

The Modern Girl Around the World

Consumption, Modernity,
and Globalization

The Modern Girl

Around the World Research Group

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

DURHAM AND LONDON

2008

Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?

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In Zhang Henshui's novel *Shanghai Express* (1935), the young protagonist Xuchun, on board the Beijing-Shanghai express, at first appears to be an ideal modern woman. Her tasteful dress, charming smile, graceful gestures, skillful handling of complicated situations, her eloquence, her independence, and her ability to read English, quickly catch the attention of Mr. Hu, an older, married businessman. Although Hu is attracted to Xuchun's modern appearance, it is her willingness to become a concubinelike secret lover and submit her life to his control that convinces him to enter a relationship with her. As the train dashes toward Shanghai, Hu falls asleep fantasizing that Xuchun will belong to him, but he wakes up only to find that she has disappeared with all his money and stocks. Now penniless in the big city Shanghai, Hu sees Xuchun in every modern-looking woman on the station platform and cries out warnings to all men.¹

Zhang's story is a quintessential cautionary tale of the modern told through the figure of the Modern Girl. Its crux, the anxiety caused by a combination of attraction to and fear of the unknowable Modern Girl, was shared widely by her representations in news reports, literature, and visual culture.² While the Modern Girl was represented in advertisements as a beguiling icon of the glamour of modern life and happiness ostensibly achievable through consumption of industrial

commodities, she also often appeared as a mystery and was seen as a threatening figure.³ Modern Girl Xuchun, for example, is nothing but artifice or performance. By the end of the novel, the reader learns nothing about this woman except her modern appearance. Her name is false, and all her history is bogus. She is the perfect con artist whose true identity is impossible to know, a woman as baffling as the modern city Shanghai itself. In addition, guarding against this Modern Girl also means fighting against one's own desires. Hu's warning about the Modern Girl, therefore, is also one against men's own fantasies toward the modern. In this sense, her attractiveness and men's inability to resist it conceal the real threat of the Modern Girl.

The prevalence of themes and plots such as those in *Shanghai Express* indicated the angst and titillation among the elite caused by the Modern Girl. In the first two sections of this chapter, I examine how the "Modern Girl look" facilitated the crossing of class boundaries and how the elite tried to salvage this look to defend its privilege to be modern. In a third section I discuss how the Modern Girl upset social conventions in her relations with her male counterpart, the modern man. Historically, the "superficiality" of the Modern Girl has been the focus of her criticisms from all sides. The last section of the chapter considers the historical and historiographical effects of such a focus.

In order to understand the Modern Girl figure, it is necessary to confront the issue of the dominance of male perspectives in her representations. Major changes in Republican-era Chinese social practices — such as the establishment of the nuclear family as the norm; young men and women receiving education or joining in the work force in integrated public spaces away from their parents' homes; and the emergence of an urban culture targeting the young — opened up potential spaces for single young women to play new roles in society. These public roles for women involved unprecedented visibility and shifts in representation, including Modern Girl fashions, attitudes, and images. The forms and meanings of these representations gave rise to a host of disputes, anxieties, and marketing schemes. The representations of the Modern Girl in stories, cartoons, and pictures were a major staging ground shaping these images and people's actions in relation to them. Though women were key actors in the social changes, this world of image production and interpretation was controlled and shaped mainly by men and capitalist forces. Hence, the main focus became the male issues of desire and fear and an all-or-nothing vision of the Modern Girl as emasculating or confirming modern masculinity. This chapter treats the bias in such male perspectives as an entry point to unravel how, through the figure of the Modern Girl, the desires, fantasies, and disillusionments of young women and men of the post-May Fourth period were not separated, but deeply entangled.

Who Were These Modern-looking Women?

The Modern Girl look, with its painted face, bobbed or permed hair, fashionable *qipao*, and high-heel shoes, was so widely adopted by women of diverse social groups, including high school and college students, professionals, young wives of the upper and middle classes, and prostitutes, that by the 1930s it had become a passport to opportunity and a dress code of necessity for young female city dwellers. In an article written in 1933, Yunshang argued that the Modern Girl phenomenon had spread from the "leisure class" to the "middle class" and then led to the emergence of dance girls, masseuses, waitresses, saleswomen, all of whom were seen as prostitutes in disguise.⁴ If a woman's appearance is often the first quality used to identify her in the modern city, the Modern Girl look was nonetheless often considered as veiling more than it revealed. While they reflected the new urban anonymity, representations of the Modern Girl as a mysterious figure also indicated anxiety over her blurring of class and status lines.

The magazine *Young Companion* (Liang Yu) stood out in featuring images of modern-looking women. Established in 1926, this popular pictorial was set apart from contemporary magazines through high-quality printing and avoidance of tabloid-style content. Reports on international news and eminent figures on the national stage, fiction, advertisements for cosmetics, cigarettes, fabrics, and other "modern" commodities filled its pages. The magazine juxtaposed photos of real women with advertising images and fashion sketches and created a space for imagining the modern by blending reality, desire, and fantasy.

After featuring female movie stars and two young female students on the covers of its first few issues, the magazine received the following response from a reader, which it published in its eleventh issue: "The magazine focuses on women visually and uses them as ornaments, but the texts treat them as subjects for jokes. Does this elevate women's status, or does it treat them as playthings?" The editors defended the magazine by arguing that it was the deteriorating social conditions that distorted the meaning of women's physical beauty. But the editors admitted that they once offended a high school student by publishing her picture without her consent. The editors observed, "Her attitude is typical of the mentality of the majority of people who consider all females whose pictures appear in magazines, except old ladies with white hair and wrinkled skin, cheap women of low moral quality."⁵

This mentality changed by the end of 1927 when a Chinese "high society" took form following the reunification of China and the establishment of the Nationalist government in Nanjing. The magazine developed its high-class

reputation, and it became acceptable, even honorable, for young women to have their pictures published in *Young Companion*. A column named "Women's Page" (*Funü zhi ye*) featured images of modern Chinese women around the world. Appearing in hairstyles, fashions, and makeup identical to those of Modern Girls in ads, the women in *Young Companion* were graduates of elite high schools, college students from around the country, daughters of eminent families in China and overseas Chinese communities, or young wives of famous men. The word "debutante" often accompanied the photos. In some cases, the young women in the pictures were attached to well-known families, but most of the time they were identified only by their own names. In other words, they were not defined in relationship to patrilineal families but as free and available young women in a public space. The only guarantee that they were "respectable," "good," and "high-class" was the highbrow medium in which their pictures were displayed. In contrast, newspapers and magazines published during the same period targeting a relatively lower-class audience, such as *Shanghai huabao* (*Shanghai Pictorial*, published in 1925), *Fu'ermosi* (*Sherlock Holmes*, published in 1926), and *Jingbao* (*Crystal*, published in 1929) displayed no such photos of young women.

While the magazine apparently intended its covers and the Women's Page to showcase debutantes and high-class women, those whose images were chosen sometimes turned out to possess surprising qualities or even scandalous associations. The cover of *Young Companion*'s issue no. 130, published in July 1937, the month when Japan officially began its invasion of China, featured a charming and confident young woman. The magazine identified her as Ms. Zheng.⁶ Zheng appeared in the perfect Modern Girl look: permed hair, careful makeup, bright smile, and form-fitting floral *qipao*. She could have been just another debutante, except that three years later, instead of marrying an eminent man, she was executed by Chinese collaborators with the Japanese occupation army for being a spy for the nationalists. Zheng's Modern Girl appearance played a major role in her disarming of Ding Mocun, who headed the intelligence agency of the collaboration force and was a target of assassination by the nationalists, but that appearance belied a political commitment for which she was ready to sacrifice her life. Contemporary reports, expectedly, stressed her love affair with Ding, and it was widely rumored that she was executed at the urging of officials' wives who considered her and women like her a major threat to their families.⁷

If the Modern Girl on the cover of *Young Companion* could be a national hero but also a "threat to families," Ms. Peiying, whose photos appeared in the magazine's Women's Page in 1929, became an example of all that had gone wrong with "women's liberation movement." In this case, under the Modern



9.1 Zheng Pingru on the cover of *Young Companion*, no. 130, 1937.

Girl look was a college student who descended into a cabaret dancer and was “forced by a dance partner to drink poison.” An editorial in the same issue commented: “There is no longer any doubt that we have to break the old moral codes; but what is the solution for women after their liberation? Some have indeed achieved happiness through liberation, but opposite cases are abundant . . . For example, one woman eloped with a janitor; some left school and became prostitutes. They would claim that they had done it out of love and were breaking vulgar social codes.”⁸ The lesson the magazine’s readers were expected to draw from the story was that the wrong kind of “liberation” could be dangerous. The editor clearly made a connection between “women’s libera-



9.2 “Sir . . . I am here to interview for the position for a woman clerk,” by Lu Shaofei. *Shidai Manhua*, 1934.

tion” and achieving a higher class status; careless Modern Girls could easily slip down the social ladder, and “they will become excuses for the conservatives and turn into barriers to women’s liberation.”⁹

For women who worked in government institutions, schools, companies, and stores as teachers, clerks, secretaries, saleswomen and typists, the Modern Girl look was a necessity. Yang Gonghuai noted the difficulty for women to find jobs and explained that their employment often resulted from an employer’s desire to use the women to “improve the atmosphere of the office.” When interviewing female applicants, employers paid much less attention to their knowledge and abilities than to their “look” (*maixiang*, literally “selling appearance”), as shown in a cartoon printed in 1931 (see figure 9.2). Conse-

quently, working women uniformly wore permed hair, fashionable clothes, high heels, as well as powder, rouge, and lipstick. Yang is critical of these women and of the social environment. He recognizes that the women had to endure harassments from both their bosses and the customers. On the other hand, he criticized the women for preferring to spend their leisure time shopping, in movie theaters, or dining in restaurants but not doing housework or studying, which he considered an indication of their flawed moral character.¹⁰

The Modern Girl look also reached women workers living along the heavily polluted Suzhou Creek, an area of shacks housing the city's poorest labor forces. While spending little on food, these workers invested their money in dressing up. In the mid-1930s, it became popular in schools to elect "queens" and "school flowers." Following this example, factory workers elected as factory flowers women who displayed three attributes: pretty faces, good relationships with co-workers, and talent in singing, dancing, and the art of conversation. As a folk song puts it, "Her fragrance wafts three miles, and so white is her face powder." When participating in social events, factory flowers dressed up in a "modern" (*modeng*) style, donning qipao or Western suits and leather shoes and wearing permed hair. They looked like high-class "young ladies [*xiaojie*] at aristocratic schools" and "people could not tell that they came from factory worker backgrounds at all." "Factory workers" then were transformed into "modern metropolitan girls" (*dushi modeng nülang*). In one case, a teacher allegedly fell in love with a factory flower, but she dumped him and became a dance hall girl and "made very good money."¹¹

Stories about rural women's transformations into urban Modern Girls also frequently appeared in major Chinese-language newspapers such as *Shenbao*. One article described a married woman from Suzhou who worked as a maid in Shanghai. She spent all her income on clothes and jewelry until she "did not look like a country woman at all." She attracted a man working at the customs and moved in with him, bluntly telling her husband, who came to Shanghai to look for her, that she no longer loved him.¹² Another report, titled "Country Girl Suddenly Became Fashionable," told the story of a nineteen-year-old country girl who went to work in a Shanghai silk textile factory and became an outstanding worker. Having been promoted and making a decent income, she began dating a young man in her neighborhood and spending all her wages on clothing. One day, she bought a pink qipao and Western-style shoes and had a perm at a hair studio in the concessions. About her new look her aunt commented, "A country girl should not dress like this." Enraged, she left the house she shared with her uncle and aunt.¹³

What made these cases scandalous and newsworthy was that these women

9.3 "When permed hair became popular," by Zhang Guangyu. *Manhua daguan*, 1931. The women's clothes indicate that they are of the lower class.



were using the Modern Girl look to enter the society to which they did not belong, disturbing the social order. There was no sure way to tell the class of a young woman sporting the Modern Girl look, nor was there any guarantee of her high moral standing. Even *Young Companion*, among the most elitist magazines at the time, juxtaposed pictures of famous wives and debutantes with those of movie stars and Peiying, the college student who deteriorated into a dance hall girl. Young unmarried women within the elite class were disturbing marriages as they enjoyed their "provisional space." "Low-class" women workers and rural migrant women dressed up as Modern Girls to "seduce" respectable young men of higher class. While "bad women" of lower classes were sneaking into the elite marriage market, good women could fall out of it because the Modern Girl look led them down a path toward disreputable actions or dangers. Both were class slippages based on the inability of women and men to see beyond the artifice of the Modern Girl look to the reality of a woman's character. The Modern Girl look, then, blurred class and status lines and threatened the purity of the elite marriage market. The life path prescribed for young women in *Young Companion* aimed at securing the patrilineal family within the status quo: attending school, coming out as a debutante, marrying a successful man, and enjoying children as a young mother. But in reality, this ideal was hard to maintain and social boundaries were difficult to police.

Molding the Ideal Modern Woman

The role the Modern Girl look played in blurring class boundaries and its serving as a means for female upward social mobility made it an object of scrutiny by the social and cultural elites, who considered it their privilege and duty to define the meaning of being modern. Their efforts at crafting a more skilled reading of appearances to distinguish “true” from “false” modern involved two not necessarily harmonious, and at times even conflicting, goals. Fighting to maintain their privilege to be the “truly” modern, “cosmopolitan elites” took it upon themselves to separate “high-class” modern women from the rest. The scrutiny applied to the Modern Girl, in this sense, indicated a struggle between the attempt to cross the class boundaries and the need to establish and maintain them. Meanwhile, through commercial publications, the social and cultural elites were also molding the “modern women” according to their own aesthetic and moral criteria.

Furen huabao (Women's Pictorial), published from 1933 to 1935, offered a complete manual on how to be a “real” modern woman. Guo Jianying served as the chief editor. Interested in Japanese modernist literature, and a close friend of the New Perceptionist writer Liu Naou, Guo published a fair number of translations as well as his own writings in the literature journal *Xin wenyi* (New Literature, 1929). His drawings of modern urban life began to appear in Shanghai's newspapers and magazines in 1931 and were published as a collection in 1934. Shunning the politicized terms for women at the time, *funü* or *nüxing*, Guo chose the more neutral *furen* for the title of his magazine. At the peak of its publication, in contrast to most contemporary popular magazines, which used photographs of Chinese beauties on their covers, *Furen huabao* featured line drawings to achieve a more cosmopolitan look (see figure 9.4). Complaining about the rarity of “ideal modern women” in Shanghai, Guo designed the magazine to teach Chinese women to distinguish “high-class” (*gaoguide*) from “native and vulgar” (*xiangtuqide*) modernity. The magazine presented a plethora of information on fashion, makeup, fragrance, foreign and Chinese movie stars, fiction, poetry, essays, and cartoons by the most eminent modernist artists. As a finishing school on paper, it provided the knowledge for the “truly modern woman.”¹⁴

The magazine paid close attention to details of women's appearance and behavior. Many articles and images instructed the readers how to care for their facial skin, eyebrows, hair and hands, and how to apply cosmetics. A large portion of the magazine was devoted to pointing out fashion mistakes made by the Chinese Modern Girl and how to correct those following Western role models. Readers were encouraged to pay attention to European and American



9.4 Guo Jianying's line drawing for the cover of *Furen huabao*, no. 22, 1934.

fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, for inspiration on what kinds of dress and shoes to wear for different occasions. Every issue of the magazine featured articles and images informing readers of the latest fashion trends in Europe and the United States, especially Paris, so that they would not be confused by any “low-class taste.”¹⁵ Guo's special column, “Modeng shenghuo xue jiangzuo” (Forum on modern life), took references from *Vanity Fair*, *College Humor*, and Japanese women's magazines to teach the proper etiquette in various social situations such as dating, dancing, dining, walking in the street, or riding the bus.¹⁶ The “ideal modern woman” was one “without any trace of modern,” a standard hard to meet by just any woman who, often out of necessity, wore a qipao, a pair of high heels, and lipstick.¹⁷

The colonial worship of things foreign (including foreign women) had a strong impact on the modernity of the Chinese Modern Girl. *Furen huabao* clearly defined the ideal modern Chinese woman as authentically or properly Westernized in her appearance, behavior, education, and mentality. Using her Western counterparts as role models, the Chinese Modern Girl was expected to

be beautiful, healthy, energetic, cheerful, and lively. A number of articles in the magazine concurred that traditional Chinese standard of beauty — oval face, willow leaf eyebrows, long thin eyes, small cherry-like mouth, and slim fragile-looking body — had been replaced by one featuring big eyes, long thin eyebrows, broad mouth with fine white teeth, and an agile, energetic body.¹⁸ Ten contemporary Hollywood actresses were presented as examples of ideal feminine beauty.¹⁹

The modernist writer Ouwai Ou scrutinized the faces and bodies of Chinese women in great detail. Their faces, in contrast to those of Caucasian women, lacked shadow due to the flatness of their noses and eye sockets. The only way for them to compensate for this flaw was to learn from Western movie actresses how to make their faces more expressive. The author noted approvingly that Chinese women had in fact gleaned from movie close-ups how to improve their expressions by presenting a “Hollywood screen face.” “Urban women’s faces are no longer authentically Chinese,” he wrote. “It is not an exaggeration to say that they now reflect international beauty beyond national boundaries.”²⁰ Ouwai also suggested that all Chinese women needed the help of surgical measures to reshape their eyebrows and make them similar to those of Caucasian women. On the other hand, he praised straight black hair and “yellow” skin color as the special advantages of East Asian and Chinese women. Ouwai’s comments exemplify the numerous contemporary critiques of the appearance of the Chinese Modern Girl and of Chinese women in general. Although not always espousing conventional Western racial schemes, these critiques are nonetheless racial. The creation of the ideal “look” for the Chinese Modern Girl thus involved both class and racial discourses — being high-class meant being properly Westernized, socially and physically.

In addition to the correct “modern look,” the magazine also inculcated its readers with the idea that a truly modern woman was expected to develop her “internal qualities by attaining a certain level of taste for modern life.” Specifically, she needed to have sufficient knowledge in film, sports, readings (weighted equally among modern literature, classical literature, self-development, the domestic arts, and contemporary magazines), social dancing (but not at dance halls that hired commercial dancing girls), music (the ability to play an instrument, and an album collection made up of 40 percent jazz and 60 percent classical), and handicrafts (such as knitting).²¹

The new meaning of “morality,” apparently, settled heavily on domesticity. Women readers were admonished not to forget the ultimate purpose of all this self-polishing — to attract men and to become their worthy companions.²² The magazine warned that indulgence in youthful fun might divert attention

from marriage until it was too late. Letters from “old maidens” regretting their missed opportunities in marriage were published as warning lessons for young women.²³ An article written in 1934 by Xu Xinqin in *Shidai manhua* (Times Cartoon), a popular Shanghai magazine, confirmed that marriage was considered the proper destiny for the Modern Girl. Xu observed, “The first concern on people’s minds for the future of a *shidai xiaojie* [modern young lady/Modern Girl] is her marriage . . . In the way this world is still organized, a woman always belongs to a family . . . Society considers being a wife the proper destiny for a *xiaojie* . . . It is commonly recognized that it is difficult for a *xiaojie* to avoid becoming a *taitai* [wife].” The author admitted that there were young women who did not want to become “slaves of the family” but pointed out that it was extremely difficult for them to make a living on their own.²⁴

One purpose of creating the “real modern woman,” then, was to prepare her for marrying the modern man. The ubiquitous appearance of young, unmarried women in the city was preceded and accompanied by the urban influx of young men for education and work, away from their extended families. As Susan Glosser argues, in spite of the radicalism of the May Fourth moment, young, educated urban men still defined themselves through marriage and family. Glosser points out that socioeconomic issues, rather than nationalism or individualism, drove the young urban man to challenge traditional family structure and authority and to be “passionately involved in redefining himself as a member of an industrializing economy and a modernizing state.”²⁵

Because it was so important to a man’s identity as a modern, enlightened individual to make a freely chosen love-marriage, the quality of his marriage and his wife became absolutely essential to his self-image. Consequently, despite the rhetoric about women’s rights to independence and full personhood, these men were most interested in creating women who met male demands for educated, enlightened companionship. And men complained bitterly when women failed to meet their husbands’ expectations.²⁶

Thus, the primary motivation of marrying a “modern woman” was to achieve and maintain social status. It was not new to preserve the status quo through marriage. As Susan Mann points out in her study of texts and practices on marriage in eighteenth-century China, discourses on preparing young women for marriage were often “metonymic comment on larger social issues of mobility and class.”²⁷ Mann argues that through protecting the purity of the marriage market, elites “sought to fix the fluidity of social change that threatened to erode the boundaries defining their own respectability.”²⁸ Since wives and daughters carried forward the status of elite families and the honor of their

class, the elites were always “discovering ways to valorize the status of brides and wives in their class and to emphasize the differences that separated marriageable women from concubine and women of lower rank.”²⁹

Like their eighteenth-century counterparts, the twentieth-century elites also attempted to control the marriage market; the difference lay in the new tensions and means in defining class boundaries. One quality *Furen huabao* considered important for modern Chinese women to develop was openness in their interaction with men. American college students—healthy, energetic, lively, and sexy—were presented as their role models.³⁰ Modern women should not be constrained by traditional cultural codes. But this was considered a privilege reserved for elite women. Xu Xinqin distinguished between “modern young ladies” (*modeng xiaojie*) and “old style young ladies” (*jiushi xiaojie*). Modern young ladies determined their own marriage; parents and family could only play the role of consultants. “Girls of modest and working class families” had adopted some ideas from the “*modeng xiaojie*” and “put on some love tragedies.” But they never ended up well: eventually, they were either taken home by their parents to be disciplined or sold to brothels in far-away cities.³¹ While elite women should be “modern” and practice free love, women of lower classes needed to adhere to more traditional standards with trenchant (and dull) fervor. Again, as with the Modern Girl look, the correct practice of love also had to be class specific. In the Republican period, free love was a luxury to be enjoyed only by the elites. Without the scrutiny by the extended family and arranged marriage as the first line of defense, and as elite men were beginning to make their own choices and decisions in marriage, the pool of candidates for “free love” must be kept pure. Elites such as the editors of *Furen huabao* were fighting to take control of the double-edged sword of the Modern Girl look that served as the new status marker in the city but could also slash open class lines.

The Modern Girl and the Modern Man

Although the Modern Girl phenomenon touched upon a wide social milieu, it involved most directly urban upper-class and middle-class women and men. The modern urban men expressed paradoxical feelings toward the Modern Girl: both longing and fear. Such an attitude was most clearly expressed in their anxieties over the Modern Girl as lover and wife. In this section, I discuss the representation of the Modern Girl in love and marriage in social cartoons by a group of modernist artists.³²

Manhua (satirical image, caricature, and cartoon) emerged in China at the end of the nineteenth century, following the development of lithograph print-

ing, newspapers, and pictorials. An emergent and ever-growing middle class provided a willing market for stereotypical images in which it recognized itself. By the 1920s and 1930s, caricature had become a staple item in almost all newspapers and magazines across China. From 1934 to 1937, the number of cartoon magazines increased dramatically—Shanghai alone had nineteen.³³ Representative of this trend was *Shanghai manhua* (*Shanghai Sketch*), a large-size color lithographic cartoon magazine founded and financed by Shao Xunmei, the modernist poet and quintessential modern boy who earned himself the name “Shanghai dandy.”³⁴ It was first published from 1928 to 1930, during which time each of its more than one hundred issues sold about 3,000 copies. It was then folded into *Shidai manhua* and continued to be published for three more years in the early 1930s.³⁵

Unlike earlier cartoons that focused on national politics, a large number of social caricatures appeared in these magazines through which the artists hoped to observe and express “the richness of Shanghai life.”³⁶ Relationships between the sexes constituted a major theme for these social cartoons on urban life; in particular, the artists focused on the Modern Girl and her relationship with the modern man in both the public and private realms of city life. These caricatures, as interpretations of gender relations with an attitude, provide unique lenses for examining the role of the Modern Girl in creating new gender relations.

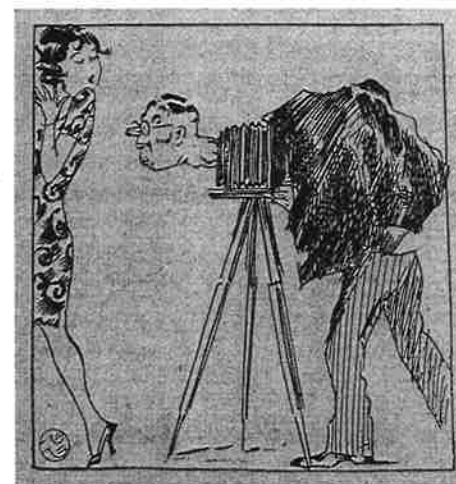
Most of the pieces in the magazines were by young male cartoonists who also worked for advertising agencies. Ding Song was employed by the advertising department of the British American Tobacco Company (BAT) in Shanghai, whose calendar posters featuring the Modern Girl created a new genre of commercial art in China.³⁷ Dan Duyu painted the Modern Girl in his advertisements and calendar posters, as did Lu Shaofei.³⁸ Ye Qianyu contributed his fashion drawings to *Young Companion*, while Guo Jianying’s appeared in *Furen huabao*. These artists simultaneously created an idealized image of the Modern Girl in their advertisements, fashion drawings, and film while at the same time they critiqued her in their cartoons. From their constant shifting of position emerged a complex image of the Modern Girl, to her male counterpart, as a source of both fantasy and fear. The caricatures reflected ambivalence between desire for and resistance to the Modern Girl and incited self-recognition in their satirical depictions of flawed fellow beings. In so doing, the caricatures provoked humorous laughter that reflected a new kind of male identity created through the Modern Girl. As Ainslie McLees points out, “Social caricature is thematically affiliated with genre painting, which by definition portrays types rather than individuals, and modest, often domestic, situations rather than the exalted personages of history painting.”³⁹ The caricatures thus created stereotypical images of modern urban women and communicated the

artists' attitude toward them through the Modern Girl, an attitude that they believed would echo the sentiments of their audience.

The Modern Girl was seen as part of the scenery of the modern city. Guo Jianying claimed: "The youth of Shanghai women is endowed with energy and creativity. How boring and bleak Shanghai streets would be without the youthfulness of the women."⁴⁰ Much of Guo's work depicted the Modern Girl as spectacle. His artistic style reflects the influence of Aubrey Beardsley, who was himself impacted by Japanese erotic prints and in turn inspired Chinese artists with his black and white pen and ink drawings. His illustrations for *Salome*, which was translated and staged by the Southern Society together with *Pan Jinlian* and *A Doll's House* in 1926, became familiar to Chinese intellectuals. Beardsley's depictions of women are often grotesque; his influence on Chinese artists, however, led to the creation of a very soft genre, *shuqing hua* (lyrical drawings), of which Guo was a practitioner. In figure 9.5, a cartoon of a scene on a bus, although the Modern Girls are making the man nervous, they are depicted in a way that is decorative, feminine, and not austere. Guo apparently intended to depict women and modern urban life as "lively, vigorous, and refreshing."⁴¹

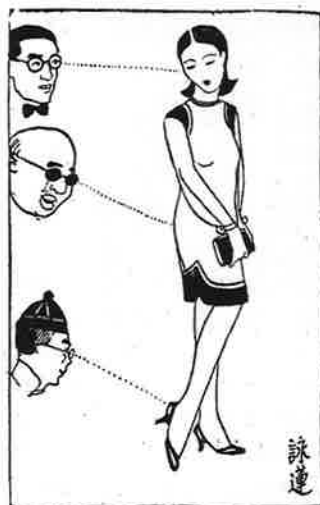
In these male depictions of the Modern Girl, the man's desire for her is apparent, but so is hers for him. Many of the caricatures show the male gaze at her. In public and private spaces—at work, in the streets, on balconies, on the bus, in the classroom, in front of the camera, and in men's fantasies—the Modern Girl is always being looked at. While she is represented as an object of desire, fetishism, and voyeurism, she often does not appear to be passive but a desiring subject instead. She rarely shuns such gazes but instead blatantly ignores them, enjoys them, gazes back, or even purposely provokes and attracts them. She also gazes at herself: she is narcissistic and consciously makes herself sexually attractive. She is aware of the value of her charm and uses it in her relationship with men. What these caricatures say, essentially, is that the Modern Girl solicits male attention. In the male's projection of his desire through the Modern Girl, the young woman becomes a powerful figure because she, while an object of the gaze, also possesses the gaze and thus is capable of objectifying those who would objectify her.

When the Modern Girl is depicted as interacting closely with men instead of as a distant spectacle, the caricatures reveal a critical attitude in general: she appears to be calculating, flirtatious, venal, and greedy. She is a gold digger; the first thing she looks for in a relationship is the man's money.⁴² She is a consumer who uses her checkbook compulsively.⁴³ Her conspicuous consumption of commodities, including cosmetics, leads to spousal tensions. The crisis caused by transformation of the Chinese family from principally a unit of



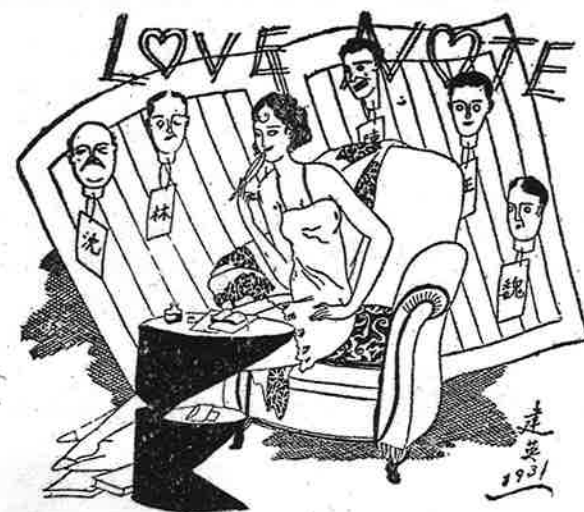
9.5 "Brutal torture . . . A shy young man stepped on the trolley bus," by Guo Jianying. *Jianying manhua ji*, 1934.

9.6 "The photographer thinks that these are his best lenses," by Lu Shaofei. *Manhua daguan*, 1931.



9.7 "A new teacher has come to the school," by Wang Zhenhui. *Manhua daguan*, 1931.

9.8 "Three stages of the gaze," by Yonglian. *Manhua daguan*, 1931.



9.9 "Memos of love," by Guo Jianying. *Manhua daguan*, 1931.

production to one of consumption is narrated through the spending habits of the Modern Girl. She does not know how to do housework or take care of a baby.⁴⁴ She is treacherous, entertaining her husband's friends when he is on a trip.⁴⁵ She is unchaste; premarital sex and simultaneous relationships with multiple men are normal for her. In Guo Jianying's "Memos of Love," a Modern Girl keeps information about men—names, ages, looks, physiques, wealth—and assigns a grade to each item under each name. When she wants a man who knows how to have fun, she calls Wang and extracts "unlimited pleasure from this handsome young man." When she needs money, she writes Shen because "this old man's wallet is always full." When she wants to take a walk, she calls Lin; and if she needs someone with strength, she turns to Chen.⁴⁶

In these cartoons, men's experience with urban life appears to be totally different from the Modern Girl's. The cartoon images of the Modern Girl are highly dramatic and dramatized—these young women are always in public or places of entertainment: coffee shops, shoe stores, university campuses, dance halls, parks, beaches, and city streets. In contrast, quotidian and mundane themes are reserved for the male figures, who are often depicted as trapped in domestic, private spaces. The men are the ones who have to worry about the responsibilities of family and domestic life: mending socks, taking care of babies, bringing home the bread, and, as shown in figure 9.11, paying for the wife's expenditures to keep up her "modern" look.



9.10 "Mama is not home," by Zhang Guangyu. *Manhua daguan*, 1931.

9.11 "Clothing, food, and housing," by Zhang Guangyu. *Manhua daguan*, 1931. Inside the house, a woman with the Modern Girl look is gazing at herself in a mirror.



The Modern Girl's aura of romance provokes male longing, but also fears. Just like Mr. Hu in *Shanghai Express*, the male figures in the caricatures appear to be trapped between their desire for the charming femininity of the Modern Girl and the danger of that charm. They are often overwhelmed by fears: of contracting sexually transmitted diseases; of competing with other men for women's attention; of dysfunctional relationships; and of rejection, emotional pain and loneliness. For men, urban life means both anxiety resulting from their own desires and fears caused by the constant presence of temptation. Men appear in these cartoons to be the victims in this new gender relation. In contrast to the confident Modern Girl who is totally at ease with and in command of modern urban life, her male counterpart seems to have difficulty living up to her challenge.

A reversal of power relations between the sexes and the contrast between powerful women and powerless men are clearly evident in these cartoons. The men do not assume the usual postures that signal power; for example, they do



9.12 "Playthings of different times," by Shen Baohui. *Manhua daguan*, 1931.

not stand in the conventional male stance, with legs apart and feet parallel. When their arms are outstretched from their bodies, their gesture does not signal power and authority but petty meanness or surprise. The body language of the women also reflects a break with traditional roles. They occupy no less, and very often even more, space than men, and their stance is neither modest nor less affected than that of men. Women are rarely shown with feet together or arms held close to their torsos—except where the artists depict ideal types. Female gestures are not responsive; instead, women often initiate actions and interactions with men. Their facial expressions are more individualized and articulated than those of men. The Modern Girl does not keep to herself. She gazes directly and smiles flirtatiously. With her slender waist, polished nails, painted red lips, plucked eyebrows, careful makeup, fashionable attire, and delicate high heels, the Modern Girl is a perfect image of seductive aggressiveness. She is always romantically involved with men but turns a deaf ear to male professions of love and is a threat to the patrilineal household—she does not cook, clean, sew, or have babies. In these cartoons, women conquer men; women, no male playthings, treat men as their playthings; husbands take on what should have been wives' work; men follow women; and women's images loom larger than men's. If the young, educated urban men sought their version of ideal marriage in modern women, then the Modern Girl figure was used to stand in for these women who, in reality, often turned out to be "imperfect" companions in the eyes of their male counterparts.

In these cartoons, the social imbalances with which the hapless men have to

cope make them, instead of the women, objects of laughter. Caricatures speak in coded language whose deciphering releases recognition and understanding in the audience. The resulting laughter reveals that the observer recognizes in the image before him his own imperfection and despairs over it while triumphing over it aesthetically.⁴⁷ The cartoonists apparently believed that their audience would understand and identify with the images and captions. The expected, knowing chuckles of the male readers thus indicate a common understanding of male identity that would not have existed without the image of the Modern Girl. She might have been comfortingly fictional, but she played a central role in defining modern masculinity.

The "Superficiality" of the Modern Girl

The Chinese Modern Girl was criticized fiercely by many of her contemporaries, including the leftists, nationalists, and different strands of feminists. All the criticisms of her, however, share a common vocabulary, focusing on her "superficiality." She was "degenerated" (*duoluo*), "indulgent" (*xiangle*), "comfort-seeking" (*anyi*), "parasitic" (*jisheng*), "decadent" (*tuifei*), "vain" (*xurong*), "extravagant" (*shechi*), "impetuous" (*ganqingyongshi*), and "slavish to foreign (products)." Her sexuality was commodified (*xing shangpin hua*), which made her a prostitute in disguise (*changji bianxing*). Four aspects of the Modern Girl, in particular, were singled out by her critics. First of all, her appearance solicits male attention. She wears qipao, high heel shoes, and permed hair. She applies face powder, rouge, and lipstick. She chases after new fashions. Her behavior was also scrutinized. She dances, frequents cinemas, enters men's rooms, and makes appearances in public gatherings. Her marriage, love, and sexuality received condemnation. She prefers to stay single, feels negative about family life, and refuses to have children. Or, otherwise, she is flirtatious, cohabits with men without getting married, and becomes pregnant out of wedlock. Sometimes the Modern Girl even practices homosexuality. She openly seeks sexual pleasure, plays emotional games with men, and pays too much attention to their appearance. She was also denounced for her consuming imported clothes and cosmetics and indulging in good food and wine.⁴⁸

To the leftists, the Modern Girl and her male counterparts such as Shào Xunmei were products of colonial culture. As Louise Edwards argues, the Modern Girl was a site where leftist intellectuals attempted to define women's modernity by rescuing the New Woman from her shallow counterpart. The Modern Girl, to them, usurped personal style as a political tool and depoliti-

cized it. Challenging conventional dress codes had been a radical act for youth of the May Fourth period; choosing to have natural feet and bobbed hair and wearing the short skirt adopted by students could make a young woman a social outcast or even cost her life. Edwards argues that the May Fourth modern woman was conceived as "politically aware, patriotic, independent, and educated." In contrast,

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, big Shanghai companies used the modern woman as an enticement to purchase and consume "modern" goods and services. In this commercial framework, the modern woman was glamorous, fashionable, desirable, and available. Thus, two decades after their first appearance in 1918, the modern woman became a symbol of a national modernity that was commercially rather than politically centered. Commercial power usurped the reformist intellectual's guardianship of the modern woman.⁴⁹

In distinguishing a real from a pseudomodern woman, intellectuals in the post-May Fourth era dismissed external manifestations of modernity such as clothing, hairstyles, and shoe styles as superficial trappings. A truly modern woman, they argued, had inner qualities centering on an abiding concern for China's national welfare. This preoccupation with the moral attributes of the modern woman, Edwards argues, was an attempt by some reformist intellectuals to reclaim their role as enlightened moral guardians and therefore leading advisers for the nation.⁵⁰ Sarah Stevens also points out that women's bodies were used to enact the struggle between conflicting aspects of modernity. The Modern Girl and the New Woman serve different functions in literary texts. The New Woman is always linked to the positive aspects of modernity. She symbolizes the vision of a future strong nation and her character highlights the revolutionary qualities of the modern women (*nüxing*). As Stevens puts it, "The contrasts between the figures of the New Woman and the Modern Girl illustrate the tensions inherent within the very construction of modernity itself."⁵¹

The Nationalists and leftists, although political rivals, shared commonalities in their criticisms of the Modern Girl. The heyday of the Chinese Modern Girl roughly overlapped with the "Nanjing Decade" from the Nationalist government's reunification of China in 1927 to the Japanese invasion in 1937. In addition to purging radical intellectuals and silencing the left, the new nationalist government began to regulate daily life as soon as it took control of the cities. "Cloth demons"—women in "Westernized" fashions—were to be banned from public spaces.⁵² Many cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Tianjin, and Hankou, organized "Brigades of Destroyers of the Modern"

(*Modeng pohui tuan*), whose members patrolled the streets and cut women's clothes if they appeared too "modern" and "strange."⁵³ The government also enforced the regulation by policing public spaces and arresting women in "strange clothes."⁵⁴

The policing of women's fashion reached a peak during the New Life Movement in 1934. Inspired by German and Italian Fascism, this was an attempt to mobilize the masses during a time of national crisis by fostering in them qualities such as frugality, self discipline, and a spirit of self-sacrifice. During the New Life Movement, the Modern Girl look was considered un-Chinese, and her consumerism once again became an object of criticism and reform.⁵⁵ Song Meiling, wife of Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, claimed that Chinese women should not wear permed hair, which was banned, together with nail polish, especially among professional women.⁵⁶ Women were required to abide by dress codes that limited the length of dress, jacket, and skirt, and to abandon "modern" (*modeng*) fashions.⁵⁷ These bans and codes, however, were not very effective and rarely followed. Public morality and national mobilization were excuses for these restrictions, and the national economy was another. The Modern Girl's consumption of imported luxury goods allegedly hurt China's economy. Men and women were told to wear plain clothes made of China's own fabric.⁵⁸ The year 1935 was designated "Year of National Products for Women" and the Modern Girl image, including photos of movie stars like Hu Die (Butterfly Wu), was widely mobilized to promote Chinese products. Here, the Nationalist government apparently attempted to recruit the Modern Girl as citizen, albeit still through consumption.

Unlike what had been historically considered models for women's liberation — the good wife and wise mother of the late Qing, the radical Nora, the professional women, and the working-class women — the Modern Girl was seen by most feminists as pulling the movement a step back. The May Fourth and New Culture Movement encouraged young women to venture into the public realm, to pursue modern education, to break away from the patriarchal family, and to struggle for free love and marriage. The Modern Girl appeared to be fulfilling most of these conditions. But what the Chinese Nora left was her father's house, and from there she was expected to walk into the "small family" of her husband. The Chinese Modern Girl did not revolutionize or abolish marriage but rather sought to negotiate "a better marriage," which was the main trend during this time. To Lu Xun's answer to his own question, "What happens after Nora leaves home?" — that she would either return, or become a prostitute — the Chinese Modern Girl provided an alternative. She undermined the patrilineal household from inside and brought changes to gender relations in everyday interactions with men and through new expectations for marital relations.

In this way, the romance she offered posed a major threat to the patrilineal family. As Sally Mitchell points out, "Girl's culture suggested new ways of being, new modes of behavior, and new attitudes that were not yet acceptable for adult women. It authorized a change in outlook and supported inner transformations that had promise for transmuting women's 'nature.'"⁵⁹

The Modern Girl and the modern man, the next generation of the May Fourth youth, together created new gender relations and entangled interests, as well as hopes and disillusionment for the urban nuclear family. The Modern Girl's aura of romance, together with the modern man's attraction to it, destabilized the patrilineal family. Beneath her consumerist façade, the ebullient, uncontrollable Modern Girl challenged, historically and historiographically, male-centered conceptions of "youth" and commandeered societal expectations of the "girl-wife-mother" life cycle. The Modern Girl herself rarely voiced protest against criticism, but her having fun in the modern city with a smile on her face definitively caused plenty of fear.

Notes

I am indebted to Susan Fernsebner, Joshua Goldstein, and the Modern Girl Around the World Research Group at the University of Washington for their comments and suggestions.

1. Zhang, *Shanghai Express*.
2. Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*.
3. Laing, *Selling Happiness*.
4. Yunshang, "Lun Modeng nülang zhi suo you chansheng" in *Funiu gongming*, June 1933, 2–6.
5. *Young Companion*, no. 11, 1.
6. Ma, *Liangyou yi jiu*, 236–37.
7. Lo, "Historical Narrative and Literary Representation," 47–98.
8. Liang Desuo, "Bianhou yu" in *Young Companion*, no. 50, 2.
9. Ibid.
10. Yang Gonghuai, "Shanghai zhiyejie de nüzhuyuan," *Shanghai shenghuo*, no. 4 (1939): 20–21. Goodman, "The Vocational Woman and the Elusiveness of 'Personhood' in Early Republican China," 265–86.
11. Xu Xing, "Shanghai de nügong," *Shanghai shenghuo*, no. 4 (1939): 24–25.
12. *Shenbao*, 23 January 1930, 15.
13. *Shenbao*, 13 January 1930, 15.
14. "Opening remarks" in *Furen huabao* 1, no. 1.
15. Zhang Lilan, "Liuxing jie de bei xi ju," *Furen huabao* 25 (1935): 9–10.
16. Jianying, "Modeng shenghuo xue jiangzuo," *Furen huabao* 1, no. 1 (1933): 16.
17. Ms. Zhao Lianlian, "Ruguo wo shi ge nanzi," *Furen huabao* 16 (1934): 17.

18. Hu Kao, "Zhongguo nüxing de zhizhuo mei" and Moran, "Wairen muzhong zhi Zhongguo nüxing mei" in *Furen huabao* 1, no. 4 (1933), special issue on beauty of Chinese women, 10-12.
19. "Biaozhun meiren," *Furen huabao* 1, no. 1 (1933): 18.
20. Ouwei Ou, "Zhonghua ernü mei zhi gebie shenpan," *Furen huabao* 1, no. 4 (1933), special issue on beauty of Chinese women, 12-16.
21. Zhang Lilan, "Nide xiandai shenghuo quwei yingyou zenyang de chengdu ne?" *Furen huabao*, 25 (1935): 13.
22. Ma Guoliang, "Shidai nüxing shenghuo zhi jiepou," *Furen huabao* 15 (1934): 9-11.
23. Huang Jiade, "Lao chunü de houhui," *Furen huabao* 27 (1935): 6-7.
24. Xu Xinqin, "Shidai xiaojie de jianglai," *Shidai manhua* 1, inaugural issue (1934).
25. Glosser, "The Truth I Have Learned," 121.
26. Ibid., 139.
27. Mann, "Grooming a Daughter for Marriage," 94.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 101.
30. Huang Jiade, "1934 nian de Meiguo nu daxue sheng," *Furen huabao* 14, special issue for the New Year (1934), 25-26.
31. Xu Xinqin, "Shidai xiaojie de jianglai," 6.
32. The discussion in this section is based mostly on cartoons collected in Ye Qianyu, ed., *Manhua daguan*, published in Shanghai in 1931, unless otherwise referenced.
33. Bi and Huang, *Zhongguo manhua shi*, 93.
34. Hutt, "La Maison D'or," 111-42.
35. Bi and Huang, *Zhongguo manhua shi*, 86.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 43.
38. Ibid., 56-57, 116.
39. McLees, *Baudelaire's "Argot Plastique"*, 15.
40. Guo, *Modeng Shanghai*, 16.
41. Chen Zishan, "Modeng Shanghai de xiantiao ban: Guo Jianying qiren qihua," in Guo, *Modeng Shanghai* (no page).
42. Lu Zhixiang, "Her Hope," in Ye, *Manhua daguan*, 64.
43. Lu Shaofei, "Woman's Checkbook: To Save or Not to Save?" in Ye, *Manhua daguan*, insert, 4.
44. Guo, "No Need to Worry," in Guo, *Modeng Shanghai*, 20.
45. Lu Shaofei, "Jihui," in Ye, *Manhua daguan*, 75.
46. Guo, "Ai de beiwang lu," in Ye, *Manhua daguan*, 71.
47. McLees, *Baudelaire's "Argot Plastique"*, 33-40.
48. Yunshang, "Lun Modeng nulang zhi suo you chansheng," 2-6. Also see Sachiko Egami, "Xiandai Zhongguo de 'xin funü' huayu yu zuowei 'modeng nulang' daiyanren de Ding Ling," *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan*, no. 2 (2006): 66-88.
49. Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China," 116.
50. Ibid., 115.
51. Stevens, "Figuring Modernity," 86.
52. Beiping Municipal Government, *Jingshi jingcha gongbao*, 25 June 1927 (no page number).
53. Beiping Municipal Government, *Shizheng pinglun*, 1 June 1934, 58-59.
54. *Jingshi jingcha gongbao*, 16 July 1927.
55. Gao Long, "Tantan funü biao zhun fuzhuang," *Funü yuebao* 1, no. 5 (June 1936): 9-10.
56. "Shi Jiaojie jin zhi nü jiaoyuan tangfa tuzhi," *Funü yuebao* 2, no. 8 (September 1936): 20.
57. "Bang Xinyunhui qudi funü qizhuang yifu," *Funü yuebao* 1, no. 3 (April 1935): 53-54; and "Guangzhou qiangzhi zhixing qudi qizhuang yifu," *Funü yuebao* 1, no. 9 (October 1935): 31-33.
58. "Shi Shanghui chengqing qudi qizhuang yifu," *Funü yuebao* 1, no. 7 (August 1935): 35.
59. Mitchell, *The New Girl*, 3.