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Once Upon a Time in China

Lu Zhixiang's Sketches of Shanghai's Society in the 1930s

Martina CASCHERA

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Once Upon a Time in China

Lu Zhixiang's Sketches of Shanghai's Society in the 1930s

Martina CASCHERA

Cartoon master Lu Zhixiang's artistic production offers notable glimpses into timeless aspects of Shanghai's metropolitan modernisation in the 1930s, providing particular insight into the plight of the underclasses. In this essay, Martina Caschera argues that Lu's work is not only particularly representative of the ideal approach to artistic creation strongly upheld by leftist intellectuals in that epoch, but can also be useful as we reflect on the social dynamics of present-day China.

Migrant workers crowding together into metropolitan landscapes. Coming mainly from the countryside, they float in the streets looking for decent housing, a reliable job, maybe a purpose. Today's China? Not at all. I am describing Shanghai in the 1930s.

The present essay focuses on Lu Zhixiang (1910–92)—a cartoon master committed to the representation of these timeless aspects of Shanghai's metropolitan modernisation. In it, I argue that the cartoonist's work, despite not receiving much scholarly attention, is particularly representative of the ideal approach to artistic creation strongly upheld by leftist intellectuals at that time. In particular, I propose an analysis of selected cartoons from his two collections *Zhixiang's Collected Sketches* (志序素描集) and *Society Sketches* (社会素描)—both published in 1936—in order

to illustrate some distinctive communicative choices that represent the complexity of 1930s society from a sociopolitical stance. Ultimately, the essay aims to illustrate how these artworks, which belong to another era, can be useful as we reflect on present-day dynamics.

Cartoons as Social Criticism

There is not much information about Lu Zhixiang's early life. We know that he was born in Suzhou, where he received formal artistic education, and that he caught a severe cold when he was still a child, lost his hearing and, gradually, the ability to speak. In his early twenties, Lu had already started publishing drawings and cartoons in a number of local and national magazines, and was soon befriended by Lu Shaofei, Ye Qianyu, and Hu Kao (Bevan 2016; Bi and Huang 2006; Wei 1994), members of the *manhua* circle (漫画界), a group of influential intellectuals and artists involved in almost every activity related to the creation and dissemination of *manhua* (cartoons) during the 1930s. Although Bi and Huang (2006) do not mention Lu's name among the founders of the Shanghai Cartoon Society—the first organisation explicitly dedicated to cartoons, established in 1926—recent research demonstrates that he was one of them (Bevan 2016).

During the 1930s, Lu Zhixiang was art director for *Modern Miscellany* (时代), an influential pictorial produced by the artist and patron Shao Xunmei. 1936 was a crucial year in his life, as he joined the National Association of Chinese Cartoonists, took part in the organisation of the first National Exhibition of Chinese Cartoons, and published the two collections of *manhua* sketches mentioned above: *Zhixiang's Collected Sketches* and *Society Sketches* (Huang et al. 2010, 188). Both works were enthusiastically received by one of the leading authors in the *manhua* circle, Ye Qianyu. 'With a sharp sight and a thoughtful

brush,' he commented, '[Lu Zhixiang] borrows social phenomena and expresses people's sufferings, desolation, difficulties, and poverty, winning aesthetical and mindful appreciation' (Huang et al. 2010, 189).

Although Lu was considerably less influential (and sociable) than Ye, the two had something in common: they were both famous for a style called the 'cartoon sketch' (速写漫画), which employed exaggeration as an expressive technique and focussed mainly on social phenomena. If we consider cartoons as metaphorical constructs that synthesise complex concepts and function as *instructional texts* in times of crisis (Wagner 2011), these cartoon sketches can be seen as portraying reality by programmatically focussing on specific exemplary figures and settings, and by exaggerating shapes and expressions in order to highlight particular social phenomena that defined the era. Although interest in cartoons had been already flourishing for some time in China by the mid-1930s, the social component in this style of sketches meant that they became particularly representative of the leftist sociopolitical discourse. To have a rough idea of the diffusion of this artistic form, one just has to think that of the 16,000 newspaper articles about *manhua* and *manhua*-related events published from the late nineteenth century through to the 1940s and now collected in the Shanghai Digital Library—around 10,000 of which were published between 1934 and 1939 alone.

Short Essays and Cartoons (小品文和漫画), a special issue of the leftist magazine *Venus* (太白), is particularly representative of how progressive intellectual circles came to look upon *manhua* in the mid-1930s. In these short essays, socially- and politically-aware writers and critics—such as Lu Xun, Wu Zuxiang, Ma Guoliang, and Ye Zi—defined cartoonists as being charged with the historical mission to *construct* a *manhua* that could metaphorically represent and effectively synthesise the contradictions of the era. From an analysis of their discourses, the cartoon artist emerged as the subject of an heuristic process articulated

in a few steps, with the first one being 'observation' (观察). According to artist and critic Huang Miaozi, the artist had to 'observe carefully', 'open the eyes and run into society', because those who work 'behind a closed door cannot produce anything valuable' (Chen 1935). Wu Zuxiang further elaborated on the necessity of personal involvement as a further step, rooting it in the critical situation China was experiencing at that time. 'Everything I see or hear every day is terribly serious. Since I face these things, I cannot humour up (幽默不起来),' he wrote, stressing the importance of avoiding humorous 'detachment' (超脱风度).

The last essential step was representing the 'deepest' (深刻) aspects of reality. Ma Guoliang wrote that it was 'really difficult to make a deep *manhua*.' 'There are only two kinds of *manhua*,' he maintained, the 'lyrical' (抒情) and the 'satirical' (讽刺). The former 'is like a poem without words'; the latter 'is like a dissertation without words'. In his opinion, if a cartoon did not outshine a poem or a dissertation, it could not have been good. He then moved on to criticise contemporary 'leftist' cartoonists for being lazy and shallow in representing society, and therefore unable to powerfully 'seize the era' (雄据时代). For instance, he complained about how, in order to criticise the female 'cult of money' (拜金主义), they just focussed on women's eyelashes and legs, and they merely juxtaposed the characters for 'rich' and 'poor' to point out social inequalities.

The contributors to the issue also touched upon the political nature of *manhua* and its pertinence in the debate about the role of art and artistic freedom. Huang Shiyong's opinion that 'modern *manhua* is undoubtedly a work of mass art' was shared by two other contributors (Chen 1935). At the same time, although they did not employ such explicit terms as 'mass' (大众 or 民众) or 'majority' (大多数), other authors still referred either directly or indirectly to the 'lowest strata of the population' (下层 or 底层).

In sum, according to the contributors of this special issue, the ideal leftist cartoonist should have been able to observe and delve into

societal conditions, express deep humanity, and display a preference for the masses, while also possessing unique communicative skills and a recognisable style. They were profiling Lu Zhixiang.

A Young Old Master

In the late 1930s, Lu Zhixiang was already described by his colleagues as an ‘old’ master who had reached a considerable maturity in the field of *manhua* (Lian 1937). According to Bevan (2016, 135), Lu Zhixiang, Cai Ruohong, and the other younger cartoonists ‘responsible for the shift to the left’ that took place in the mid-1930s, were all tied together by a common model, the German artist George Grosz (1893–1959), who was mostly famous for his sociopolitically-charged cartoons and caricatures.

As a matter of fact, cartoon historians and even Lu Zhixiang’s contemporaries stress that in the 1930s Lu had already evolved from a mostly imitative initial phase, when his works showed a resemblance first to Symbolist and Decadent taste and then to the works of the German artist and cartoonist George Grosz. By that time, he had reached a personal style characterised by ‘bold’ (苍劲) and ‘fluid’ (流畅) lines mainly using pencils and pens, which gave his works a ‘fresh and clumsy’ impression (Huang et al. 2010, 188).

Lu had also inherited and fully processed Grosz’s special interest in the ‘working masses’ (劳苦大众), and especially in the ‘working people of the lowest social strata’ (社会下层的劳动人民) (Huang et al. 2010; Bi and Huang 2006). For this reason, his work shows a great correspondence with the ‘call’ launched by the left-wing intelligentsia. Both this discursive link and the peculiarity of Lu’s discourse are better expressed by the choice of representing society as a whole, and not through a rough juxtaposition of poor/rich characters. The *wholesomeness* of his works underpinned by his unique capacity for observation, often

described as connected to his deafness. From an iconographical perspective, this is rendered by the combination of selected components, each one of them charged with the same intensity.

Lu himself, when introducing his first collection in 1936, stressed his intention to grasp ‘the all-encompassing features’ (包罗万象的面目), while also highlighting his interest for ‘extremes’ (e.g. ‘the edge’ 尖端 or ‘the extremity’ 尽头) and the central role that the masses played in his view of society. In the same introduction, he explained the physical bonds between the works included in the collection and the real world: ‘This is the record of a bunch of *real* (真实) social situations that I encountered in the process of living.’ This honesty unravelled in the subsequent description of the modern city as a combination of places—fancy restaurants, skyscrapers, dancing halls, roads as ‘arteries’ for cars as well as piers and crowded alleys—and characters—from ‘prettified’ (涂脂抹粉) women who just want have fun to the men and women who sell their bodies (出售身体的男女) (Lu 1998b, i–ii).

By reading these lines, we immediately notice the imaginative power of Lu’s writings. His cartoons also exhibit a peculiar *multimodal quality*: long, descriptive titles (verbal component), and dialogue with lines and shapes (iconic component), in order to both preserve the literary value of the text and build a complex metaphorical construction that draws on more than one semiotic code. In many occasions, the author shows his talent in exploiting the power of relay by managing the iconic and verbal components as if they were ‘fragments of a more general syntagm’ (Barthes 1977, 41), as exemplified in figure 1.

In this lyrical *manhua* (figure 1), the words help to further illustrate not just the action of the scene, but also the ideological reference to unbalanced power dynamics. Lu is not overemphasising some typical characteristics or showing objective disadvantage, he is portraying the desire and pleasure through the depiction of their ‘gaze’ (what Lacan calls *le regard*). According to the psychoanalytic

approach in visual studies, the ‘practices of looking’ are crucial in the formation of subjects and their social relationships (Sturken and Cartwright 2009). In this case, the voyeuristic gaze, usually charged with negative connotation, expresses the disadvantaged ‘viewing relationship’ characteristic of semicolonial societies. The involvement of the reader—to whom the actual scenery behind the fence is precluded—in this desiring gaze is aimed at obtaining deep emotional response, even empathy for those subjects whose life is defined by contrast.

The centrality of the concept of ‘human body’ (身体) in Lu’s discourse is proven by both the recurrence of the term and the indirect references to it. Figures 2 and 3 exemplify this point. In the first image, some prostitutes are portrayed exposing themselves with dignity to men’s—as well as the viewer’s—

Figure 1: ‘The difference between the foreign and the Chinese border’ (租界与华界的区别).

desire. Two of them have serious faces, one looks sad. Although the title indirectly implies a chauvinist reference to modern women’s ‘cult of money’, a classic subject in leftist visual propaganda, here the moral stance is not based on the vilification of women but rather on praise: prostitutes are not sexually charged nor described by exaggerated dramatic details. They are provided with a morally valuable agency.

In ‘Every labour demands the contribution of our own body’ (figure 3), the human body is directly mentioned to further illustrate the ideological charge of the image. Here, a group of workers is caught resting or trying to take refuge from the rain. The ‘safe’ space portrayed as shrinking, stuffed by people and objects—mainly rickshaws—gives the viewer a sense of precariousness and pressure.

Besides representing the working class ‘on duty’, many cartoons are also dedicated to people who ‘do nothing’. On one side of the moral spectrum, there are those whose lifestyle is based on exploiting the working class, usually portrayed while having fun in flamboyant social activities or wasting time and money gambling. The *manhua* in figure 4 is a case in point: the men in the first row seem bored, caught lazily looking at their objects of desire while they wait for their turn. Rather than exaggerating negative details, Lu prefers to convey detachment by arranging a setting where not only would the viewer feel like an outsider, ignored by everybody and excluded from the fun, but also the depiction of the men themselves also conveys the same feeling.

On the opposite side of the moral spectrum, Lu Zhixiang places the neglected category of *migrants*. In semicolonial Shanghai, the term ‘migrant’ (流民) defined a specific category of people, i.e. those who ‘did not have a stable housing and [who] live in an extremely temporary or unstable employment condition’ (Ma 1996, 46). Such a definition included a wide range of city dwellers, spanning from beggars to different kind of *coolies* (苦力). Lu employs it especially to address the condition of extreme precariousness and uncertainty

Figure 2: 'Women who don't sell their soul' (不售灵魂的女人). Figure 3: 'Every labour demands the contribution of our own body' (没有一个劳力不贡献自己的身体). Figure 4: 'These ones rely on the blood of common people to preserve this consumption of life' (这些人依赖平民的膏血去维持这种生活消费).

these people were enduring. As we can see in figure 5, a group of young unemployed migrants is caught in a timeless moment. Two characters look at the viewer, bringing him/her into the scene, while the other three just drape themselves over the railings—we can imagine their eyes lost in the river waves.

The stillness of the migrants in figure 5 contrasts with the ongoing action caught in ‘The door between city and countryside’ (figure 6). Here, some migrants, the majority of which came from the surrounding countryside, are depicted as passing through a threshold in order to grasp the opportunities offered by modernity. It looks like an ordinary scene: two are going to bring their things through, while another comes towards the viewer, who is included in the flow of people and objects, but is too far removed to be considered one of them.

To conclude this excursus, I selected a cartoon that represents the dichotomy between the ‘horizontal’ and the ‘vertical’ axes, a common trope of the era. The opposition—i.e. the uneven competition—between the representatives of different social classes envisioned the superior one as owning the vertical dimension of the skyscrapers, and the inferior as roaming horizontally in the streets. In ‘Ups and downs of life’, Lu shows sympathy for the people who live on the river, arranging a setting that gives the viewer the perspective of a middle class wanderer who catches all the contradictions of a metropolis in one glance. Nice architectures and blank space fill the higher half of the images, chaotic and unstable ‘dwellings’ and overlapping shapes the lower. More generally, the contrast is rendered by the density of lines, which influences the overall *modality* and increases the emotional involvement. This last aspect is addressed also by the presence of two human beings captured as looking ever more downward.

A Sensitivity That Transcends the Age

These social sketches published in 1936 aimed at introducing to the reader a specific construction of reality. As an ideal leftist cartoonist, Lu Zhixiang was able to enlarge his view to catch every detail—maybe also as a result of the isolation due to his hearing loss—while delving into the contradictions and conditions of his contemporary society. He then cut, rearranged, and paired the images with long descriptive and often provocative titles, requiring the involvement of both the hearts and minds of the viewers.

His works are not easily digestible, neither during his time nor today. However, despite the sociopolitical charge, the artist retained a sort of lightness, a desire to sustain the less fortunate while representing nuanced contradictions, which was rooted in a peculiar sensitivity and ensured both deep sympathy and aesthetic appreciation. Furthermore, and maybe even more importantly, Lu’s art is worth considering in the context of present-day China. The socioeconomic inequalities expressed by—and through—physical exploitation, the problematic relationship between city and countryside, as well as the desire and disenchantment of the subjects portrayed in Lu’s works, all appear useful to reflect on how, or if, society has really changed over the past century. ■

Figure 5: 'Migrants who drift aimlessly' (漂泊来的流民). Figure 6: 'The door between city and countryside' (城里和乡下的门户). Figure 7: 'Ups and downs of life' (生活的高下).