

Visual Politics and Shanghai Glamour

Hu Xueyan passed a clothier's shop one day and caught sight of an attractive young woman leaning by the entrance. He stopped to look at her; she turned away and shut the door. Displeased, Hu Xueyan sent a go-between to the clothier. Hu offered seven thousand *yuan*. The clothier gave in and Hu took the woman as his concubine.

On the wedding day Hu Xueyan threw an extravagant banquet and entertained a large number of guests. At the end of the evening he went into the bridal chamber. He broke open a new jug of wine and sipped alone. After he had had enough to drink he ordered the bride to take off her clothes and lie naked in bed. Hu ordered a male servant to follow him, holding high a tall candle thicker than the arm that gave out brilliant light. Hu moved about and encircled the bed multiple times, viewing and gazing from all angles. After a long while he stroked his beard and gave out a gratified laugh. He said to the woman: "You spurned my gaze the other day. How did you like it at this moment?" With that, he hastened out of the chamber and spent the remainder of the night in the quarters of another concubine.

At dawn Hu sent a maid to the bride with a message. "Take anything you'd wish from this chamber. Leave and marry someone else. There is no room in my house for you."

The bride did what she was told and hauled away objects that were worth over twenty thousand pieces in gold. She returned to her father and the clothier became a very wealthy man.

—Li Boyuan, "Hu Xueyan," *Nanting biji* (1906)

In the year 1853 the Taiping rebels burst through the mountain passes of southwestern China and poured down the Xiang River valley. They sacked Wuhan, the imperial stronghold in the upper Yangzi, and emptied out the governor-general's office, which contained over two million taels of silver. Thus fortified, rebel forces charged eastward to take town after town, the ranks of their followers swelling into the tens of thousands. They captured Nanjing, declared it the capital of the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace," and went on to take Suzhou, the seat of the governor-general of the lower Yangzi. The Suzhou elite, famed for their poetry, refinement, titles, and wealth consisting of silk, rice, silver, and copper coins, fled before the charging rebels. Many sought refuge in

Shanghai, doubling the city's population and necessitating the creation of new offices that regulated hygiene, housing, public works, and relief in the concessions.

On a fine spring day in 1856, Ge Yuanxu, one such Suzhou aristocrat who had fled his hometown, strolled through a seasonal market near Nanshi. He found himself gazing through the bars of wooden cages and reinforced crates at parrots, cranes, mandarin ducks, peacocks, deer, and leopards. The produce stalls offered a splendid display of harvest colors: grapes, lychees, honey tangerines, almonds, cashews, dates, prunes, chestnuts, and pomegranates. There were also imported plants, trees, fish, birds, fruits, and nuts, often with perplexing foreign names containing multiple syllables.¹ The market seemed to have everything: ginseng and chocolate, clocks and seal stones, glass balls and sutra beads, and anatomical drawings and acupuncture charts. The goods enriched restaurant menus and cuisine selections, added interest to homes and gardens, introduced new prescriptions for medical cures and happiness, and, by and large, enhanced the imagination for consumption.²

The emporium, a place of abundance, incongruity, variety, and exoticism, consisted of hundreds of stalls and booths and was the setting of proud discoveries, intricate bargaining, triumphant conclusions, and, in some cases, recurrent patronage and long-standing relationships.

In emulation of life, art albums appeared. They contained disparate assemblages of pictures that displayed a wide range of styles and techniques—a visual *mélange* of shapes, lines, forms, and colors. There were pictures that depicted plants, flowers, birds, and animals rarely seen before, possibly inspired by illustrations used in merchandise catalogues in the Guangzhou trade. There were those that juxtaposed depictions of real objects with images of demons, spirits, fairies, and ghosts. Some drawings showed blue-eyed figures capped, collared, cuffed, decorated, buckled, caped, and booted. Other drawings offered introspective portraits of dark-haired subjects with shaven foreheads and long queues, returning a viewer's gaze like the image in a mirror.³ Many drawings told historical stories and reported news. They depicted the fury of modern firearms, the rowdiness of marketplaces, the outlandishness of foreign things, the grandeur of public ceremonies, and so forth. The best-known painter of this genre was probably Wu Youru, whose three-volume set depicted the city's "hundred trades," "hundred sights," and "hundred beauties," in addition to various events.⁴ These volumes, lithographed and published, distributed images of Shanghai far and wide.

The local people, meanwhile, behaved in ways that raised eyebrows.

Shanghai's "good-for-nothing" ruffians sold beef and "blatantly" displayed cut-up oxen parts despite long-held Buddhist sensitivities. Their customers used knives and forks and ate steak medium rare. Contemporary reactions to elaborate meals of steak and wine seemed evenly divided between labored admiration for the etiquette and involuntary horror at the cuisine.

The city's mercantile rich, in blatant disregard for sumptuary laws and modesty, donned silk, fur, jewels, and jade, and had horse-drawn carriages attended to by private entourages.⁵ They frequented the pleasure quarters, gave lavish banquets of shark-fin soup and lamb chops, and struck deals in the company of women. Their "retained" ladies wore diamonds and jeweled wristwatches, and rode with men in open coaches through the busiest sections in town. These women put such exquisite care into their appearance that they began new fashion trends, from makeup and hairstyles to jewelry, watches, shoes, and clothing.⁶

At the turn of the last century, cross-dressing and costume plays came into vogue.⁷ With the establishment of the first women's schools in Shanghai, even daughters from gentry families began unbinding their feet, attending social events, and conversing with men.⁸ Diplomats and Westernizers approved of such trends. Sheng Xuanhuai's numerous daughters, who added prestige to the exclusive McTyeire School, were among the first to convert to the Protestant faith, to insist on monogamy, and, eventually, to sue their brothers for an equitable share of their father's vast estate.

Women featured largely in the gossip columns and exposé fiction produced by a new breed of professional voyeurs who wrote for the city's emerging publishing industry.⁹ Guidebooks contained detailed reviews of what to see, where to dine, what to order, and where to stay—essentially advising how to hold on to one's purse strings and not act like a country bumpkin. In the late 1890s local gazettes periodically sponsored beauty contests and ranked the women in the pleasure quarters according to—as we would say today—"customer satisfaction."¹⁰ By the 1920s leading magazines such as *Liangyou* devoted full sections to the photo portraits of "college queens." In the eyes of many, Shanghai's grandest "spectacle" was the figurative consumption of women and the commodification of their public image.

But the "spectacular" nature of Shanghai derived ultimately from the presence of the Europeans, who built the city and created the space in which these women found their new place. The authorities of the International Settlement, through the adoption of municipal codes, did much

to regulate civilian conduct on the street and at public places. The municipal law required, for example, that all carriages slow down when crossing a narrow bridge. No one was allowed to stop a cab or cart in the middle of a road, to dig a ditch, or pave over a road without first notifying the police. All vehicles were required to light lamps after sunset. No one was to dump garbage or urinate on the street. Venders and peddlers could not shout their way across town or park their stands at the doorways of trading firms. It was against the municipal code to sell unlicensed alcohol, spoiled fish or meat, or wild animals either on the street or in teahouses. No fireworks, gambling, brawling, fighting, or noisy arguing was permitted, either on the street or in teahouses. It was against the law to hold live poultry by the feet when transporting them. It was also against the law to break off the branches of trees or plants growing on public property.¹¹

The Europeans, in short, had built a place of a different order. Apart from all the imported items—birds, animals, prints, pictures, cameras, telescopes, printing presses, anatomical knives, light bulbs, detergents, gramophones, and moving pictures—Shanghai was a spatially re-imagined place of clock towers, church steeples, park greens, paved roads, street lights, tramways, domed tops, vaulted ceilings, stepped entrances, colonnaded fronts, and steel and cement structures that housed images of the Madonna and child. Functionally and organizationally, in addition to the trading houses, banking offices, docks, warehouses, clubs, hostels, and waterfront bars, there were fire stations, schools, newspapers, printing houses, churches, police stations, court houses, consular offices, and a municipal council. Eventually, in the shade of mature trees, there were also cemeteries containing the remains of the inhabitants from previous generations.

SHANGHAI FROM AFAR

At the turn of the last century, educated young men contemplated the lure of Shanghai from behind the high walls of their upper-class compounds in Suzhou. Suzhou's kerosene lamps were ten times brighter than the oil lamps used elsewhere in China's interior. Yet the electric street lights in Shanghai's concessions were ten times brighter still. In Suzhou, the well-informed learned about the world by reading newspapers printed elsewhere, which took up to a week just to reach the county seat. In Shanghai, every person on the street could hear breaking news the same day.

One fictional account tells of Master Yao, a respectable provincial degree-holder (*juren*) from Suzhou, who takes his son and three disciples, all of old-stock gentry, to Shanghai on a study tour.¹² Upon their arrival in the International Settlement, the group has breakfast in a teahouse, during which Master Yao announces his planned curriculum. They are to meet with fellow scholars and students, browse in bookstores and publishing houses, tour new-style schools, listen to a presentation of “Suzhou storytelling” in tea gardens, and attend theater performances. After the evening play they will have supper, which is also to be an educational experience as they plan to sample different cuisines, especially “Western food.” The weekends are for sightseeing in and around Shanghai. They will ride in horse-drawn carriages and explore every inch of the city, from the avenues to the back alleyways. They are also to go to the Zhang Garden (Zhang Yuan) to hear public speeches and to join the gentry rally.¹³

Someone comes by to sell the daily *Shenbao*, *Xinwenbao*, and *Hubao* newspapers as the group finishes breakfast. Just as they begin reading, a quarrel breaks out at the next table. A young woman, casually dressed and wearing cheap jewelry, sits in the company of three men. She has been sharing the same pot of tea with them. She begins to speak excitedly in a raised voice.¹⁴ Once a student, she is now the mistress of the man sitting opposite her at the table, who works as a clerk in a European trading firm. Their companions are a coach driver, who had introduced the couple for a fee, and a runner on the detective squad of the Shanghai Municipal Police. The young woman pounds on the table to underscore her argument, the many gold bangles on her wrist jangling together. Soon after, she jumps to her feet, grabs her estranged lover by his vest, and the two begin struggling with one another. The detective tries to separate them, but has no success. With the help of the coach driver he drags both of them down to the street, where two waiting policemen, “one Chinese and the other a foreigner with red turban and dark face,”¹⁵ promptly step forward. The episode ends with the couple being taken to appear before the foreign magistrate of the concession court.

Master Yao tries to rush his students away from this scandalous scene in the teahouse. But before that happens, a tall man walks up the stairs and steps inside. All eyes turn to this man, who appears to be Western. He has a sunburned face, carries a walking stick, and wears a suit and brown leather shoes. A man by the name of Huang Guomin (literally “yellow countryman”) hails from a corner table; this man is wearing a cotton gown with patched holes. The suited man joins the gowned one, removing his straw hat to reveal a “full head of hair tied into a bun, rather

different from the short hair of the foreigners.” Instead of a Westerner, the newcomer is but “a transformed Chinese.”¹⁶

The Westernized person speaks of his transformation. “Ever since my adoption of Western-style clothing, I have changed all my habits of eating, drinking, sleeping, and walking.”¹⁷ He eats two meals a day and refrains from having snacks in between. He tried taking a cold shower one time and nearly died of it. He tries to take a bath everyday, but has not been altogether successful. He is not sure whether to keep his hair long or cut it short, and he is confused about which the foreigners believe is more hygienic.

The two episodes in the teahouse share a refrain about the strangeness of Shanghai seen through provincial eyes: women in public, foreigners in the city, and a new breed of Chinese that have adopted Western ways. The state and elite promoted new schools and a new curriculum, the *shangxue* and its declared value of science and patriotism. The teahouse audience nonetheless saw immodesty and transgression, absurdity and humiliation. What to make of the foreign in their midst remained an issue of mixed feelings and uncertainty.

Much of Shanghai’s urban history in modern times concerns the efforts made by a Westernizing economic elite, in collaboration with the state, to bring about the indigenization of the foreign and the domestication of novelty. Imported gadgets, so long as they remained “foreign” and “exotic,” were occupying only a marginal place in Chinese lives. Goods that had emerged to play a large role in a changed way of life, on the other hand, were those that had necessarily become domesticated in that very process. In the first decades of the twentieth century, with the rise of light industry based in Shanghai, the city’s new enterprises invested considerable effort to promote the novel and to tame the strange, to produce the lure of the modern and to soothe unease over the uncomfortable. By the 1920s there were Chinese owners making and selling Western-style hats, walking sticks, leather shoes, handkerchiefs, and suits, along with a multitude of other articles. Meanwhile, a new culture of image-making developed, producing popular advertising campaigns and transforming the visual dynamics of the urban space.

ADVERTISING AND THE MAKING OF NANJING ROAD

In the 1920s, Nanjing Road (then known as Nanking Road), the main thoroughfare in the International Settlement, became a leading shopping street and the home of a new commercial culture.¹⁸ Four major depart-

ment stores (Sincere, Wing On, the Sun, and Sun Sun) were located on Nanjing Road, in addition to a whole host of makers and retailers of fine jewelry, watches, shoes, hats, satin, fabrics, dresses, suits, children's clothing, eyeglasses, cosmetics, and so forth.¹⁹ Local historians refer to a "Nanjing Road Phenomenon" that combined new designs for shop fronts, new patterns of merchandise displays, new standards of quality assurance, and new attitudes in customer service.²⁰ These changes reinvented the "shop" much as the manuals advised (see chapter 2) and turned shopping into entertainment. A stroll down Nanjing Road, as the Suzhou gentleman's stroll through the Nanshi market had been a half century earlier, was a pleasure and an experience. Yet the two strolls underscored not only the differences between the seasonal markets of old and the newer fancy shops on municipal blocks, but also that between a predominantly male versus female shopping crowd. The new shops were often housed inside steel and cement buildings with large glass panes. Window shopping became more in fashion, as customers were able to look in from the anonymity of the street without being accosted by the clerks. A whole range of restaurants, bakeries, food companies, theaters, movie houses, and amusement halls established their presence along the way. Shopping acquired certain glamour. It had also shed its dimly unsavory taint so as to permit women from middle-class households to indulge in this pleasure in the company of their "sisterhood."²¹

The leading store that glamorized the shopping experience was no doubt the Wing On Department Store. Wing On was a subsidiary of the Hong Kong Wing On Company that was launched by a group of Cantonese investors who had learned their craft from British department store operators in Sydney. But Wing On was not Shanghai's first retailer offering a diversified line of imports—that distinction belonged to the equally glamorous Sincere Company, which opened in 1916 as an offshoot of two Western-owned shops of limited scale, in operation since the turn of the century.²² Nor did Wing On spearhead the practice of selling a diversified inventory of household goods. Retailers featuring an assortment of Chinese and Western goods (*hua yang zahuo* or "Chinese-Western miscellany") had already appeared in Shanghai in the mid-nineteenth century. These shops had derived their practice, in turn, from retailers merchandizing an assortment of goods transported across long distance from north and south China—the *Jing Guang zahuo* or "Beijing-Guangzhou miscellany."

Yet when the Shanghai Wing On Company opened its doors for business on September 5, 1918, it surpassed all other retailers in a variety of

ways. It occupied a prime location in the International Settlement. It had taken out a thirty-year lease, at fifty thousand *yuan* a year, from Silas Hardoon, a Sephardic Jew who had become Shanghai's leading real estate magnate. And its opening was the culmination of two years of careful planning that included the construction of a four-story building with a basement. It was capitalized at two million Hong Kong dollars, a record figure for a retailer. It featured forty departments with goods that included light industrial products (towels, linen, bath robes, undergarments, soap, toothpaste, electric fans, heaters, kitchen appliances, utensils, dinnerware), clothing and accessories for women, men, and children (fabric, silk, ready-to-wear, scarves, sweaters, hats, shoes, walking sticks), luxury items (jewelry, watches, pens, musical instruments, clocks, radios, cameras, vases, antiques), specialties (ginseng, herbs, Western medicine, tea, alcohol), home furnishing (furniture, rugs, lamps, luggage), and Chinese and Western candy, canned foods, dry goods, and delicacies. The management put much thought into both the organization of the goods into sales departments and to their strategic placement within the store's vertically-differentiated space. There were spatial designs and suggestions, based on the "science" of customer psychology, that were to suggest a purposeful flow instead of the aimless wandering of shoppers.²³

Wing On's announced distinction, meanwhile, lay not in the diversity of goods that it carried, but in its stocking of *all* valuable brands. While the seasonal markets of the 1860s displayed whatever happened to come their way, Wing On proudly presented itself as the "universal provider." It provided the "hundred goods [*baihuo*] from all around the globe [*huanqiu*]" by casting its shopping net far and wide with the help of its Hong Kong parent company, Shanghai's foreign firms, traveling factory agents, and company buyers in Japan and America. In the past Shanghai retailers had procured their goods from all corners of China. Wing On broke new ground as an active procurer methodically importing from Western Europe, North America, and Japan.

The forty sales and service departments at Wing On were a synergized result that had been studiously managed and astutely commercialized for the realization of the greatest profit potential. In its management, accounting, financing, merchandizing, pricing, advertising, organization, customer service, backend integration, brand name promotion, and the diversification of its operations into real estate, credit service, entertainment, hotels, and restaurants, the company drew on accumulated experiences, customary practices, and European and American models. The "modernity" at Wing On rested on its resolve to be "scientific" in its

pursuit of reliable performance and high return. Other department stores on Nanjing Road—Sincere, the Sun, and Sun Sun in particular—followed suit.

These stores of the Republican era were, in that sense, significantly different from the decentralized assemblage of the seasonal markets of Nanshi in the mid-nineteenth century. The earlier emporium, with its random assemblage of live tropical birds and gruesome bear paws, had stimulated the city's visual imagination with its mindless transgression. The makeshift stalls of the late Qing, with minimal overhead costs, opened or folded as circumstances might dictate. The incorporated Wing On, with its neon lights and cluster of buildings in multiple stories, functioned as a tightly managed corporation and became a Shanghai landmark that was there to stay.

In the 1920s foreign imports made up of about three quarters of Wing On's merchandise. Of the imports, the ratio between European and American goods (Palmolive soap, Quaker oats, Kronin powdered milk, Siemens electronics, Parker pens, Philips radios, Context cameras, typewriters, eyeglasses, refrigerators, space heaters, butter, biscuits, canned foods, brandy) versus Japanese products was about four to one. Machine-manufactured goods made in China rarely appeared on the floors of Wing On, where the "Chineseness" in its global construction consisted almost exclusively of handicrafts and local specialties: Suzhou embroidery, Jiangxi porcelain, Fuzhou lacquer, Jinhua ham—an "Orientalized" conception, one might say, of Chinese goods from a Westernized perspective.²⁴

Wing On operated Chinese and Western restaurants in its luxury hotel, with bars and amusement halls that featured a variety of shows. Much like le Bon Marché in Paris, Wing On endeavored to create a new kind of environment in which the pleasure of modern shopping was fused with that of dining, drinking, and entertaining. It filled over sixty-four thousand square feet of space with products and consumers, deployed an inventory valued at over five hundred thousand Hong Kong dollars, and engaged the service of four hundred men and women, all with a secondary education.²⁵ Sales staff spoke multiple Chinese dialects—Cantonese, Wu, and Mandarin—in addition to English and a smattering of Japanese. "The customer," a large neon sign in the store announced in English, "is always right." Wing On abolished the practice of bargaining, permitted the return of purchased items, collected payments upon delivery, extended credit to prized Chinese and foreign patrons, stood behind the quality of its goods, and provided the services of a host of master craftsmen who had been engaged in special house contracts. For those who could afford

Wing On's prices, shopping was transformed into an experience of luxury and entertainment.

To meet the needs of the multilingual commercial environment, Wing On assembled an educated work force that was versed in languages and numbers. It housed them in dormitories, provided them with meals in company dining halls, dressed them in uniforms, set their daily schedules, regulated their conduct, warned them against gambling and unruly behavior, and handed out rewards and punishments in accordance with sales performance evaluations and revenue results. The Kwoks, who controlled Wing On's management, like the Mas, who ran the Sincere Company, were devout Christians educated in English missionary schools. Until the end of the 1920s, they required that employees attend sermons on Sundays when the stores were closed to observe the Sabbath.²⁶ Wing On was among the first, in 1930, to place women on its sales staff in select departments. The pretty ones created a sensation and acquired nicknames such as "Xishi," the Chinese equivalent of Helen of Troy, or "queen" as was the fashion in missionary colleges. The stationary department had a "queen" selling fountain pens to college dandies. The sweater department, which priced its articles at eighty to ninety *yuan* a piece (at the time a family of four was able to manage on a monthly income of eighteen *yuan*), had a Xishi to model the latest styles. To protect the company's image and reputation, the management nonetheless set stern rules about female respectability. Pregnancy was a condition that often jeopardized career prospects.

The rise of Wing On represented the construction in Shanghai, with professional expertise and institutionalized support, of an incorporated environment that was dedicated to sensory stimulation and material consumption. The company, to be sure, functioned with the able management of a disciplined work force. Yet it prospered not just from the allure of its products, but also from the excitement of shopping that its advertising campaigns and promotional techniques worked to produce. The inauguration of Wing On in September 1917, for instance, began with a grand party. Hundreds of notables and dignitaries were issued invitations to attend a gala reception held on its floors. The party, in turn, was preceded by an intensive newspaper campaign that went on for two weeks, which did much to arouse the public's interest and curiosity, not only about its goods and displays, but also about its bargains. Just as in Émile Zola's novel *The Ladies' Paradise*, where Octave Mouret "revolutionized" nineteenth-century Parisian retail by underselling the smaller, surrounding shop owners—thereby attracting society ladies whose car-

riages jammed his entrance—Wing On drew a multitude of housewives who came for the cut-rate Jinhua ham: a dried, cured, and flavored delicacy made from the choicest cuts of pork raised on family farms in the central hills of Zhejiang.²⁷

Business historians who examined the rise of *le Bon Marché* have argued that the department store—a “drapery shop” that departed from medieval French guild conventions and carried a diverse range of merchandise—was an expression of emerging machine-manufacturing capacity in the mid-nineteenth century. In an expanding economy of size and scale, *le Bon Marché* “democratized luxury” by passing on to urban customers the savings that resulted from more efficient manufacturing and distribution techniques.²⁸

By contrast, the rise of Wing On—and Sincere—had less to do with the store’s connection with domestic Chinese manufacturers than its access to liquid capital and overseas suppliers. In its first two decades of operation, Wing On gave less than 15 percent of its shelf space to Chinese products, which were stocked to address the low end of the pricing structure. A frequent target of public criticism during the anti-foreign boycotts in the 1920s and ’30s, Wing On achieved success not by improving the efficiency in the distribution of manufactured products in increased quantity to a larger market; it excelled, instead, both in the packaging of luxury that targeted an exclusive clientele and in the reorganization of sales and advertising that glamorized shopping.

Business historians have argued that the rise of enterprises such as *le Bon Marché* and Macy’s meant a simultaneous decline of old-style retailers, who lost out under heavy competitive pressure. Unable to compete in price, quality, and selection, master-proprietors in Paris and New York, who practiced their craft in family settings with the help of a handful of clerks and apprentices, were left behind in their dark and cheerless workrooms.

In contrast, the rise of Sincere and Wing On appeared to have the opposite effect on small retailers. Instead of pushing them out of business, the department stores inspired entire districts of old shops to modernize their practices and keep up with new trends. Shanghai’s master hatters, shoemakers, cosmetic dealers, leather goods manufacturers, silk merchants, fur dealers, tailors, jewelers, umbrella makers, scissors makers, and so forth were spared the fate of Zola’s Uncle Baudu or neighbor Bourras. Profiting from the new shopping fad generated by the department stores, old-line retailers transformed their business operations and offered new products. Some made use of imports, while others thrived on

their mastery of new Western-inspired techniques such as the tailoring of coats, *qipao*, or suits. They offered services and products at prices that suited the needs of different sectors of the urban population. They also filled the niches—early morning, late evening, Sundays and Western holidays—left open by department stores. The largest single-product retailers on Nanjing Road were the fabric stores Baodaxiang, Xiedaxiang, and Xindaxiang, which each employed about one hundred employees.²⁹ They addressed the needs of an urban constituency that desired quality and convenience yet were reluctant to pay the price. These shops prospered with the development of niche sales channels. The “backend integration” often went no further than workshops in the back, and stores up front. Yet some cosmetic outlets on Nanjing Road, for example, thrived nonetheless on becoming wholesale suppliers to the provincial hinterland.

Shops on Nanjing Road occupied the top notch in Shanghai’s pyramid of consumer culture. Contemporaries observed that by the 1920s, this part of Shanghai gave evidence that it was quite in tune with the latest fashion trends in the world. With the conclusion of the First World War, Chinese students and workers went to Europe and America in growing numbers.³⁰ They returned home to function as conduits for the dissemination of what they had learned abroad, teaching at fine arts institutes and publishing journals, catalogues, newsletters, or collections with a hefty inclusion of translated articles.³¹ Their work brought new resources to an emerging image industry on its way to professionalizing the practice of advertising, painting, photographing, decorating, building, and so forth.

Art Deco images and motifs, for example, traveled from European cities to Shanghai via students, tourists, designers, and patrons. By the 1930s, Art Deco was the style of choice for a multitude of Shanghai’s palatial dance halls, theaters, and hotels in the foreign concessions. The Park Hotel, commissioned by a consortium of Chinese bankers (Jinchen, Dalu, Yanye, and Shanghai), was a monumental structure that aimed to make a strong statement. Designed by the Hungarian-born Jewish architect, Ladislaus Hudec, it stood, upon its completion in 1934, as the tallest building in Shanghai, and remained so until the 1980s. Its staff was trained by the Shanghai Baptist College’s business school and the CSVE (see chapter 2). As soon as it opened, the cruise industry listed the Park as one of the grand hotels in Asia.³²

The bustling quality of the shopping district on Nanjing Road—the shops and restaurants vying for customers, the assortment of banners and signs announcing slashed prices and new stock, the eager clerks, paid

by commission only, competing for customers—set the scene for numerous photographs. The “Nanjing Road Phenomenon,” embedded as it was in the midst of an ever-changing cityscape, was no mere intensification of traditional forms of commercial activities. The printing press, the publishing industry, the use of photographs and the commercialization of art allowed Shanghai merchants to advertise in new ways. They sponsored posters, calendars, billboards, cigarette cards, and advertisements in newspapers and periodicals.³³ Their use of radio programs, model sites, display shows, and neon signs that lit the night sky also transformed the city’s popular culture. The “Nanjing Road Phenomenon” was not just about the promotion of goods, but also about the production and consumption of images—a collage of images that was more than the aggregate total of the shops and stores. It was the image industry that transformed Nanjing Road into the locus of a commercial phenomenon—a celebration of sponsored pictures that enabled a mobile and “disembedded” consumption of the glamour and abundance of modernity.³⁴

THE IMAGE INDUSTRY

As participants in a business that sought both to entice and to persuade, Shanghai advertisers in the early twentieth century explored multiple strategies. One strategy involved the mobilization of established genres of communication to produce new meanings. Another involved the use of new media to circulate age-old ideas. In both cases the means employed were undeniably “modern,” yet the cultural components that supplied the content were of mixed temporal and spatial origins. Technologically and organizationally “modernized,” “modern” advertising did not prevent advertisers from circulating clichéd notions. On the contrary, as is the case in most other places in the world, the most effective way to promote novel images was to infuse them with old ideas.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, photography, lithography, and the publication of newspapers combined to alter the way pictures were made, reproduced, and circulated in China.³⁵ New technology was initially used to make familiar images. Eventually, it broke with the convention of pictorial composition and enabled composition in new visual forms. Pictures and texts were equally important components of a complex tool used to describe and represent the world. They fascinated a wide range of audiences and proved to be particularly effective as a medium of communication with a popular audience.

Photographic portraiture, for instance, initially borrowed the established conventions of ancestral portraits that had long been a feature in affluent households. Studio portraiture, meanwhile, made use of props and developed their own conventions of staging.³⁶ These formulaic arrangements made their way into advertising posters featuring young women. Artistically, a compositional “genealogy” thus linked the painted portraits of ancestors, commonly used on ritual occasions in late imperial times, to the poster images of young women, colorfully represented for visible display in the Republican era. As common people sought out the colorful prints to adorn their walls, the stern stares of the ancestors eventually gave way to the coquettish smiles of young women. The camera was especially instrumental in replacing the stare with the smile in picture-taking.³⁷

The rise of the textile industry in the early twentieth century played a significant part in the production of images for machine manufacturing. Graphic designs for fabrics, handkerchiefs, pillows, sheets, and quilts used to be the work of young women embroidering at home. By the 1920s such designs became part of a larger industrial manufacturing process.³⁸ Similarly, the printing industry embraced book covers featuring designs of photographed or hand-drawn illustrations.³⁹ They borrowed freely from European and Japanese image-making techniques to produce works of mixed genres, producing pictures that mixed figures, landscape, birds, flora, and calligraphy.

In funding the rise of the image industry, cigarette makers and pharmaceutical companies, with their in-house advertising departments, led the way. The British American Tobacco Company set up an in-house unit for advertising production in 1902; their rivals Nanyang and Huacheng followed suit.

The publishing industry was not far behind. The Shanghai Commercial Press, which dominated the publishing industry with its state-of-the-art printing machines and sales revenue, engaged Chinese, German, and Japanese artists to instruct its trainees on the design of book covers and illustrations. Zhonghua and Kaiming, the former the Commercial Press’s long-standing rival and the latter its emerging one, did the same.⁴⁰ Pictorial illustrations gained particular prominence for Kaiming as it developed the niche market of secondary school textbooks and children’s literature. The British American Tobacco Company and the Commercial Press were the most important enterprises fostering the growth of commercial art in Shanghai. They led in the investment of resources and nurtured a network of image designers who professionalized the practice.

Chemical companies that produced household consumer goods came slightly later, in the late 1920s. The China Chemistry Company advertised heavily in newspapers and magazines. In Tokyo, the same decade witnessed the launching of the cosmetics company Shiseido and the intensive use of colorful pictorial images in the promotion of factory-manufactured beauty products.⁴¹ In Shanghai, the China Chemistry Company used drawings accompanied by texts to promote its brands of mosquito repellent, facial cream, toothpaste, and body lotion. Local businesses in the manufacturing and promotion of fashion products and cosmetics appeared to have barely moved into the machine age. There were no glossy catalogues, as Chinese chemical companies placed their advertisements in newspapers and magazines. As a result, it was the chemical companies, more than the cigarette distributors and the publishing companies, that fostered the careers of cartoonists who excelled in drawings and captions.⁴²

By the 1920s independent studios came into existence. They provided designs for shop signs, advertising banners, trademarks, packaging materials, and, in some cases, fabric patterns, filling out company orders and servicing independent merchants.⁴³ In 1926 Shanghai's first major pictorial magazine, *Liangyou*, was inaugurated. *Liangyou's* success attested to the viability of a commercial formula that combined photographs and images of young women with a modern outlook of life. In the early 1930s two advertising firms, Huashang and Lianhe, came into being. The firms were partnerships of seasoned commercial artists who preferred autonomy to corporate directives.⁴⁴ They accepted contractual engagements from a wide range of business and sought efficiency in artistic production through a methodical system of the division of creative labor.

The most significant visual product, which spearheaded the expansion of cigarettes and soap beyond the Chinese coast, was the calendar poster.⁴⁵ Distributed *en masse* as bonus gifts to customers of various products, successful poster designs reached a circulation of tens of millions per image. In the 1930s Shanghai designs penetrated Chinese-speaking markets not only in the Chinese interior, but also in Hong Kong, Singapore, and throughout Southeast Asia.⁴⁶

Of the first generation of Shanghai's commercial designers, both Zhou Bosheng (1887–1955) and Zhou Muqiao (?–1923) trained with Wu Youru at Taohuawu in Suzhou to design traditional woodblock prints.⁴⁷ In 1917 Zhou Bosheng moved to Shanghai, where he took a job with the Chinese-owned Nanyang Tobacco Company. Zhou's calendar posters

featured female figures in historical costumes, adorned with traditional symbols of felicity and accompanied by clichéd aphorisms of morality. Zhou Muqiao joined Wu Youru's studio after working in Nanshi in southern Shanghai, where he painted shop signs, cigarette cards, and old-fashioned posters for woodblock prints. He too took his images from historical stories, producing series of characters based on dramatized episodes in historical romance. His drawings of opera scenes, often based on *Journey to the West* or *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, featured large casts of characters enacting familiar events.⁴⁸ His myriad characters were clearly outlined in bright colors, and were almost always set in busy scenes that overwhelmed viewers with their complexity of composition.

Zheng Mantuo (1885–1959), who was an apprentice at a photo studio (Eryouxuan) in Hangzhou, arrived in Shanghai in 1914. He had learned the technique of etching, with both pencil and charcoal, to sharpen the contours of enlarged or blurred prints of photo portraits through the manipulation of light and texture. In Shanghai, Zheng Mantuo combined this technique with the use of watercolors, producing subtly layered images of modern women dressed in contemporary fashions. Rather than placing these women in busy settings, he situated them inside the tranquility of private gardens or comfortably furnished rooms, Western-style.⁴⁹

Zheng Mantuo acquired watercolor techniques through his partnership with Xu Yongqing (1880–1953). Xu had been raised in Shanghai's French Jesuit orphanage at Tushanwan, in Xujiahui.⁵⁰ There he learned painting as an apprentice in the production of church iconographic portraits.⁵¹ As partners, Zheng and Xu collaborated on the production of poster images, each complementing the other's talents. Zheng painted the *meiren* (beautiful women) with photo realism, while Xu added Westernized landscapes imbued in a halo of serenity. The partnership produced some of the most popular calendar posters of the 1920s—they vastly eclipsed the popularity of the historical Suzhou folk style (Zhou Muqiao died an impoverished man). They also received the aesthetic endorsement of the brothers Gao Jianfu and Gao Qifeng, leading painters of Lingnan style (Guangzhou) and publishers of the elite Shenmei shuguan (Art Critics Books).⁵²

By the 1920s a second generation of commercial artists came to the fore, who had either apprenticed with the pioneering commercial artists, worked with elite painters of the old school, or graduated from new-style institutes of fine arts. Xie Zhiguang (1900–1976) studied with Wu Youru and Zhou Muqiao, as well as Zhang Yuguang. The latter taught Western-

style stage setting at the new Shanghai Institute of Fine Arts. Xie was credited with the design of thousands of calendar posters in his long career, first as the director of the advertising department for the Huacheng Tobacco Company, and then as a principal with an advertising firm. Liang Dingming (1895–1959), famed in the 1930s for his government-commissioned wall-sized paintings of the Nationalist Revolutionary Army's Northern Expedition campaigns, worked briefly with the British American Tobacco Company in the 1920s. He blended oil-painting techniques into his poster designs and presented images in exceptionally brilliant colors—a feathery shawl in peacock blue atop a flowing dress of silk and satin; the dress, with embroidered borders in cream and burgundy, is tied around the waist with strands of pearls clasped in knots of rubies.⁵³ Liang's sister, Xueqing, also a painter and commercial artist, pioneered the design of fashion.⁵⁴ Hang Zhiying (1900–1947), who entered the Shanghai Commercial Press as a trainee in 1913, took lessons from Xu Yongqing and Zheng Mantuo and claimed inspiration from Disney animation.⁵⁵ Hang's studio, a partnership with Jin Xuechen (1904–1996) and Li Mubai (1913–1991), grew into the best-known and most sought-after design studio in the 1920s. The partners collaborated on the composition of the pictures, each concentrating on aspects of the figure, landscape, advertised objects, and calligraphy.⁵⁶ At the peak of the studio's fame in the 1930s it produced an average of eighty poster designs each month.⁵⁷

The first lithographed poster-calendars, from the late 1890s, were distributed free of charge to patrons of the Shanghai racecourse. The calendars displayed twelve photographs (one for each month) of famous Shanghai landmarks: the Jing'an Temple, the Yu Gardens, the old police station clock, and so forth, plus drawings of a cheering crowd celebrating the winning tickets at the racecourse. The calendars were framed with elaborate border designs accompanied by advertising messages.⁵⁸

Classical beauties, fictional or historical, retained their popularity with painters and audiences throughout the Republican era.⁵⁹ The new sensitivities acquired from photography and human anatomy inspired artists to concentrate on skin tone and texture, to present facial close-ups, and to place the female body under close scrutiny. One Hang Zhiying poster, for example, portrayed a cheerfully smiling young woman with long legs and high heels standing astride a bicycle, her triangular sleeveless top barely covering her full bosom.⁶⁰ Other images from the 1930s depicted women with extended arms and exposed thighs, dressed in gauzy fabrics and situated in an intimate interior space.

The sensual and alluring qualities of these images encouraged desire and possession. But the female figures, despite the center-stage positioning, were but pretexts for the display of an array of goods that included fur-trimmed jackets, high-heeled shoes, electric fans, cigarettes, cushioned love seats, bicycles, cotton thread, and copper thimbles. The faces, eternally youthful and freshly made-up, were virtually identical from poster to poster. But the clothing, jewelry, fashion, furniture, house, and garden displayed an infinite variance in detail. Not even the woman, handsomely adorned and lavishly accommodated, embodied the full picture of Shanghai materialism and consumerism. It was the woman in the midst of an abundance of products that ultimately made up the Shanghai vision of commercial modernity.

Thanks to the persuasiveness of such advertising, smoking became fashionable among affluent Chinese women in the early twentieth century. Women of status sported gold filters and matching cigarette cases—smoking had become the new standard of ultimate sophistication.

STORYTELLING FOR ADVERTISING

In addition to pictures, Shanghai advertisers made use of songs and stories, often via emerging forms of communication such as radio and film, to project ideas and images beyond their immediate sites of production. In the case of Laojiuhe, one of Shanghai's premium retailers of silk and fur, the advertiser's use of popular storytelling (*tanci*) transformed traditional folk performances into a commercialized radio program produced by professionals.⁶¹

Laojiuhe's use of a certain Mr. Ni's storytelling talent, for instance, aired almost as soon as commercial radio became available in Shanghai, which was in the late 1920s. The advertisers selected storytelling because it was a well established form of popular entertainment that had been an integral part of city life for decades. Performed in teahouses from Nanshi to the International Settlement, storytelling consisted of itinerant performers, generally female, who presented their songs and stories to a predominantly male neighborhood audience in an interactive setting. The migration of the art to the radio changed its nature. Listeners from all walks of life could now hear the stories, aided by printed songbooks. The performance was a shared experience that followed a common script rather than a community.

Storytelling on the radio, furthermore, contributed to the rise to stardom for male performers who, as disembodied voices on the airwaves,

reached thousands of middle-class female listeners in the privacy of their homes. These women, previously isolated in the insularity of their sheltered lives, became members of a “listening public” (*tingzhong*) of intimate anonymity via the radio.

Although Laojiuhe, a well-established store that initially operated out of Nanshi, was selling familiar lines of products, the advertisements that it sponsored nonetheless promoted their silk gowns and fur coats as an indispensable part of modernity. The store used images of fashionable young women walking down Shanghai streets lined with multistoried buildings. With bobbed haircuts, silk and fur garments, and high heels, these women seemed weighed down by new purchases in their moments of celebrated gratification. The store’s radio ads sang the delight of sisterhood when modern women went shopping together at Laojiuhe. In this newly fashioned culture of consumption, shopping was not only safe and proper, but also the very embodiment of feminine well-being.

While some advertising campaigns drew attention to the merchandise, others promoted their goods by investing new significance into the act of buying. When selling new or unfamiliar foreign products to prospective customers, for example, consumption went beyond pleasure to become an act informed by an understanding of material progress and advancement, or an enlightened and scientific appreciation of well-being. Such advertising strategies appeared to be particularly relevant when selling utterly unfamiliar products such as milk, or promoting new behaviors such as taking baths.

SELLING SOMETHING NEW

Susan Glosser’s research on You Huaigao’s attempts to sell dairy products, especially milk, is a case in point.⁶² You, the son of Jiangsu gentry, returned to Shanghai in the mid-1930s, after studying agriculture at Cornell, to open a dairy farm in the suburbs. Milk, however, was neither tea nor ice cream, and You had a hard time finding it acceptance as either a regular drink or a special treat. To promote his product, You became the author, editor, and publisher of a weekly pamphlet, which he distributed free of charge to his prospective and established customers. In this pamphlet, *Jiating xingqi* (Family weekly), You idealized the image of happy, prosperous urban nuclear families (*xiao jiating*), managed by women no less fashionably dressed than the customers of Laojiuhe. These women, however, now appeared not as carefree shoppers, but as wives and mothers shouldering familial responsibilities—the drawings placed them in the

interior of their homes rather than in city streets. Regular consumption of milk, You wrote, was healthy not only for babies, but for all members of the family. Yet drinking milk was a habit still to be acquired by most Chinese. A decision to include milk as part of the dietary routine of the family required knowledge and creative innovation on the part of mothers. Only a modern woman, You suggested, would be sufficiently enlightened and thoughtful to see in this unfamiliar product a major opportunity to benefit her family.

As might be expected, images of chubby babies and overflowing bottles of milk adorned the pages of You's journal. In addition, his weekly gave advice to housewives on matters such as how to open a family savings account along with other suggestions related to "scientific" child care and home economics.⁶³ You's messages resonated with the latest instructions dispensed in the classrooms of American missionary schools for girls. They were also endorsed in the pages of publications that amounted to Chinese versions of the *Lady's Home Journal*. Those who bought You's bottles of pasteurized milk were delivered a whole package of pragmatic suggestions about what to do with the rest of their lives. You's advice was presumably intended for the all-around health, physical as well as financial, of every member of the family.

While the owners of Laojiuhe fashioned traditional luxury items, such as silk and fur, into images of modernity, You Huaigao promoted milk by prescribing an entirely new system of home management—to the extent that it became virtually impossible to tell whether You was primarily a family reformer or a dairy farmer. Those who sold known products and those who promoted new items, then, faced different kinds of advertising challenges. If an entrepreneur happened to be dealing with something new, he not only had to buy and sell; he was obliged, in addition, to explain the product's use and justify its proper place in a desired way of life.

PRODUCING THE "NATIONAL"

Goods in themselves, of course, did not drive cultural change. They changed the way people led their lives only to the extent that uses were found for them. Foreign goods engendered changes built around their uses in the process of indigenization. That process was often characterized by a push and pull between the foreign attributes of the thing in itself and the domesticating practices that had been taken up to acclima-

tize them. This tension between the foreign and the domestic was prominent in the material transformation of Chinese lives in Shanghai during the Republican era. A closer examination of the city's recurrent advertising campaigns to promote "national goods," much lauded by contemporaries as spontaneous urban expressions of anti-foreign sentiment, helps to further illuminate this critical paradox.

The "national goods" (*guohuo*) campaigns of the 1920s and '30s had their origin in the popular boycotts against foreign goods.⁶⁴ The most notable of these included, for example, the late nineteenth-century anti-American boycotts organized in Guangdong in protest of American exclusionary acts against Chinese, the nationwide anti-Japanese boycotts in the aftermath of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, and the massive anti-British boycotts of 1925 as a popular reaction against the killing of Chinese workers by the Shanghai Municipal Council police force during the May Thirtieth Incident. The national goods campaign, which gathered momentum in the years after 1925, turned a negative campaign to boycott the foreign into a positive campaign to promote Chinese products.⁶⁵ Riding the wave of popular anger against the British, for instance, the Nanyang Tobacco Company sought to undercut the business of its arch rival, the British American Tobacco Company, by running ads that appealed to the patriotic sentiments of fellow Chinese. These ads urged Chinese consumers to support fellow Chinese manufacturers and to buy "national goods." This choice and consciousness on the part of the consumers were lauded as patriotic deeds.⁶⁶

The national goods movement, as the case of the Nanyang Tobacco Company suggests, was launched by Shanghai's new-style manufacturers and supported by the city's leading financiers. It used the language of nationalism to promote Chinese manufactured goods, and was propagated, among other media, in the pages of Chinese-owned newspapers that sought to fuse mass anti-foreign campaigns with a buy-Chinese merchandising push. Whatever the effects of such efforts, their high visibility and multiple recurrences drew attention to the critical role played by Shanghai's modern business interests in the construction of a nationalist discourse.

But the nationalist language and avowed patriotism of the commercial campaigns were quite misleading at times. In a global capitalist economic system, it was difficult to determine the exact "national" content of any manufacturing process or product.⁶⁷ The owners of the Nanyang Tobacco Company, the Jian brothers, actually held Japanese passports

and had developed very close business connections with Japanese suppliers in their Southeast Asian operations. The company's use of patriotism in its advertising campaigns, furthermore, produced at best mixed results in various sectors of the domestic market. This was because as normative categories, the "nation" and the shared sentiments of "citizenship" were largely urban constructions that had yet to take hold in the country as a whole. Provincial consumers did not always make the connection between their choice of cigarettes and their allegiance to the country. Nationalism, like modernity, was itself a new idea born in the city.

The patriotism of the national goods movement was misleading in yet another sense. There were, generally speaking, at least four sets of dichotomies commonly used by contemporaries as they tried to determine the national content of any given set of goods. A product could be either "domestic" or "imported," and "native" or "foreign," when classified spatially with regard to its place of origin. A product could also be either "Chinese" or "Western," and "traditional" or "modern," when classified temporally with an eye on the differences between China's past and present. Thus oriented, "national goods" such as tobacco, matches, and bedroom linen were "national" only in the sense that they were domestically produced and not imports. To the conservatives, they could readily represent a foreign rather than a native line of products in the not-so-distant past. In other words, though safely "Chinese" as a result of associations with their Chinese owners and promoters, these goods were nonetheless "modern" as opposed to "traditional" in Chinese terms—they challenged rather than maintained established ways. Each one of the national goods, insofar as it entailed a crisscrossing of attributes along these spatial and temporal divisions, had to become the result of an active process of indigenization. The indigenization of these goods was vigorously pursued by a new generation of Chinese entrepreneurs who did not mind mixing the foreign and modern with the Chinese and domestic. In this process, they succeeded in constructing a new material culture which they labeled as "national."

Because national goods were not traditional, Chinese manufacturers of Western-style products thus became active promoters of a new style of life that often combined both Chinese and Western elements. To sell bathrobes and cotton facial towels, for example, the Sanyou Company ran ads that essentially beautified a new rhythm of everyday life. If you rise early, says the ad, you will hear birds singing and find dewy blossoms greeting you under a rosy-hued sky. Be sure to exercise and shower, and then put on the recommended brand of bathrobe so you can enjoy

the morning without exposing yourself to its chill.⁶⁸ Chinese manufacturers of bathrobes and facial towels, in other words, ended up selling recommendations of frequent baths and exercise in which their products were embedded.

Similarly, to sell bedroom linen, mosquito nets, pillow cases, window curtains, and other items of interior decoration, the Sanyou company created a display room on Nanjing Road. Furnished as a home and named the “Peach Blossom Spring” after a fifth-century literary construction of a timeless utopia, the manufacturer used it both to showcase home furnishing products and to suggest new ways to arrange the interior. Apart from its many rooms, each with a specific function, the “Peach Blossom Spring” presumably also comfortably housed a nuclear family. Dolls were tucked into bed like children, wearing pajamas that bore the company’s brandname.⁶⁹ Urban familial happiness was tangibly producible, the showroom suggested, so long as the proper material conditions had been arranged with the help of the right products.

The model home, with its living room, dining room, study, master bedroom, children’s bedroom, and kitchen, corresponded in spatial design to the floor plans of housing units known as *shikumen*: the two-to-three-storied townhouses of stone façades that formed a residential block featuring its own archways and interior courtyards.⁷⁰ Urban housing in this style emerged after the turn of the century and proliferated during the first decades of the twentieth century. The design assumed the needs of the *xiao jiating*, or a nuclear family supported by the income of the head of the household.⁷¹ The *shikumen*, with their enclosed and self-contained design, followed a pattern of spatial arrangement that was distinctively different from traditional-style Chinese gentry compounds. In its attempts to sell a full line of Western-inspired products that were promoted as “national goods,” the Sanyou company ended up merchandising a non-traditional style of life that supported the modern sector of the economy.

One could not, in short, promote new products without also selling new practices in which the products were embedded. Nor would it produce satisfactory results to simply advertise certain goods without arguing for their desirability in a broader sense. Bedroom linens thus led to steel-framed beds, bedrooms in which the beds were placed, floor plans that included bedrooms, and so forth. From bathrobes and bedroom linens it was but a short leap to the promotion of nuclear families, women’s education, savings plans, child welfare, dental hygiene, Western medicine, and more, though the logic was far from binding. Nonetheless, wittingly or not, the manufacturers of China’s “national goods”

turned themselves into the most interested and determined promoters of a transformed way of everyday life in China.

Thanks largely to “national goods” advertising campaigns, a visual culture emerged, in which symbols from China, the West, past, and present were taken out of context, broken apart, and then fused back together to produce new images that gained a growing familiarity in the eyes of urban consumers of the 1930s. Golden Arrow Cigarettes, for instance, offered its customers free gifts that included silver-plated cigarette cases, leather briefcases, wristwatches, and raincoats. To receive the gifts, however, customers had to first collect a complete set of cigarette cards depicting all seventy-two of Confucius’s disciples.⁷² A dye factory presented Snow White and the Seven Dwarves as a new set of “Eight Immortals” belonging to the Daoist pantheon. The new immortals, however, did not ride ocean waves or fly across the sky on the backs of crimson clouds as their Chinese counterparts were known to do—they played innocently in front of a Disney-style castle.⁷³ In another ad, a handful of doves peck away on a lawn while a Chinese woman and her two small children watch with interest. The family and birds share a landscape composed of a pond, sprinkling fountain, winding path, and patches of lawn bordered by hedged green. This tranquil scene was constructed to promote the Shandong Tobacco Company’s cigarettes.⁷⁴

Finally, consider a Coca-Cola poster designed by a famous commercial artist, in which a young woman raises a glass to propose a toast. The smiling girl is portrayed in the color of a Western bride: she has white teeth, pearl earrings, and ivory-colored high heels that perfectly match a sheer *qipao* of shimmering white. She sits alone in a room that emanates the radiant red of a Chinese bridal chamber. On the wall behind her is a Coke logo in red and white. The woman dressed in white and sitting in a red chamber, in other words, is none other than the stimulating drink she is offering.⁷⁵

The national goods movement was thus instrumental not only in the indigenization of a foreign line of goods, but also in the production of consumer images that brought together modern and Chinese. The “Coke girl,” who so alluringly embodied the suggestive sweetness of an American drink, was, in a way, emblematic of the culmination of a quarter century of Shanghai marketing, where the forces of commerce were working both to indigenize the foreign and to commodify images of women. The image places a Western object inside a private chamber, thus revealing the inner chamber to the public. Thanks to the mechanisms of commerce

and the mediation of imaging technology, the imported foreign had been brought *in* just as the Chinese feminine had been brought *out*. In the case of Coke, consumption became linked to that of the Chinese girl; the image filled an interior space that was framed for public gaze. The concept of the “transformed Chinese,” who in the eyes of the turn-of-the-century teahouse observers seemed so awkwardly absurd with his plans for daily showers and Western-style clothing, had thus already become naturalized by the early 1930s as an ordinary urban consumer of casual sophistication and national respectability.

After the founding of the Manchukuo, Shanghai’s department stores called for an all-out boycott of Japanese imports. In November 1932, under the initiatives of Chinese machine-manufacturers, the National Goods Department Store (Guohuo baihuo gongsi) was launched to serve as an outlet for their products.⁷⁶ The Bank of China played a crucial role in facilitating direct connections between the manufacturers and retailers, extending credit where it was needed and reducing risks when its assurance made a difference. Wing On, the “universal provider,” dropped Japanese goods and replaced them with Chinese products. Over seventy Chinese manufacturers signed on with Wing On to become suppliers of flannel and straw hats, parasols, thermos bottles, mosquito repellent, blankets, and a variety of pills for the presumed enhancement of health or alleviation of minor ailments. Over a thousand Chinese manufacturers submitted their samples in the hope of benefiting from Wing On’s marketing prowess. Wing On placed orders, meanwhile, on terms that helped its financial management. This became crucial especially after the Silver Purchase Act of 1934.⁷⁷ Wing On’s turn to “national products” in the mid-1930s was not only a gesture of patriotism, but also a matter of calculated self-interest.⁷⁸

The increased use of cameras, lithography, printing presses, animation films, and oil painting in the 1920s and ’30s had significantly enlarged the repertoire of commercial artists. The rise of a modern sector of economy in Shanghai had contributed, furthermore, to the subversion of pictorial conventions. But the users of these new techniques, who produced images of modernity, were not necessarily bent upon a critique of clichés and conventions. They placed roses on the lapels of a smiling woman who was defined against a spring sky filled with plum blossoms. They put peonies in between her fingers to twirl, and enrobed her brightly made-up face in a collar of fur. Xu Yongqing, the orphan artist raised by Jesuit teachers to paint the Madonna and Child, was the artist of two

famous paintings, *Huqiu* (Tiger Hill) and *Jingyin huiye tu* (Dharma Vision). He placed a Buddhist pagoda atop the well-known hill in the backdrop. He also placed diminutive human figures, either seeking entrance through a gate or contemplating on a rock, under the protective arms of a tall standing tree whose outline is reminiscent of the cross.⁷⁹ The hybrid defies clear-cut interpretive readings of China versus the West, or old versus new. As modernizers, Shanghai's visual artists, who performed by the rules of the marketplace, had taken incremental steps. The visual culture of their making offered ample evidence of innovation and vitality. At the same time, it almost never gave evidence of a self-conscious effort to confront convention or break with the past.

THE POLITICS OF VIEWING

How a "spectacle" came to be perceived as such depended on factors that went beyond the merely intrinsic. It mattered how the practice of viewing took place in context. To promote goods and to show progress, new-style entrepreneurs, in collaboration with the state, organized exhibitions of "national products" and took part in world exhibitions—such as the one in San Francisco at the turn of the century—to present "Chinese goods." Commodities in arranged settings became proper objects of viewing not as goods, but as objects with civilizational attributes, that is, as "Chinese," "modern," and so forth. Technology and the organizational forces of commerce and state thus joined efforts to place before the consumers, as patriotic citizens, spectacles of the machine and the material.

Along with spectacles came display. The Xindu merchants of old had believed in the virtue of self-effacing modesty. Hawking was hardship and peddling produced little dignity. Shanghai advertising, however, trumpeted display and visibility. So much of the Nanjing Road phenomenon was built upon appearance that outfits, accessories, and trappings supplanted genealogy as the source of urban identity.

What then were the sensitivities that informed the production of images from Shanghai? Whose sensitivities were these and what sorts of viewpoints did they promote? How was the Shanghai gaze disciplined to revere or to dismiss, to engage or to avert, to support or to subvert the systems of interest and power at work? What sorts of mechanisms were at work to train Shanghai's viewing eye and to set its visual expectations about the "natural"?

In the lithographed drawings that circulated with newspapers in the

1880s, women saw new things thanks to new patterns of connections with machine-made tools and imported gadgets. In the inner recess of the home, by the bamboo-screened window, a woman sat in front of a sewing machine, her eyes following the movement of the needle on the fabric.⁸⁰ From the top of a balcony, a gathering of young women passed around a telescope to look at distant views for their amusement.⁸¹ A party of well-dressed women, jade bracelets on their wrists, stood around a pool table in a chandeliered room. All eyes were on the one who held her breath and was poised to push the cue, her body delicately arched and her eyes intently focused.⁸² Aided by machines and tools, these women, from multiple angles in their everyday activities, enacted new patterns in the distribution of viewing advantages. By doing so they also turned themselves, through print and drawing, into objects worthy of viewing.

Hu Xueyan, the merchant official of fabulous wealth, was said to pay extraordinary attention to eye care. As part of his morning routine, he would have set before him a plate of colored gemstones. He would devote fifteen minutes to following the rolling stones with his eyes so as to “nourish” his sight. An essential aspect of being privileged in modern times had to do with an ability to see the unseen or unseeable.

With wealth at their disposal, Shanghai’s mercantile rich acquired viewing advantages that challenged the patterns of distribution and threatened the constraining norms within the accepted cultural vista. Yet—to return to the story told at the beginning of this chapter—did wealth justify visual violence? Did Hu’s money make things proper for the clothier’s daughter, who was stripped for his gaze? In bringing her to his house, Hu Xueyan had paid handsomely, in seeming observance of ritual propriety. In sending her away, he had scorned the intent of the ceremonies and rejected the bonds that the performed rituals were to seal. With wealth at his disposal, he emptied the rites of trust and sincerity, turning a solemn act for long-term commitment into a device used for a short-term transaction.

The tale, which begins with the spurned gaze, is thus a story about tension and contestation. It explores the power of money and the bounds of sight vis-à-vis the imperatives of rites. It captures a pivotal moment when market wealth was perceived to threaten the sanctity of established systems of ethics and understanding. It was poised to accept the proposition that money makes right. Yet the tale was not without ambivalence.

Consider the issue of “economism” as Leah Greenfeld has defined it: How far did the material turn succeed in reorganizing ethnical norms in

social practice in Shanghai in the first half of the twentieth century? To what extent did the mercantile logic of transaction gain its legitimacy in the ethical realm, dominated historically by an ethical denigration of the material? Answers to these questions, as the rest of the book will show, provide powerful insights into China's history in the twentieth century.