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THE CARTOONIST HU KAO AND SHANGHAI *MODENG*

In an article written for the January 1939 edition of the English language journal *Asia*, Trinidadian born journalist, Jack Chen (1908-1995), described Hu Kao (1912-1994) as ‘one of the finest of our young modern artists.’² Chen’s approbation of Hu’s work had been repeated time and again in articles promoting the exhibitions of ‘Modern Chinese Pictorial Art’ he had taken to Europe, the USA and China during 1937/38 (Chen 1939).³

Hu Kao had already made a name for himself in Shanghai as a cartoonist and illustrator, having begun his career at the age of 20. A year after his escape from war-torn Shanghai in 1937, he made his way with Jack Chen, via Hong Kong to the Communist base in Yan’an, where he took up a teaching post at the newly established Lu Xun Academy.

The left-wing cartoon movement of wartime China to which Hu belonged remains largely unknown in the West. In China, Hu has been overshadowed by China’s cartoon greats: Ye Qianyu (1907-1995), Ding Cong (1916-2009) and Zhang Leping (1910-1992).

EARLY WORK 1933 -1934

Hu Kao’s early work had appeared in popular cartoon magazines such as *Shidai manhua* (Modern Sketch)⁴ and *Lunyu*⁵ where his ‘art-deco’ inspired humorous cartoons and sketches depicted well-known Chinese film stars, sports personalities and politicians.

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² Chen, J. (1939) ‘Towards a Modern Conception of Art’, *T’ien Hsia Monthly*, Vol. VII, No. 4, p. 342.

³ Chen, J. (1939) ‘Why They go to Yenan’, *Asia*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 1; Chen, J. (1939) *Five Thousand Years Young – Modern Chinese Drawings and Woodcuts*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

⁴ The journal *Shidai Manhua* was also published with the English title *Modern Sketch*.

⁵ The satirical journal *Lunyu* took its name from the Chinese Classic *Lunyu* (The Analects) by Confucius.

Hu's illustrations for the Chinese classic drama *Xixiang ji* (Romance of the Western Chamber) ⁶ had come in for criticism by the influential writer Lu Xun (1881-1936). As 'Father of the Woodcut', Lu Xun gave comments about works of art in letters to friends and associates. In one such letter to Cao Juren (1900-1972) of March 29th 1935, Lu Xun singled out Hu's work for its constraining use of draftsmen's tools.

'Apart from his *Xixiang ji*, I have seen two types of artwork by Mr. Hu Kao, namely, his *You sanjie* [from the *Dream of the Red Chamber*] and *Mangzhong*. They are lively in spirit and refined of line. However, because he uses [draftsman's] tools, [Hu's work] sometimes seems constrained and unnatural. That is to say, sometimes the line takes on a life of its own. The *Xixiang ji* is very well executed and should be published, as both this and *You sanjie* suit the manner of his drawing. However, I think that if he used this way of drawing to 'attack establishment idols' it would make his work more 'caricature-esque' and therefore even more meaningful. Furthermore this would broaden his horizons. I don't know what you think?'⁷

Lu Xun's comments are perhaps more a reflection of his own taste in art, as one of the leading advocates of the European expressionist-inspired 'New Woodcut Movement'. It could be argued however that Hu's 'art-deco' geometric style should be seen his main artistic strength at the time!

HU KAO'S STYLES

It is Hu's 'art-deco' style that one writer has in mind when she claims 'Hu's style is more consistent than that of most other contemporary cartoonists and, in its strong tendency towards stylization, more consciously modern' (Pan 2008).⁸ Consciously modern it certainly is, but it can be seen, even in the early editions of *Shidai manhua*, that Hu's 'style' is far from

⁶ This edition of *Xixiang ji* was published by Shanghai qianqiu chubanshe in May 1935 and Lu Xun's critique was published as part of the forward (*In Memory of Artists*, p. 61). It was republished in the October 1988 issue of *Zhongguo lianhuanhua* 'Chinese Comic Strips' (*In Memory of Artists*, p.63).

⁷ Lu Xun (1991) *Lu Xun xuanji: shuxin juan*, Shandong: Shandong wenyi chubanshe, pp. 381-382. Cao had tried his hand at the publication of a manhua journal earlier that year. *Qunzhong manhua* began in Shanghai in February 1935 published by Qunzhong manhua she.

⁸ Pan, L. (2008) *Shanghai Style Art and Design Between the Wars*, San Francisco: Long River press, p.155.

consistent. In a review from the Hong Kong leg of Jack Chen's travelling exhibition, the journalist Chun Kum-Wen mentions: a drawing of large size by Ho Ko [Hu Kao], entitled 'Refugees', as being one of the best shown in the exhibition. 'Its well-balanced composition and beautiful lines reveal the sorrows and suffering of millions of good-natured common people caused by the Japanese invasion' (Chun 1938).⁹ This is certainly not a description of Hu's 'art-deco' inspired work and *Refugees* stands in stark contrast to Hu's modernist style.

A CARTOON IN THE SHANGHAI DIALECT

Refugees is signed by Hu Kao using the Romanization "Wu Ko", which is how Jack Chen always refers to him in his writings. Wu Ko is in fact a Romanization of Hu's name in the Shanghai dialect. Hu often used the local language of Shanghai in his writings¹⁰ including in captions to his cartoons. The following cartoon is a notable example.¹¹

Xian shehui de dianxing renwu 現社會的典型人物 (Typical characters of modern society)

操你娘起來，眼烏珠張張開，認得儂娘嗎？(白相人嫂嫂)

Fuck your mother, take a good look, don't you know who I am? (The good-for-nothing woman)

操起來.....白蘭西地界的臺子還不開，真弄不落。(白相人)

Fuck it... the clubs in the French concession aren't open yet, I really can't cope. (The ruffian)

請王大少坐一歇，奴還有堂差要轉來。(小婊子)

Mr. Wang please wait a while, I have another customer to see and will be right back. (Little whore)

張大少現在“生意浪”生意實在清，請張大少幫幫忙哉。(七十鳥)

Your "Business Wave" venture is really not doing too well. Please come and help me out Mr. Zhang. (Old whore)

⁹ Chun Kum-wen (1938) *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 209. This critique is repeated almost word-for-word in a review of the exhibition when it was shown in Hong Kong, appearing in the 1938 edition of the *Far Eastern Mirror* in an article by Yeh Ch'iu-yuan. Yeh Ch'iu-yuan [Ye Qiuyuan] (1907-1948), 'The International Exhibition in Hong Kong' *Far Eastern Mirror*, Vol. 1, No.7, June 10, 1938, pp. 3-4. Ye was on the editorial team of *T'ien Hsia Monthly* as well as a contributor to that journal ('Archaeology Chronicle' Vol. VI, No. 1, January 1938).

¹⁰ See Hu Kao (1982) *Shanghai tan (Shanghai's Bund)*, Guangdong: Huacheng chubanshe, where passages of dialogue are written in the Shanghai dialect.

¹¹ Lu Shaofei, ed. (1934) *Shidai manhua (Modern Sketch)*, vol. 4, Shanghai: Modern Publications Ltd, p. 28.

‘行行出狀元’是白相人的自我哲學。‘你我小弟兄，面子要撐’是白相人的處世哲學。‘生不帶來，死不帶去’是白相人的超人哲學。‘二十年輪迴轉，又是一條好漢’是白相人的新英雄主義。大英地界，白蘭西地界，中國地界是白相人楚河漢界較量較量。

‘賣藝不賣身’‘恩情講勿盡’‘蔣老五十嘆’‘霉頭觸到陰度國’，荷花大少碰對。

‘You can distinguish yourself in any trade’ is the personal philosophy of the [Shanghai] good-for-nothing.

‘You and I are brothers, I won’t let you lose face’ is the philosophy of the good-for-nothing in [Shanghai] society.

‘You can’t bring it with you when you’re born and you can’t take with you when you’re dead’ is the good-for-nothing’s Übermensch philosophy.

‘After twenty years have passed another fine fellow will come’¹² is the good-for-nothing’s new heroism.

‘The British and French concessions and the Chinese city are the Chu-Han borderline for weighing up the good-for-nothings’ disputes.’

‘Sell your art not your body,’ ‘You are too kind,’ ‘The 50 sighs of venerable Jiang,’ bad luck reaching to the nether world, a meeting with the whore-house dandy.

TO YAN’AN WITH JACK CHEN

One of the main sources of information on Hu Kao’s movements in the later 1930s are Jack Chen’s journalistic writings. In August 1937 Shanghai fell to the Japanese. The following year Hu and Chen made their way together to the Communist base in Yan’an where Hu was to take up a teaching post at the newly established Lu Xun Academy. Hua Junwu (1915-) stated in a 2005 interview with John A. Lent and Xu Ying that he was the second cartoonist to arrive in Yan’an (in December 1938), Hu Kao having arrived some months earlier (Lent and Xu 2008).¹³ Rather mysteriously this does not include Jack Chen in the equation. Chen and Hu Kao arrived in Yan’an together. It is clear from his writings that Jack Chen thought of himself as one of the ‘Chinese’ cartoonists. However, Hua Junwu may have thought him to

¹² Referring to Ah Q’s exclamation towards the end of Lu Xun’s novel *A Q Zhengzhuàn*: ‘After 20 years another shall come.’ Lu Xun, *A Q Zhengzhuàn* (The True Story of Ah Q), Hong Kong: Xingzhou shijie shuju, p.151.

¹³ Lent, J.A., and Xu Ying, (2008), ‘Cartooning and Wartime China: Part One – 1931-1945’, *International Journal of Cartoon Art*, Spring 2008, p.107.

be simply another of the many foreign journalist to have gone to Yan'an at this time. Whilst at Yan'an, Chen mounted an exhibition of works by British and American artists which had been entrusted to him by left-wing fundraising organizations in Europe and the USA (supplemented by a number of works by Chinese artists, including Hu Kao).

LATER YEARS

Subsequently, other important figures from the cartoon world arrived at Yan'an, including Cai Ruohong (1910-), Zhang E (1910-1995) and Zhang Ding (1917- 2010). It seems that Hu Kao didn't stay for more than a couple years in Yan'an, as he is said to have been in Hong Kong in the early 1940s. With regard to this, the cartoonist Ding Cong, in interview with Lent and Xu, related how he had fled Nationalist party persecution in Chongqing and escaped to Hong Kong where he lived together with the cartoonists Te Wei (1915-2010), Lu Zhixiang (1910-1992) and Hu Kao (Lent and Xu 2008).¹⁴

By 1942 Hu Kao was in the 'East China Region' where the New Fourth Army was stationed and then from 1945 taught painting and poetry at Shandong University (Jiang 1995).¹⁵ After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Hu Kao joined the editorial team of the *China Pictorial* but by 1957 had been branded a 'rightist' and was only to resurface after the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976. In 1982 his novel *Shanghai tan* was published. This novel, set in the 1930s, describes the Shanghai of Hu Kao's youth with all the character-types he had depicted in his early cartoons included within its pages.

Hu Kao died on the 23rd of June 1994. Through much of his life Hu Kao had been somewhat overshadowed by his more famous colleagues Ye Qianyu and Zhang Leping. Hu's early work shows a lively modernist style, full of individuality and compares favourably with the work of the best popular artists of the day. After the founding of the PRC in 1949 Hu's style continued to evolve. In later years he turned to traditional Chinese painting and continued to write both poetry and fiction. Hu's friend, the well-known painter and calligrapher Huang Miaozi, inscribed the following epitaph on one of Hu's later 'bird and flower' paintings. It

¹⁴ From an interview with Ding Cong carried out by John A. Lent and Xu Ying in 2002. See Lent, J.A., and Xu Ying, (2008), 'Cartooning and Wartime China: Part One – 1931-1945', *International Journal of Cartoon Art*, Spring, 2008, p.109.

¹⁵ Jiang Weipu and Daonian Hukao (1995) 'Remembering Hu Kao, 'In Memory of Artists'', *Meishu*, 1, pp. 60-61.

seems from what Huang writes that the works of Hu's final years didn't meet with public approval and in the final line, he suggests that his art may be better understood in years to come.

'I became friends with brother Hu Kao in the 1930s, whilst we were both members of the Shanghai Cartoon Brigade. Last year, when I returned from the South Pacific, brother Kao had all ready passed away several months before. Brother Limin showed this painting to me; hearing the flute from the south side of the mountain, how can I bear this sorrow?'¹⁶

'Brother Kao was one year older than me. When he was young he stood head and shoulders above the rest in talent and made a brilliant sound in the world of art. The works he produced over the years; the novels; the poems; there were none that were not praised by his friends. In later years he painted in the style of Bada Shanren (八大山人, 1626-1705) and then changed to painting birds-and-flowers. But few are they who can join in the singing of highbrow songs. These works will find understanding friends in a later age. [Written in] the first month of the *yihai* year [1995 by Huang] Miaozi' (Bao 2004).¹⁷

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¹⁶ *Shanyin wendi* 山陰聞笛, (Hearing the flute on the south side of the mountain), a phrase often written in obituaries for the passing of old friends.

¹⁷ Bao Limin (2004) 'Caimo mudan (Coloured Ink Peony)', *Sichuan Literature Monthly*, Issue 06.

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