiying would only supervise the finished product and choose the advertising inscriptions and type styles. The Zhiying studio was so successful that they were eventually entrusted with half of the yuefenpai 产业 production for the British-American Tobacco Company. They can be considered the last stage of development of the yuefenpai 种 genre before its political ‘reinterpretation’ under the Communist regime. As proof of the long-lasting influence of this production Hang Zhiying’s son, Hang Wushi 杭鸣时, continued in his father’s career designing auspicious ‘New Year’ pictures in the ‘socialist mode’ and teaching the special technique of yuefenpai— which after 1949 was subsumed under the general term of nianhua— at the Lu Xun Academy in Shenyang. (I owe this information to the artist Huang Suning who actually took a course with him in Beijing in the early ’80s). See Zhang Yanfeng, Lao yufenpai guangao hua, pp.89–92, and Cochran, “Marketing medicine,” pp.23–6.

58 See below (p.141), “Elegy to the Cigarette.”

59 This practice, generally employed by smaller companies that could not afford to establish their own designing and printing departments, is confirmed by the existence of posters employing the same image to advertise products of different brands (see for example Wu Hao, Dubuimodengyufenpai, p.75, pl.23, and Zhang Yanfeng, Lao yufenpai guangao hua, p.69) and by many ‘blank’ posters whose borders and frames are designed to allow space for the company’s name and trademark. See Zhang Yanfeng, ibid., pp.117–24.

60 A study on the standard living conditions of working classes in Shanghai in 1930 puts cigarettes as a main item among miscellaneous expenses, with an average of 185 packets consumed per family per year. Expenditure on cigarettes and wine alone was greater than on sanitation, furniture or water. Yang Hsi-Meng, A study of the standard of living of working families in Shanghai (Peiping: Institute of Social Research, 1931), p.71.

The exaggerated proportions of head and hands executed in a highly realistic mode and the extraordinarily smooth texture of the skin are justified both by the painting process—the face being the central element of yuefenpai composition—and by the need to provide a quasi-physical experience of the flesh. The staging of the scene is intended as a traditional reconstruction, but the evident disjunction between foreground and background is more suggestive of a photographic studio with a trompe-d’oeil backdrop than of a genuine garden scene. The ‘traditional’ style looks in fact very much staged, as if a contemporary modern lady had been hurriedly forced into a more appropriately traditional Chinese setting, underlined by the moon-gate and the visually penetrating depth of the garden in the background.

A suggested hypothesis for this disjunction between body and setting is the marketing policy that formed the basis of the success of Nanyang Brothers Tobacco. In the commercial war waged against the British-American Tobacco Company, then the leading tobacco corporation, Nanyang eventually focused on the nationalistic feelings that American anti-Chinese immigration policies had stirred up all over China. Nanyang’s advertising policies thus begun to promote the company’s tobacco with patriotic intent by urging Chinese citizens to smoke only Chinese cigarettes and boycott foreign ones. In this context the modern icon of the beautiful lady has been re-positioned in a setting which looks traditional but not to the point of transforming her into an old-time beauty. Her conventional character is artificially staged, providing a fitting metaphor for the modern, pleasurable, and yet ‘Chinese’ Nanyang cigarette.

Another interesting detail is that the lady is ‘consuming’ the commodity that she advertises, a practice that was generally adopted only at a later stage in yuefenpai development. Rarely, in fact, is the woman shown interacting with the product she advertises, unless the ad is specifically targeted to a female audience, as in the case of cosmetics, medicines and fabrics. The reason normally given for the absence of the advertised product within the framework of the image is related to the way in which yuefenpai were created, the images most often being executed in bulk and only later selected by companies for their advertisements. Another possible semiological explanation would combine the context of viewing meiren painting, the still insignificant social relevance of women, and the easy association created with modern goods in defining a glamorous modern identity. Equated to the status of a ‘beautiful object’ for purchase, the yuefenpai girl is as passive as the object she is supposed to advertise. Whether or not she can or wants to consume the commodity is irrelevant to the product’s marketing purpose.

The appeal and success of this strategy is confirmed by the marketing boom enjoyed by tobacco companies in the first part of the twentieth century which made the market for cigarettes in China almost as large as that in the United States. As stated by Sherman Cochran, in the words of a British-American Tobacco representative who later returned from China to become a successful copywriter with the American advertising agency in New
York, the British American Tobacco calendar became its “big advertising smash every year” and was distributed “in every nook and corner of the Nation.”

In a Chinese context the images of beautiful and accessible women depicted in advertising were effective first because they were ‘culturally distinct’ from the Chinese tradition of women’s representation, and secondly because they fulfilled society’s scopophillic expectations. The act of smoking a cigarette would be associated with that of ‘visually consuming’ the beautiful woman and thus increase its pleasurable sensation. The ‘gendering’ of the cigarette, associated with the figure of woman because of a specific advertising strategy, is suggested by the lyrics of the ballad, “Elegy to the Cigarette,” composed in 1905 for Nanyang Brothers Tobacco during their aggressive campaign against their British-American rival:

Ah cigarette,
You have the word American in your trademark for everyone to see
So I must give you up along with my bicycle
Our love affair
Today must end
Ai,
cigarette please don’t harbor resentment
Perhaps a time might come when we meet again,
But it must be after Americans abrogate the treaty.
Then as before I shall be able to fondle you.

Conclusion

The yuefenpai form was created to introduce modern commodities to China’s urban market during a time of intense economic, social and cultural change stimulated by the cultural penetration of Western mass marketing practices. Created to advertise foreign and new products to a Chinese audience, yuefenpai posters had to combine different sets of cultural conventions in order to suggest at the same time modernity, exotic appeal and familiarity. To achieve such a goal, an iconographical source was provided by the genre of ‘beautiful ladies’—paintings or popular prints where the images of beautifully adorned and erotically enticing women were exhibited with a set of conventions suggesting to the viewer an intimate and seductive atmosphere. In the process, the set of meanings normally attached to that traditional genre trickled down to the modern representation, creating a framework not dissimilar to the traditional way viewing women as objects of visual pleasure.

We have noticed how the loose arrangement of a woman’s body in earlier representations and more specifically the act of spreading out and raising the leg could often suggest a degree of sexual availability. Several markers

62 “The success of these two businesses at adapting to Chinese conditions and Sinifying their operations is perhaps the single most persuasive explanation for the growth of the cigarette market in early twentieth century China; and perhaps the best evidence of their adaptability and Sinification may be found in their advertising . . . This advertising seems to have been the key to British-American’s and Nanyang’s commercial success, and, pressed on consumers in intensive campaigns, it attracted enough smokers to make the market for cigarettes in China during the early twentieth century almost as large as the one in the United States.” Cochran, *Big business in China*, p.219.
63 Ibid., p.47. For the possible sexual references attached to the cigarette see also Ye Lingfeng, *Weiwan de chanhui lu* [Unfinished confession], originally published in 1934. Zhang Yingjin translates the cigarette excerpt in *The city in modern Chinese literature and film*, p.219.
associated with the traditional genre of erotic painting were actually encoded in the modern images: the boudoir and its sexually-loaded connotations of confinement; flowers and their specific erotic associations; deep and elaborate interiors that, inviting visual penetration as they did, had been traditionally associated with explicit eroticism. By translating these images into ‘modern’ terms, yuefenpai capitalized on a process of conflation between ‘new form and old content’. Establishing a kind of visual continuity with the traditional representation of beautiful ladies, the usual flapper-like position of the ‘Modern Woman’ would take on different connotations than was the case in a Western context.

Figure 58

"Life Sketch (Marvellous Photography)," Liang you 70 (Oct. 1932), p. 15. The image is provided with the following English caption: "Drinking, lusting after women, smoking and gambling make men so happy as to forget the real aim of life!" Notice how the women, shrunk to a diminutive size, are equated with objects that signify extravagance and decadence, such as gambling (poker cards) and drinking (wine glasses and liquor)
On this ‘traditional’ backdrop, new economic demands would impose images of a newly-acquired ‘modernity’, often equated to the conspicuous signs of Western mass cultural practices. The ‘beautiful ladies’ of yuefenpai provided the ideal medium for increasing the visibility of products and leading the viewer along a familiar path to the consumption of new commodities. To perform such a task, the originally ethereal bodies of the beautiful ladies of Chinese tradition went through a process of mutation informed by Western standards of beauty, as did their clothes and the interiors in which they were displayed. The ‘Modern Woman’, either as wife, concubine or high-class courtesan, became a necessary badge of contemporary urbanity and sophistication for the successful entrepreneur or enlightened intellectual alike. Glamorous images of the New Woman were marketed as yet another sign of ‘material’ modernity, which one could acquire just like cigarettes, electric torches and liquor.

Given the traditional practice of consuming the images of meiren and the artificial constructions that formed the figure of the ‘new woman’ in contemporary popular culture, it is not difficult to imagine how yuefenpai representations would serve a quite contradictory role vis-a-vis the cause of female emancipation and self-sufficiency. As shown in many cartoons, woman’s visibility and active role in social activities was often reduced to a simple vignette and the ‘Modern Woman’ is/was represented as a silly, greedy or even threatening character whose impact on contemporary society was to be dismissed with ridicule (Figure 58). Through what often appears to be a process of demonization, woman was inevitably re-assigned to a traditional position at the core of the family, her new disturbing role thus sanctioned by the suppressive Confucian system. At the same time her visibility was encouraged and ostensibly disseminated in order to stimulate consumption and support new marketing strategies. Her figure had to be promoted to boost society’s public image of progress and sophistication and endorse its newly-acquired status of modernity. As remarked by Zhang Yingjin, “the new woman is imagined not as a new subject acting on her own will but as a new object of knowledge.”

And yet—just because of her hybrid character—the yuefenpai girl faithfully expresses the sense of exhilaration created by the experience of modernity in places like Shanghai during the early nineteenth century. Her glamorous veneer, her sophisticated and iconic appeal, the luxurious settings in which she is displayed, and the exotic products she advertises offer an accurate synthesis of the most significant qualities of 1930s Shanghai visual culture.

On the other hand, the subtle mixture of transgression and coyness, trendiness and orthodoxy, materialistic reference and fanciful illusion displayed in these representations create an appropriate metaphor for the endless and fantastic possibilities lately made available in the metropolis.
which were buoyed by an awareness of their ephemeral quality and the thrill of a totally uncertain outcome (Figure 59).

With her astonishingly smooth skin, wearing elegant qipaos and see-through robes, adorned with pearl necklaces and pendant earrings, the yufenpai girl is both present and removed, touchable and unreachable, the stuff of reality and dreams. Her modernity is limited by a reassuring sense of familiarity, and she is alluring in so far as she complies with a traditional canon of beauty, offering just the right combination of confidence and unpredictability. This is probably the most significant element of her ‘modernity’—a knot of tangled messages that erase and reinforce one another, capturing all the ambivalence that is a true symptom of modern times.