The Pictorial Turn and China’s Manhua Modernity, 1925-1960

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Defining manhua—usually translated as “caricature” or “cartoon”—is like trying to put spilled ink back into the bottle. The word should be warning enough. Where the second character for the second syllable, hua, refers to pictorial art in general, the first character, man, connotes several situations: a state of overflow and inundation, an attitude of freedom and casualness, and, most broadly, a general feeling of being all over the place. The challenge of this book—The Pictorial Turn and China’s Manhua Modernity, 1925-1960—is to embrace the chaos, while also making sense of it.

This is not, of course, the first study of manhua. Many have attempted to tidy up its mess. As a general rule, this has been done via narrative: stories that contribute to making manhua out to be a stable and readily categorizable “thing,” or in more formal terms, a discursive object, that can be interrogated to give us various kinds of data, historical, biographical, etc. A ready example is the narrative of origins, a nativist pictorial lineage for manhua fabricated from the history of China’s arts by selecting items that seem to resonate with a current definition of manhua, such as simplification, exaggeration, and satirical intent. That approach can, with imagination, create a story of specifically Chinese manhua art beginning 8000 years ago with patterns on Neolithic Banpo pottery. The need to tell this kind of tale comes in part from the cultural-nationalist desire for myths of deep beginnings, and in part from the desire to construct a discrete, researchable, category of pictorial art. The fatal weakness of such a narrative is, of course, how its coherence as a teleology depends upon a process of exclusion authorized by historical anachronism; that is, making the past serve the present by screening out materials that do not align with a modern-day generic definition of manhua.

If the origin myth for manhua can be explained away rather easily, the idea of manhua as a generically coherent object of study cannot. In fact, it only grows more powerful in the contestation among current scholarly narratives. That story, the battle of these narratives, begins with the influential book-length survey The History of China’s Manhua (Zhongguo manhua shi) by manhua artist and researcher Bi Keguan, which centers upon manhua’s engagement in a struggle of righteous opposition against China’s foreign imperialist adversaries on the one hand, and against reactionary domestic foes on the other. Much more than funny pictures, manhua

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1 I express my gratitude to Daisy Yan Du for inviting me to write this trailer for my current book project. A release date of the book is off in the mists of the future, and the content of some of the chapters is, at this point, largely guesswork. But the process of writing this piece has helped firm up some important ideas, and publishing it on the ACAS site will, I hope, spark conversation, correction, and collaboration.

become a protagonist in China’s century-long quest for national salvation, an epic tale culminating in the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.³ Bi’s narrative is not original. It hews closely to the heroic vision of manhua invented by its wartime practitioners, his direct artistic predecessors and mentors, whose dedication to the national cause as propagandists led them to accentuate the positive. It also aligns with the Chinese Communist Party version of history, which recognizes the Second Sino-Japanese War, and even more so the Civil War, as a crucial turning point in national liberation. But for all its limitations, Bi’s pioneering work remains a rich resource for manhua scholarship.⁴

In fact, because it is so rich in narration of historical detail, Bi’s The History of China’s Manhua has determined critical positions for subsequent scholarship. Among these, one of the earliest, and most influential, accounts is that of historian Chang-tai Hung. Hung’s groundbreaking work on manhua of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the ensuing Civil War develops Bi’s salvational narrative, such that anti-Japanese manhua, centering on the activities of the National Salvation Manhua Propaganda Corps (Jiuwang manhua xuanchuanqu), become something akin to a heroic character in a historical novel. Thus manhua, driven by fearsome invaders from its home in treaty-port Shanghai, a rather decadent place polluted with commercialized temptations of the flesh, entered the Chinese interior, where it discovered its potential to become “great Chinese art” by merging indigenous tradition and western influence in a way that let it reflect reality and mobilize the nation’s popular masses to help turn the tide against the Japanese invaders.⁵ The story continues into the ensuing Civil War, with manhua carrying on to join the internecine life-and-death political struggle on the side of justice, its sword of satire to rallying popular opinion against the corrupt, anti-democratic Nationalist regime.⁶

Understood as a narrative choice, Hung’s story of manhua in the service of national resistance is, in fact, the path of least resistance; it is a trail originally blazed by manhua artists’ own accounts of their role in wartime China, and widened by Bi Keguan’s History. Subsequent studies of manhua have challenged this narrative. They do not so much negate the grand wartime narrative

³ See Bi & Yuan, Zhongguo manhua shi; Gan, Zhongguo manhua shi.


as either supplement it or point out its gaps and flaws. Hung himself moderates his story of *manhua* by presenting the milder, more pacifist artistic vision of Feng Zikai’s *manhua* as a humanist foil to the utilitarian impulses of wartime propaganda art. Geremie Barmé’s biography of Feng does much the same, though in greater depth and breadth, to demonstrate how, across the mid-twentieth century, forces of commerce and politics marginalized Feng’s subdued, lyrical style. More direct disquisitions of the heroic wartime narrative of *manhua* have taken on the representation of women, depictions of children, and the counter-example of *manhua* artists who collaborated with the Japanese.

Whatever position they adopt, all these stories and counter-stories are bound to a certain assumption: that *manhua* exercises a certain power over its viewers, be it inspirational or nefarious. The dominant narrative of wartime *manhua*, for instance, creates a heroic subject whose true identity only emerges as it learns to exercise the “right” kind of power over its audience by teaching the Chinese people to fight to save their country first from Japan, and then from the corrupt, despotic Nationalist rulers. The counter-narratives, meanwhile, point to the one-sidedness of this story by showing how *manhua* were indeed efficacious images, but in ways that exceed and even cast doubt on the standard nationalistic account. Thus where anti-Japanese *manhua* depicting wartime atrocities might have aroused a sense of militant patriotism in otherwise benighted peasants and townspeople, the pacifist elements of Feng Zikai’s *manhua* moderated viewers’ impulses for vengeful violence. And where, on the one hand, one might think that *manhua* of Chinese women raped and mutilated by Japanese soldiers sparked intense feelings of patriotic indignation, these same images might also end up hyper-masculinizing the perpetrators.

Did *manhua* have this kind of power over their audiences? Interestingly, Louise Edwards concludes her study of sexual violence in anti-Japanese propaganda *manhua* precisely by questioning tacit assumptions of their potency. These images, she remarks, are in many cases far more complex than they have been given credit for, and on top of that, gauging actual reader response to them is a near impossible task. In other words, we are on shaky ground when we

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try to figure out what these pictures do in terms of influencing their original audiences. But at the same time, in order to fashion an argument, or counter-argument, studies of manhua have had to presume that these images exercise some sort of impact on their audience. If they did not, why bother to write about them at all?

One way to move beyond commonsense questions of audience reception is, following W. J. T. Mitchell, to shift the underlying terms of inquiry by asking not what these pictures do, but what they want. In other words, what if the clashing narratives of wartime manhua are driven by pictures’ own desire for power? What if these narratives rely on primal—or at least unexamined—tendency to fetishize images, a tendency that leads one to project onto manhua an imagined power born of the critic’s desire for “pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing, or praising them”? If such is the case, then it would be the pictures themselves that have won the “war,” rather like mercenaries who receive their pay no matter which side they fight for, because, in the end, they have mastered their beholders, Medusa-like, “turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture.”

Looking further into this apparent entrancement with the visual power of manhua, we find that it by no means end with the conclusion of the Civil War in 1949. Scholarly voices on manhua during the early Mao-years have been quite condemnatory. This antagonism hearkens back to the early Cold War period, the year 1951, when American journalist and intelligence specialist Edward J. Hunter bluntly described the manhua of Chinese communist propaganda campaigns as a technique of “brainwashing,” invented to convert otherwise perfectly sane Chinese citizens into warmongering, anti-American “blind fanatics.” The term brainwashing—Hunter’s own invention—has become something of a Cold War relic. But recent studies of manhua continue to channel Free World anxieties of totalitarian deception, censorship, and thought control. Thus we read of manhua artists sacrificing creative autonomy under “the Party’s total control of art”, audiences for manhua succumbing to manipulative anti-American propaganda, and the primary institution of this art, the satire pictorial, gradually compelled to give up its stock in trade—

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independent social critique—under the pressure of political supervision. Under the lingering influence of Cold War ideology, scholarly analysis continues to acknowledge the power of manhua imagery, as evidenced by a felt need to either demystify, that is, reveal utilitarian political motivations behind communist art, or denigrate, by arguing that manhua were robbed of an essential creative independence.

Obviously I have so far only discussed manhua from 1937 to the early 1950s, limiting my argument to times of war and nation-building, in other words, extreme historical circumstances that foreground contentious aesthetic issues surrounding political propaganda and popular mobilization. What, then, of pre-war manhua, the free-wheeling, cosmopolitan, commercially driven work generated by Shanghai’s publishing boom of the relatively stable Nanjing Decade (1928-1937)? When dealing with pre-war manhua another narrative steps in: one that invites us to nostalgically celebrate a golden age of manhua that was, regrettably, interrupted by the Japanese invasion and doomed by totalitarian communism. Yet I also believe that when we look carefully at certain studies of manhua from the 1920s and 1930s, the terms of analysis change, and do so in a way that hints at how we might dislocate narratives based on what manhua are presumed to do, their presumed impact and efficacy. What I am suggesting is that certain aspects of research on pre-war manhua encourages us to “scale down the rhetoric of the ‘power of images,’” to work from an assumption that pictures, and specifically manhua, “may be a lot weaker than we think.” To again cite W.J.T. Mitchell, I would like to:

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\ldots \text{shift the question from what pictures do to what they want, from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak. If the power of images is like the power of}
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\[16\] Jennifer Altehenger, “A Socialist Satire: Manhua Magazine and Political Cartoon Production in the PRC, 1950-1960,” Frontiers of History 8, no. 1 (2013). The flipside to these studies’ alliance with anti-communist Cold War narratives is, of course, early-PRC propaganda organs’ investment in politically motivated manhua, that is, their faith, backed by artistic policy and mobilization campaigns, that these pictures could rally the populace to participate in a national narrative of defense and reconstruction.


\[18\] Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want?, 33.
Stressing *manhua*’s weakness in this way is not a judgment on the status of *manhua* in some sort of aesthetic hierarchy, although it is true that *manhua*, and cartoons in general, have persistently been regarded as suffering a subaltern status in the pictorial arts. The idea of weakness should instead be taken as a theoretical wedge that, I hope, can help construct a quite different story of what *manhua* are and how we can talk about them. This weakness, I believe, becomes evident when we take note of a certain loss of “definition” that characterizes pre-war *manhua* as an object of study and scholarly argument. To be specific, research on pre-1937 *manhua* that sets off from the assumption of *manhua* as a well-defined “thing”—a viable and coherent topic to explore—becomes obliged to confront just how *man*—casual, dispersed, occasional, contingent, ephemeral, sketchy, and generally ill-defined—*manhua* actually are. This loss of definition, the surrender to *man*-ness, is not motivated by a felt need to pose a counter-narrative to narrow, nationalistic histories of *manhua*, although most of these accounts do, if a bit grudgingly, acknowledge a growing nationalist militancy of *manhua* through the 1934-1937 “golden age.” Instead, the blurring of *manhua*’s boundaries grows out of the relatively unmediated encounter with primary materials in the form of the pictorial magazines—either reprinted or original—that formed a matrix for *manhua*. That matrix has its own agency in how it facilitates not focus, but dispersal. What this research has found, without specifically looking for it, is how, on the pages of pictorials, the reified vision of *manhua* acquired from previous scholarship scatters into the multiple channels of verbal and visual discourse that constitute the mass-market illustrated magazine. What happens in practice, then, is that talking about *manhua* sends one off topic to address things like fashion, modern art, literature, politics, entertainment, advertising . . . in short, the entire, all-over-the-place, mélange of China’s Republican-era urban mass culture.

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20 The best example of this tendency is Paul Bevan’s decision to name his meticulously researched, wide-ranging study of pre-war *manhua* *A Modern Miscellany*, after the English-language name of 1930s pictorial *Shidai huabao*. Similarly, in their examinations of the late-1920s pictorial *Shanghai Sketch* (*Shanghai manhua*), Lee Hak Keung diverges into fashion illustration, and Ellen Johnston Laing (2010) detects resonances with the period’s Neo-Sensationist literature. Nick Stember’s (2015) research is less focused on *manhua* imagery per se, but his narrative reconstruction of the late 1920s Manhua Society (Manhua hui) concludes with the dispersal of its members into the flourishing market for *manhua* pictorials in the mid-1930s. See Paul Bevan, *A Modern Miscellany: Shanghai Cartoon Artists, Shao Xunmei’s Circle and the Travels of Jack Chen, 1926-1938* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016); Hak Keung Lee, “Manhuahui yue: *Shanghai Manhua* shiqi Ye Qianyu de zuopin ji qi shouzhong, 1928-1930.” (Ye Qianyu’s Cartoons and His Readers in *Shanghai Sketch*, 1928-1930) (master’s thesis, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2008); Ellen Johnston Laing, “Shanghai Manhua, the Neo-Sensationist School of Literature, and Scenes of Urban Life” (MCLC Resource Center, 2010), and; Nick Stember, “The Shanghai Manhua Society: A History of Early Chinese Cartoonists, 1918-1938” (master's thesis, The University of British Columbia, 2015).
My distinction between manhua research pre- and post-1937 is admittedly artificial. The point, however, is not to draw a historical dividing line, but to start thinking less in terms of what manhua do and more about what they want, or put another way, to be more aware of what is going on when “we address and are addressed by images of media,” a process that, in blurring the conventional, imagined boundaries of media, arouses an ambivalence toward images.21 What I believe we see in studies of manhua from 1937 and after—the studies centered on war and propaganda—is how this ambivalence tends to be contained, or short-circuited, by familiar ideologies, given form in established narratives of national salvation, humanist redemption, and anti-communism. By contrast, what we see happening in studies of manhua leading up to 1937 is how the address of manhua has elicited a different desire: to explore and make sense of juxtapositions, analogies, resonances, fragmentation, micro-narratives, and so on. In other words, we are seeing how manhua are bound up with the non-narrative, “kaleidoscopic” intermediality of pictorial magazines.22

If this is the case, that manhua inhabit pictorial magazines in some sort of active manner, then to understand the former we ought to reckon carefully with the latter. And, when doing so, we need to be wary of the big, ideologically freighted stories that manhua would like us to give them a role in—as if they were auditioning for an off-Broadway show. One way to engage with this apparent symbiosis of image and medium, the interdependence of manhua and magazine, is by working with the idea of metapictures, defined as “media objects that reflect on their own constitution” and thus offer an embedded, vernacular theory grounded in the matrix of media practices themselves.23 Thus instead of approaching manhua as humorous, satirical, pornographic, propagandistic, lyrical or what-have-you pictures that somehow reflect history or reality, we should treat them as self-aware commentators on the relationships of power and ideology through which they are constructed and received. The idea of the metapicture has the added advantage of accommodating a dialectic relation between image and text. Such a pairing would on the surface seem ideal for analyzing print-image publications like pictorial magazines, as well as manhua, with their textual titles and captions. But the image-text relation brought forward by metapictures is not the commonsense notion that text can “explain” an image; it encourages instead the questioning of ideologies that construct boundaries between pictures and

21 Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want?, 217-218. Mitchell helps us imagine this two-way address by asking us to think of “the moment when we find ourselves shouting at the television set.” See What Do Pictures Want?, 207.


23 Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want?, 210. Elsewhere, Mitchell expands on the nature of the metapicture, describing it as “a fundamental potentiality inherent in pictorial representation as such: it is the place where pictures reveal and ‘know’ themselves, where they reflect on the intersections of visuality, language, and similitude, where they engage in speculation and theorizing on their own nature and history.” See his Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 82.
words, Doing so, I suggest, can help manhua “break out of the regime that has constructed them as visual images,” and thus not just help us better understand manhua, but also think in new ways about the media ecologies in which they flourished.24

The chapters that comprise this book, though arranged chronologically, are not a survey as much as a series of experiments aimed at rethinking, in a narrow but hopefully productive way, how we encounter and talk about popular urban print culture in modern China. Some of the chapters have been drafted, one has been published, and others are speculative abstracts that may or may not withstand the rigors of development, expansion, and drastic revision. Moving forward, I expect each chapter to begin with analysis of a metapicture that helps open up a relationship between manhua and the pictorial magazine, and vice versa.

1. A Matrix for Manhua: Global Practices of the Pictorial

Chapter one focuses less on manhua than on elements of the global media ecology of the illustrated popular press that helped determine what came to be called manhua. To understand manhua, I argue, one must first understand practices established in the nineteenth-century global print media that were used to create, reproduce, and—most important—sell imagery with broad popular appeal. To help talk about the salient features of these discourses and their points of intersection, I have chosen three keywords: sensation, the everyday, and satire.

The first term, sensation, speaks primarily to illustrated popular print media’s commerce in the lurid, shocking, and profane, but also to how sensationalist imagery, explicitly or implicitly, invoked counter-narratives of civilization and moral edification. Thus the visions of crime, sex, chaos, and excess that drove sales of popular magazines were typically embedded in, and excused by, socially sanctioned messages of education and improvement.

The second keyword, the everyday, also refers to the educative potential of the popular illustrated press, but in a more quotidian sense of how mass-market pictorials helped readers find their way, and their modern selves, in a changing, unstable, even threatening urban environment. Here I review examples of turn-of-the-century pictorial journalism in the U.S. and England, showing how the period’s “new illustrated journalism” embraced the ephemera of the city: its entertainments, fashions, mass-produced goods, and its seemingly endless ranks of strangers. Using newly developed photomechanical techniques of image reproduction, this new breed of pictorial miscellany not only signified modernity, but made available new varieties of imagery, such as the pen-and-ink sketch and the halftone photograph, that helped make the city legible to its readers, an expanding “six-penny public” comprised of individuals eager to imagine themselves as part of an urban collectivity.

The third keyword, satire, I purposely and perhaps counter-intuitively, discuss last. My reasoning here is that when it comes to manhua, the notion of satire, and political satire in particular, has

tended to marginalize, or even reject, the multiple, intertwined discursive threads that make for a symbiosis between manhua and pictorial magazines. Satirical manhua, for instance, quite often depend on sensationally grotesque or exaggerated features to grab viewers’ attention, while the shocking pleasure of seeing such visually grotesque imageries of crime, sex, chaos, and excess invariably comes with some sort of didactic intent attached. Further, manhua, especially in the form of social caricature, typically engage urban sensibilities tied to the mass culture ephemera of entertainment, fashion, commodities, and, of course, a fluid gallery of urbanite types. When it comes to social manhua, “getting” the joke grants the viewer a sense of belonging with an imagined collectivity of modern, urban cultural insiders. Not to be ignored, either, is that to even appear on the pages of a mass-market periodical, any manhua, satirical or otherwise, has to be materially amenable to very specific processes of print technology, without which we would be staring dully at blank pages.

2. Shanghai Sketch and the Legible City

Chapter two demonstrates that the magazine widely regarded as central to the development of China’s manhua, Shanghai manhua (1928-1930), despite its name, as well as the concentration of important cartoonists (manhua jia) who edited it, is not really about “manhua” at all (Fig 1). I argue instead that we learn much more about the magazine, and about the nature of manhua, by examining how this illustrated weekly’s English-language name, Shanghai Sketch, ties it to the “new illustrated journalism” that drove the expansion of mass culture pictorials of Europe and the United States in the 1890s, and in particular to Shanghai Sketch’s British namesake, The Sketch: A Magazine of Art and Actuality (1893-1959).25 Once the two publications are set side by side, the resonances become impossible to ignore. Both magazines helped readers make the city legible by tracing and tracking urban ephemera through the modern imagery of the sketch and the photograph. Both functioned as guides to leisure time lifestyles by using the format of the magazine “miscellany” to create visual and textual connections between and among fashion, entertainment, the arts, and consumption. Both mingled high and low culture with an eye toward breaking with social convention. And, both aimed to generate a community of readers by offering a shared sense of “knowingness.”26 Shanghai Sketch was not, however, a simple copycat of The Sketch, but rather a generic counterpart constructed out of global journalistic models as much as from the local lineage of Shanghai’s tabloid press. The chapter as a whole, then, is less about manhua per se than about how, with largely but not exclusively commercial intent, the creators of Shanghai Sketch arranged “pictures” (hua) in a deliberate state of being “all over the place.” Their aim: to produce for Shanghai readers a visibly modern, thoroughly urban and, of course, maximally salable pictorial. The various sections of the chapter look at the immediate predecessors to Shanghai Sketch, and in particular China Camera News (Sanri huabao), the material processes of producing Shanghai Sketch, and at elements of layout that form the image-text pictorial ecology that merged sensation, the everyday, and satire.


3. Weak Images: Modern Sketch and the Metapicture

*Modern Sketch* (*Shidai manhua*) is widely recognized as China’s premier *manhua* pictorial of the 1930s, and perhaps of the entire 20th Century (Fig 2). This chapter, rather than focusing on reasons behind the success and influence of *Modern Sketch*, looks instead at how its strength as a publication in fact depended on an implicit recognition of weakness, apparent as a thread of self-parody that played off the impotence of *manhua*, and *Modern Sketch* itself, as a vehicle of social and political critique. This “weak power” of *manhua* was displayed on the front cover illustration of the inaugural issue in 1934 in the form of Zhang Guangyu’s iconic logo for the magazine: a fragile mounted warrior pieced together from the tools of the *manhua* artist’s trade: pen, paper, eraser, and ink. Read as a metapicture, Zhang’s rider invites a number of contradictory interpretations touching on *manhua*’s heterogeneous nature as both commodity and a way of creating collective consciences under a semi-colonial situation marked by the absence of institutionalized political power among the magazine’s contributors and readership.27 That heterogeneity, I argue, recurs throughout the run of the magazine, and in ways best explained through the dialectic of text and image that characterized the *manhua* pictorial.

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4. Between Word and Image: The Structural Aesthetics of the Wartime Arts Pictorial *Resistance Sketch* (*Kangzhan manhua*)

Chapter five turns to the well-traveled territory of *manhua* during the Second Sino-Japanese War. But rather than approaching wartime *manhua* as images that we can selectively interrogate to support specific contentions on issues such as nationalism, gender, popular culture, and the like, I examine the play of word and image in the structural aesthetics of the wartime *manhua* magazine *Resistance Sketch* (Wuhan 1938, Chongqing 1940), the chief publication of the All-China Cartoon Artist Association (Fig 3). The chapter focus on an analysis of the no. 3 (1 February 1938) issue of the magazine as a carefully crafted image-text artifact in the pictorial genre. The magazine’s layout and multi-dimensional content, I argue, construct for the reader verbal and visual pathways that travel in, through, and around both word and image. By foregrounding these pathways in their variability, ambiguity, and intersectionality, I hope to reconsider conventionalized media boundaries between word and image and, along the way, revise how we may understand the role of *manhua* at a time of national crisis.
When Zhang Guangyu created his illustrated tale *Journey to the West in Cartoons* (*Xiyou manji*) near Chongqing in 1945, straitened wartime conditions and a regime of censorship had made it nearly impossible to publish any form of periodical, let alone the sort of colorful, cosmopolitan *manhua* pictorial whose peak of popularity was cut off by the arrival of war eight years before (Fig 4). Thus Zhang, like many of his artist colleagues also working in China’s interior at the time, adapted his art for public exhibition. *Journey to the West in Cartoons* has been described as a colorful, whimsical, but above all trenchant lampoon of bankrupt politics and society under corrupt Nationalist rule at the close of the Second Sino-Japanese War. *Journey to the West in Cartoons* is indeed a masterful example of satire, but it is, I argue, also a remarkable work of *manhua*. Chapter five extends my attempt to read *manhua* broadly by demonstrating how, when viewed in conversation with Zhang’s long career as both an artist and a master of the pictorial magazine, we are obliged to re-read Zhang’s fanciful allegory as both a satire and a celebration of the symbiosis between *manhua* and the pictorial magazine. I construct this alternative reading of *Journey to the West in Cartoons* through several mutually supportive angles. First, after describing the creation and exhibition of *Journey to the West in Cartoons*, I review the career of Zhang Guangyu as an artist-entrepreneur who fostered the relationship between *manhua* and
pictorial magazines. I then turn to Journey to the West in Cartoons itself, reading beyond the story’s satirical messages to explore how Zhang frames Journey as a meta-commentary on the pictorial press, and in particular the manhua pictorial to which he had devoted much of his career.

![Fig 4: Journey to the West in Cartoons, 1945](image)

6. No Laughing Matter?: Manhua Monthly (Manhua yuekan) and the Satire Pictorial in 1950s China

Below I propose to revise, or at least complicate, the overwhelmingly negative view of China’s early socialist manhua by focusing less on the “cartoon” itself than on dynamic deployment of these images in and through the pictorial satire magazine. I begin by establishing a lineage between the liberal-leaning, free-wheeling cartoon pictorials of the 1930s and the seemingly politically doctrinaire Manhua Monthly of the early 1950s, with the latter inheriting the former’s role as a vehicle of sensation, the everyday, and satire (Fig 5). I next examine how, during the first stage of Manhua Monthly’s publication from 1950 to 1952, the new communist regime engaged manhua artists to revamp the illustrated satire pictorial to meet political demands of the day. Here we see how Manhua Monthly continued to function as a virtual guide to urban space, but with a difference. Instead of promoting cosmopolitan consumerism, the magazine was redesigned to lead readers and would-be cartoonists to experience the treaty port, and Shanghai in particular, as a carnivalesque space of active political participation linked to the period’s

28 The magazine was released twice a month starting with issue 68 on July 8, 1956, and its full name accordingly changed to Manhua Semi-monthly (Manhua banyuekan).
aggressive mass campaigns. True to its inherited pictorial nature, *Manhua Monthly* fostered this reimagining of space through word and image: theoretical essays, panoramic cartoons, as well as instructional columns and reader feedback. From there I move ahead several years to the Hundred Flowers period of the mid-1950s. By this time, after the Korean War and the initial, intensive state-building campaigns, we see *Manhua Monthly* recovering the pictorial’s erstwhile role as a cosmopolitan, humorously satirical guide to everyday urban experience revolving around the leisure-time spaces of theaters, shops, restaurants, and parks. The magazine had by no means abandoned its critique of the US and West-bloc politics; that critique, was, however, now compartmentalized within the structure of a magazine that merged social critique with cosmopolitan consumerist aspirations, creating what we might call an urban humor and entertainment magazine with “socialist characteristics.”

Fig 5: *Manhua Monthly*, 1955
Bibliography


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