

Chinese Cartoon in transition: animal symbolism and allegory from the “modern magazine” to the “online carnival”

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Abstract

By definition, the cartoon (satirical, single-panelled vignette) “reduces complex situations to simple images, treating a theme with a touch of immediacy. A cartoon can mask a forceful intent behind an innocuous facade; hence it is an ideal art of deception” (Hung, 1994:124). As well as their western counterparts, Chinese cartoonists have always based much of their art on the strong socio-political potential of the format, establishing a mutual dependence of pictographic material and press journalism. From a media perspective, the present paper shows how Chinese cartoon developed from 1920s-1930s society – when the “modern magazine” was the most important reference and medium for this newly-born visual language – to the present. Cyberspace has recently become the chosen space for Chinese cartoonists’ visual satire to take part in an international public discourse and in the “online carnival” (Herold and Marolt, 2011:11-15), therefore replacing magazines and printed press. Through emblematic exempla and following the main narrative of “animal symbolism and allegory”, this paper intends to connect the historical background with cartoonists’ critical efficiency, communicative tools and peculiar aesthetics, aiming at answering to questions such as: how Chinese modern cartoon changed, from the first exempla conveyed in “modern magazines” to the latest online expressions? Is its original power of irreverence still alive and how did it survive? How modern cartoonists (Lu Shaofei, Liao Bingxiong) and contemporary cartoonists (Rebel Pepper, Crazy Crab, Ba Diucao) have been dealing with governmental intervention and censorship?

Keywords: Visual Culture, Popular Culture, cartoon, satire, censorship, cyberspace

Introduction

The “cartoon”¹ is a “historically specific visually-dynamic construction of word and image” (Crespi, 2016: 4), i.e. a complex language characterized by “timeliness” and “topicality”².

Like their Western counterparts, Chinese cartoonists have always based much of their art on the strong socio-political potential of such visual language, establishing the mutual dependence between pictographic material and press journalism.

Since the late XIX century and especially during the War of Resistance, the Yan’an years and throughout the Maoist Era, political cartoons have been generally conceived as propaganda tools, carefully thought out as an important part

of a top-down indoctrination³. For this reason, Chinese cartoons have been commonly deployed by (art) historians to illustrate political narratives, and their study has been often influenced by/projected in ideology-driven views⁴. Such a “utilitarian approach” overlooks the potential of the language itself—an art refined by years of work and study in the field—and fails to recognize the complexity of the specific mediascapes involved in the formation of these popular culture artifacts⁵. Paraphrasing

³ For more information on War and cartoon propaganda, see Hung, 1994:2. As for the centralization of cartoon production in Early Republican China, see Altehenger, 2013.

⁴ The major studies in the field mainly describe the impact of historical events on the genre and vice-versa (Bi Keguan and Huang Yuanlin, 2006; Liu-Lengyel, 1993) and/or approach political cartoons as part of a comprehensive socio-political discourse (anti-Japanese propaganda and communist monopoly in Hung, 1994 and 2010).

⁵ For Popular Culture I intend “certain kinds of literature or art that are widely diffused and generally accepted by the people in a particular social setting at a particular period of time” (Hung, 1994:2: 7). This approach addresses the “artifacts”, rather than values and beliefs related to a particular social *milieu* (literary-cultural approach) and allows the researcher to “cross cultural lines and transcend group affiliations” (ibid.).

¹ The present essay adopts the term “cartoon” to define the single-panelled, satirical vignette with socio-political content.

² According to the British cartoonist David Low, “timeliness” and “topicality” are the characteristics that make political cartoons ideal means to reflect current affairs. David Low, 1953:5.

Mitchell, cartoons “cannot be addressed without some reckoning of the medium in which they appear” (1995:203), and therefore, the “environments” where these forms/systems⁶ thrive, as well as their creators and viewers, cannot be approached as isolated objects/subjects. When unable to measure the actual reaction of the readership, the analysis of political cartoons makes it possible, at least, to clarify specific processes of media encoding: the author’s visual strategies supply a great deal of information about what the targeted audience was expected to know already, about the subject, about the cartoon specific grammar and, more generally, about media.

Focusing on political cartoons, this paper follows the development of these multimodal texts⁷, ranging from the 1920s-1930s—when the *modern* (xiandai 现代, modeng 摩登) magazine allowed for the popularization of the language and the professionalization of their authors—to the present day, with the most influential cartoonists mainly working for digital enterprises. The intention is not to give a comprehensive account of the history of Chinese *modern cartoon* (xiandai manhua 现代漫画)⁸, but rather, to detect both the system-environment dynamics and the systemic coherence of each medium by shedding light on the use of animal symbolism and animal allegory, two specific communication dynamics involved in the (trans)formation of the genre⁹. Drawing on the three “environments” where cartoon-forms have been thriving since the late XIX century (the newspaper, the cartoon pictorial and the Chinese cyberspace), the present contribution

explores both conventional and creative aspects of the use of animal symbolism and allegory, by comparing exemplary works and connecting them to their historical background.

The essay is divided into two sub-narratives, which illustrate, from different angles, how cartoonists draw both on a traditional/popular and on a global imaginary in order to encode their messages, according to specific system-environment dynamics, i.e. how they participate in the construction of a transcultural¹⁰ visual grammar. While the first section deals with the representation of power dynamics, as they are projected on an international scenario, the latter mainly addresses the role of censorship as a *dialectic subject* influencing, both concretely and metaphorically, cartoonists’ communication choices.

Animal symbolism and allegory vis-à-vis Foreign Affairs

During the XX century, the Chinese cartoon took part in the formation of an internationally-shared iconography and visual grammar, the “transcultural imaginary”¹¹. Since the 1930s in particular, this process is not to be intended as a passive emulation of established standards, but more as a conscious adaptation of an imported visual language to specific media frameworks.

From a historical perspective, the modern newspaper is the medium that possesses the greatest continuity in featuring cartoons.

By the first decade of the XX century, newspapers were the crucial space for Chinese cartoonists to test their communication ability, mainly capitalizing on the five strategies of cartoons’ specific visual grammar: symbolism, exaggeration/distortion, labeling, humor/satire, and analogy. Despite making a relatively small portion in the economy of the medium, political cartoons have had an important role in explicit political indoctrination, mirroring the top-down

⁶ To introduce a more attentive way of analyzing images, Mitchell speculates on the systems theory model of media as “autopoietic system-environment dialectics”, drawing the conclusion that “media can fit on both sides of the system/environment divide: they are a system for transmitting messages through a material vehicle to a receiver; or they are a space in which forms can thrive” (1995:207-208).

⁷ For a definition of the meaning and the role of multimodality and multiliteracy in contemporary learning see Cope, Bill and Mary Kalantzis, 2009.1 and 2009.2.

⁸ For a comprehensive account of the history of Chinese cartoon, I suggest Bi Keguan and Huang Yuanlin, 2006; Huang Ke, Gan Zhenhu and Chen Lei (eds.), 2010; Gan Xianfeng, 2008.

⁹ For “animal symbolism” I refer to the practice of attributing the power of representing abstract concepts and values to specific animals (e.g. Lion and regality). The correspondence between signifier and meaning is commonly bound to nationally-shared conventional criteria, and is, therefore, more static. Conversely, the main strategy used to read “animal allegories” is contextualization because their meaning and role may change in accordance with the environment and the relationships these allegories are projected on. In other words, the link between signifier and meaning in the allegory is more arbitrary and intentional, less intuitive and more elaborated to detect than through symbolism.

¹⁰ The “transcultural approach” is based on the assumption that “[c]ultures de facto no longer have the insinuated form of homogeneity and separateness. They have instead assumed a new form, which is to be called transcultural insofar that it passes through classical cultural boundaries” (Welsh, 1999:198).

¹¹ In the volume *Asian Punches* (Harder and Mittler, 2013), I. Wei-wu and C. Rea examine the “presence” of Punch/Puck-like satirical illustrated magazines in China during the first two decades of the XX century. The essays offer the opportunity to understand from different perspectives (foreign and native) the degree of China-based participation in the construction of a transcultural imaginary, connected both to the transnational format of satirical illustrated magazines and to the topical communication need of the time.

propagandistic project of reformists and revolutionary journalists¹². Regardless of any political trends, however, newspaper cartoons conveyed both mainstream and counter-discourses and brought a great variety of forms and contents up until the Sino-Japanese war. After the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, a centralizing political action and growing censorship deeply affected cartoon communication. The reforms and the consequent “de-ideologization” of the media in the Post-Mao Era had an immediate impact on newspapers and state publishing enterprises faced a considerable sales drop¹³. By the end of the 1970s, editorial cartoons were back to their place in newspapers (namely, but not exclusively, in the People’s Daily), while cartoonists enjoyed renewed (albeit relative) freedom of experimentation and expression.

Despite historical circumstances, from the perspective of systemic coherence cartoonists’ basic parameters in designing their work did not undergo considerable change. Compared to the economy of other media, newspaper depended more strictly on the verbal counterpart than pictorial cartooning did, and therefore, authors’ visual choices were aimed to synthesize the editorial line or mirror (even spatially, by juxtaposition or enclosure) the subject of topical articles.

According to cartoon historian Bi Keguan, the oldest surviving example of modern political cartoon is Xie Zuantai’s (Tse Tsantai) well-known “The Situation of the Far East”, Shiju (quan)tu 时局(全)图, a full-page, single-panelled image published in 1903 on Cai Yuanpei and Zhang Shizhao’s *News from Russia* (Eshi Jinwen 俄事近闻) (Bi and Huang, 2006:19). In this cartoon,¹⁴ the author accurately portrays a map of China, using different animals in order to iconically represent the specific territorial demands of several imperialistic Powers (an eagle represents the United States, a snake Japan, a pug Great Britain, a bear the Russian Empire).

This kind of image exemplifies the most peculiar characteristics of the first phase of the genre, among which the resemblance to the foreign model is indeed the most striking¹⁵. Cartoonists’ reference to the European tradition was both formal and rhetorical, which means that authors not only experimented with pen-and-ink techniques, but also drew from a common, transcultural visual grammar. Since allegory and caricature had been crucial features in cartoons that dealt with Foreign Affairs, the Chinese readership became accustomed to that specific iconography, as early as in the first decade of the XX century.

From a verbal perspective, this means that long explanatory captions were no longer needed and short labeling sufficed. From an iconic perspective, the countries-as-subjects could be portrayed through a stereotyped and distorted human representation, through animal symbolism, or through the caricature of the country’s political or military leader. When facing the *Other*, in fact, cartoonists rarely depart from this international model set in the late XIX century, while they are more eager to experiment with the Chinese popular and folk culture when it comes to domestic issues and self-imaging. Therefore, to whatever extent the subject and the target of cartoonists’ satire might change according to the political context, they still relied on a limited range of references. The following exempla, drawn from different epochs, confirm the point.

The first image (fig. 1) was published during the “golden era” of cartoons¹⁶. Among the pictorials issued in that decade, no one had broader circulation and more longevity than *Modern Sketch* (1934-1937)¹⁷, thanks both to Shao Xunmei’s financial support¹⁸ and to the editorial

¹² Chinese media context experienced a boom in cartoons from the 1899, year of the publishing (and re-publishing) of *The Situation of the Far East* (mentioned later in the essay), straight to the May Fourth Movement. Notably, the cartoons were mainly linked to progressive thinkers. For visual exempla see Bi, 2006 and Gan, 2008.

¹³ For a further discussion on Chinese media reforms see Huang, 2001.

¹⁴ According to Wagner (2011: 24), the cartoon published on Cai Yuanpei’s periodical was actually a reprinted version of an original Hong Kong edition of 1899. The title of the 1903 cartoon was “Xianshi 现实”, *The Present Situation*.

¹⁵ It is important to stress the multifaceted identity of Chinese cartoonists’ original models, which range from the British exempla that circulated in the treaty Ports, since the second half of the XIX century, to the cultural products imported from Japan, where cartoonists had already started to reflect consciously on the cartoon format. See Duus, P. in Harder and Mittler, 2013.

¹⁶ During 1934, the so-called “year of the magazines”, about twenty different cartoon magazines were published (Bi and Huang, 2006:105-106). Some of them were highly appreciated by artists and intellectuals thanks to cartoonists’ attention to both form and content. Lu Xun, for example, who had a very critical eye for the formal and ideological aspects of visual arts, appreciated the ideological engagement of *Cartoon Life* (Manhua Shenghuo 漫画生活) and wrote a number of essays for the pictorial.

¹⁷ In his online lecture, Crespi maintains that circulation of *Modern Sketch* reached 10,000 issues (Crespi, 2014).

¹⁸ Shao Xunmei 邵洵美(1906-1968) was an influential intellectual, writer, patron and entrepreneur who had a pivotal role in the Shanghainese editorial market. He established of *Modern Publications*

board's readiness to adjust the magazine's line to a changing *shidai* ("epoch", but also, metonymically, "modernity"). *Modern Sketch* exemplifies the communication needs of its era by representing a locus of re-negotiation of powers where authors and readers could not only take part in the appropriation of mainly urban landscapes, but also be guaranteed of the rare opportunity to experiment and stay clear of radical concerns up to the last issue¹⁹. However, political cartoons occupied a growing space in the economy of *Modern Sketch* during its three years of publication and, notably, the editorial board re-created a "habitat" for editorial cartoons²⁰ by reserving the prestigious second cover to those who became – or were already renowned as – specialists of the genre²¹.



Fig. 1, Cheng Liule, *Hitting the Wolf with a Jojoba stick: wolves fear men, men fear wolves too* (Zao mugun er dalang, lang yeparen, ren yepalang 枣木棍儿打狼，狼也怕人，人也怕狼). *Shidai Manhua* 8, Aug. 1934. Source and copyright: Colgate University Library, Digital Collection.

(*Shidai Tushu Gongsi* 时代图书公司), which published five of the most influential magazines of the 1930s. For further information on Shao Xunmei, see Shen, 2013 and Lee, 1999.

¹⁹ For example, until the end of its publication, in June 1937, *Modern Sketch* still featured graphic experimentation and references to the foreign models. See the "abstract expressionism" in front cover of *Shidai Manhua*, 26, or the "fauvist" front cover of *Shidai Manhua*, 35.

²⁰ The term commonly defines the kind of cartoon that was originally printed on the first page of newspapers and conveyed the editorial political view the editorial group.

²¹ The most frequent features were Huang Wennong 黄文农, Cheng Liule 程柳乐, and the editor Lu Shaofei 鲁少飞. When *Modern Sketch* was launched in 1934, Huang Wennong was already an established editorial cartoonist and when he died later that year, the editorial board dedicated many pages the issue of July to his satirical art.

The cartoon in fig. 1 bears witness to the strong attention that the Chinese readership was paying to the European political dynamics: Hitler is portrayed attacking a wolf labeled as "Austria", while all the other beasts (France, Great Britain and Italy), far from interfering, hide in the bushes and watch from a distance. Here, visual satire is built on the contrast between the *idea* that European countries have of themselves (predators) and their actual role in foreign affairs (spectators). Therefore, this animal allegory aims at both, mocking the imperialistic ambitions and addressing the issue of country's deceptive self-imagining processes.

Fang Cheng's approach to animal allegory (fig.2) is less serious, but equally "dramatic", in addressing the question of spectatorship.

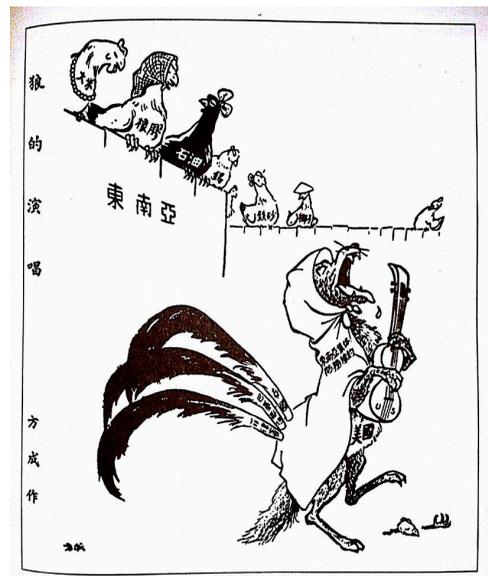


Fig. 2, Fang Cheng, *The Singing Performance of the Wolf* (Langde Yanchang 狼的演唱), *Renmin Ribao*, 1954. Source: Hung, 2011. Copyright: Fang Cheng.

This author portrays a predator, a treacherous wolf,²² dressed up like a rooster, singing and strumming a guitar so as to seduce the hens. Following the standard anti-American attitude typical of Russian cartoon art and its aesthetics, the author is hinting at the U.S. interest in South Eastern Asia's natural resources. According to Fang Cheng, during the 1950s, as cartoonists "zealously emulated Russian artists' works published in *Crocodile*" (Hung, 2011: 165), their style changed

²² Similarly to the western folk iconography, the wolf in China is the emblem of rapacity. Williams, 2009:252.

dramatically. In fact, the soviet model had been crucial even before²³: 1930s cartoonists emulated not only European and American cartoonists and popular artists, such as David Low and Grosz (Europe), Fred Ellis and Daniel R. Fitzpatrick (North America), Diego Rivera and Covarrubias (Central and America), but also Boris Efimov (Chen, 1938:311).

The following two exempla of animal allegory deal not only with Foreign Affairs, but also with the very issue of representation.

Both the cartoons allegorically represent the concept of “aggression” by employing the image of a tiger, but each of them focus on different aspects of the question through peculiar communication strategies.



Fig. 3, *The Failure of “Jiang” San Mao’s Patriotism* (Sanmao Aiguo weisui 蒋三毛爱国未遂), *Shidai Manhua*, Feb. 1936. Source and Copyright: *Shidai Manhua*, 2014.

The comic strip in fig. 3 is part of the complex narrative of *Three Hairs* (*Sanmao* 三毛), a famous and long-lived series created in the 1930s by artist Zhang Leping 张乐平 (1910–1992)²⁴.

²³ The influence of soviet aesthetics was already visible during Yan’an years, when important newspapers like *Jiefang Ribao* reprinted soviet works. It grew considerably during the 1950s (Hung, 2011: 156), and even more during the second period (1971-1976) of the Cultural Revolution, when the Socialist realism was a primary reference model for the whole artistic apparatus. For further discussion of soviet influence on Chinese art, see J. Andrews, 2010.

²⁴ For a complete view on Zhang Leping’s *Sanmao* see Pozzi, 2014.

This image could be identified as a metapicture²⁵ of cartooning and its function in late 1930s society: the main character of the strip, San Mao, is depicted as he takes part in an exhibition, which was deemed as the most effective way of spreading propaganda art. San Mao’s patriotism awakens as soon as he “sees” the drawing of a tiger invading China (a common way of representing the Japanese invasion). Zhang builds an allegorical image out of the asymmetrical relationship between patriots and government: although San Mao and his friends are just children, and the tiger they want to destroy is merely allegorical, yet their punishment is as real as the Guomindang’s action against patriotic movements. Furthermore, the author also represents the communication goals of cartoons to wit: moving the conscience, engendering actions.



Fig. 4, Zhang Ding, *The Paper Tiger* (Zhi Laohu 纸老虎), *Renmin Ribao*, Jul. 1950, Source: Hung, 2011. Copyright: Zhang Ding.

The second cartoon (fig. 4) visually interprets Mao’s famous words against U.S. imperialism²⁶. Part of an overwhelming anti-

²⁵ “Metapictures” are images that reflect “on their own constitution” (Mitchell 2005:2010). This theoretical framework could also be a useful starting point for the re-framing of the analytical approach to two important elements, that is, time and space. Usually, the concept of “space” has been related with the notion of “topicality”, while cartoons’ “timeliness” has been considered as the connection to a specific socio-political contest. Considering cartoons as metapictures means addressing the way in which they recreate time and space, within their own borders, reconstruct reality, and being informed by the rules of a specific medium.

²⁶ The image of the “paper tiger”, presented by Mao Zedong, in his 1946 interview with Ann Louise Strong, as referred to imperialism and

American propaganda of soviet inspiration, the cartoon is particularly explicit in addressing the incongruity between a country's self-representation (the facade) and its actual power (the essence), the typical strategy on which humor and satire rely. Notably, the style, which is reminiscent of both the Chinese folk art and the 1920s-1930s decorativism, seems to depart from the Russian model and pursue the decades-long move towards the "sinicization" of cartoons.²⁷

Animal Symbolism and allegory: dealing with censorship.

In their resistance to and defiance of the power-holders, cartoonists had, and still have, to find context-sensitive strategies in order to avoid (or to better challenge) censorship and control. Among them, animal symbolism/allegory is less of a direct communication strategy than caricature, but is equally striking and internationally relevant. While apparently hiding the real target of the critique, animal references amplify its satirical power by degrading the subject to a sub-human level.

During the early 1930s, cartoon pictorials were generally overlooked by KMT censors. Conversely, in a crescendo of socio-political awareness, the great majority of cartoonists – even the ones who were working in mainly commercial enterprises like *Modern Sketch* –, felt the need to convert to the anti-Japanese propaganda, by the second half of the decade (see fig. 3), thus prompting a more direct response to this widespread phenomenon by the Regime.

The image of a big fish eating a small fish was a common feature of cartoon pictorial, during the late 1930s²⁸, and its aim was to allegorically represent the military superior Japan taking advantage of a weak and compliant China (fig. 5). By that time, when even writing the word "Japan" on a periodical was forbidden, animal allegory offered a loophole to vent people's dissatisfaction. Made during the 1980s, the second cartoon (fig. 6) "flips off" the

standard image of the big fish eating the small fish, in order to reveal how an apparently (i.e. economically) strong China was actually being devoured by corruption and inequality. Both cartoonists are carefully avoiding any specific personal targeting drawing from the same visual grammar, but the communication strategy is substantially different: while the first image is constructed as a dramatic statement, the second is a typical "visual satire", a technique based on the unraveling of incongruities and paradoxes through the inversion of the norm. The author's employment of a childish aesthetics to depict the critical situation magnifies the satirical impact of the cartoon.

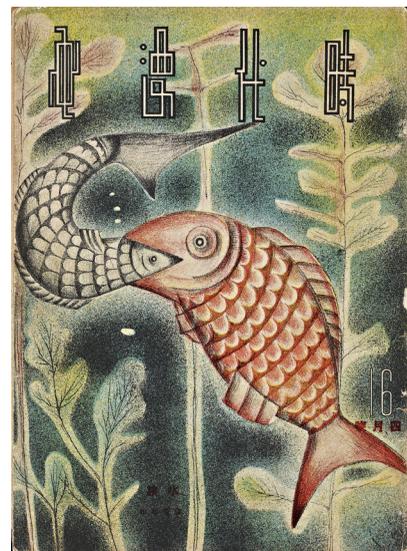


Fig. 5, Mo Feiqin, *Aquatic Animals* (Shuizu 水族), *Modern Sketch* 16, front cover. Source and Copyright: *Shidai Manhua* 2014.

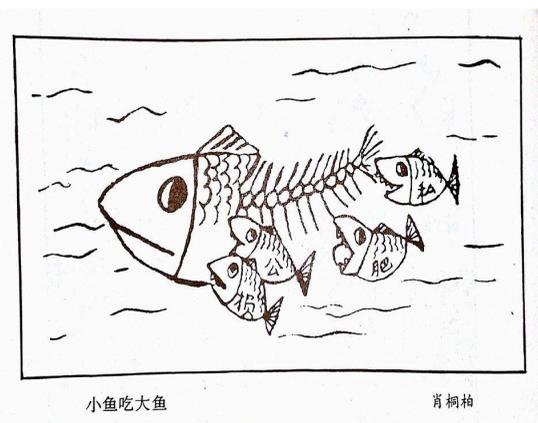


Fig. 6, Xiao Tongbai, *The small fish eats the big fish* (Xiaoyu chi da yu 小鱼吃大鱼), Fengci yu youmo, 1980s. Source: Lan and Shi, 1989. Copyright: Xiao Tongbai.

reactionaries, quickly became a trope for the political propaganda discourse.

²⁷ In his *Manhua Yishu jianghua* 漫画艺术讲话 [Lectures on cartoon art], the art critic Huang Mao 黄茅 theorizes cartoon's "sinicization" (zhongguohua 中国化), defining it as a blending of Chinese traditional (i.e. ink and brush) and Western (e.g. perspective) techniques. For additional information, see Huang Mao, 1947:64.

²⁸ See for example Hu Kao's cartoon in the magazine *Chinese Cartoon* (Zhongguo manhua 中国漫画), Sept. 1935.

As has been observed, the cartoon “reduces complex situations to simple images, treating a theme with a touch of immediacy. It can mask a forceful intent behind an innocuous facade; hence it is an ideal art of deception” (Hung, 1994.1:124). However, such “deception” was not always sufficient to protect cartoonists from the censorship. In February 1936, Lu Shaofei’s *Modern Sketch* was closed by KMT authorities²⁹, while in 1960 even the official cartoon pictorial of the PRC, *Cartoon*, was closed down because it was too hard to control (Crespi, 2016).

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, veteran cartoonist Liao Bingxiong went back to work, after decades of being labeled as rightist and being forbidden to draw cartoons. During the nineties, however, he was extremely disappointed in the situation of Chinese cartooning (Lent and Xu, 2007:650-651), and accused his contemporaries of not daring to criticize the status quo, while describing his country with contempt. Another veteran and influential cartoonist, Hua Junwu, on the other hand, does not seem to be so disapproving of the Party’s censorship, finding it rather reasonable instead: if we want to stop the spreading of pornographic cartoons, we have to subject to the Party’s control on political cartooning as well (Hua, 1984:9).

Has something changed over the last decades, with the spreading of Chinese cartoons on the cyberspace? The Chinese internet has been broadly viewed as a new space for the introduction of a democratic discourse, and, however questionable this statement might be³⁰, it is undeniable that some artists have tried, and still try, to present a counter-discourse built up on online-cartooning. The iconic component of cartoons’ language makes them elude the censorial strategy of filtering content by keywords (i.e. ISP-enforced blacklists), so that it takes longer for the authorities to intervene and cartoonists can frequently enjoy a wide – albeit temporary–success.

The cartoonist known by the nickname *Crazy Crab* (Feng Xie 疯蟹) has been one of the

most influential of the 2000s. He became internationally famous for the series of political cartoons *Harmonic Farm* (Hexie nonchang 蟹农场)³¹, which satirically depict the “fair” (gongping 公平) and “just” (zhangyi 正义) era of “harmony” (hexie 和谐) in China, while targeting in fact “dictatorship, censorship, and propaganda” (zhuanzhi 专制, shencha 审查, xuanchuan 宣传)³². The cartoonist’s visual satire mainly works through the deployment of an animal symbolism reminiscent of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: the rulers of the farm and the protagonists of the trips are all Party members, depicted as greedy and vicious pigs.

When asked about the reason why in 2009 he started drawing cartoons, he said that it was the choice to fill a gap, feeling that a proper cartoon critique was missing:

There are lots of cartoonists in China. However, real political satires are still rare. No cartoonist dares to challenge the One-Party dictatorship and question the political system. I hope my cartoons could make a change (Tom, 2012).

Questioned about the possible repercussions of his political dissent and his feelings towards the censorship, *Crazy Crab* reports the first question he asked himself when he started: “Am I crazy enough to draw such political satire for nothing but a nightmare?” (ibid.).

Cartooning is a matter of passion and a way of challenging the *status quo*, but it is hard to find a “place to publish these cartoons. There are only a handful media outlets that can publish this kind of cartoons” (ibid.), and few of them pay. However, from the first decade of the XXI century on, new online platforms (mainly foreign or Hong Kong based) started contributing to the enterprise of sharing cartoon-related content internationally.

One of the most important platforms for the international circulation of Chinese cartoons with *satirical characteristics* is *China Digital Times*, a website that hosted *Crazy Crab’s*

²⁹ In February 1936, Lu Shaofei’s caricature on the front cover of *Modern Sketch* indirectly criticized the Chinese ambassador in Japan, Xu Shiying 许世英, for being too compliant with the enemy. As a consequence, *Modern Sketch* was silenced for three months. *Modern Sketch* was substituted by the twin-magazine *Modern Puck* (Manhua jie 漫画界), edited by Wang Dunqing 王敦庆, who later became an independent publication (Crespi 2012, Note 1).

³⁰ For an introduction to the different approaches and theoretical frameworks in the field of Chinese internet research, see Harold and Marolt, 2011.

³¹ Literally, *Hexie Nongchang* 河蟹农场 means *The farm of the River Crab*, but “hexie” is here used with satirical implications, being homophonous of the Chinese word for harmony “hexie 和谐” (a well-known a keyword in contemporary China’s political discourse). See *Decoding the Chinese Internet: A Glossary of Political Slang*, 2015:11.

³² Quoted from *Crazy Crab’s* own explanation of the comic strip in the “About” section of his website. See *Crazy Crab*, 2011.

political cartoons and that now features Ba Diucao's works³³. As the website aims at interpreting “the resistance discourse of Chinese netizens by introducing and translating the codes, metaphors, and satire created in response to breaking news and censored topics” (website disclaimer), it offers cartoonists an important space where the power of their irreverence can thrive.

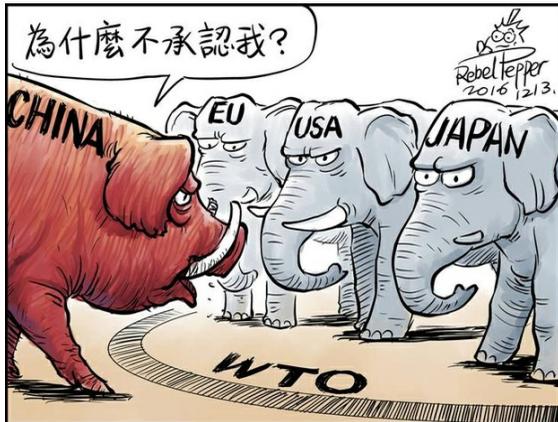


Fig. 7. Rebel Pepper, *Why don't you recognize me?* (Weishenme ni bu chengren wo 为什么你不承认我?), Dec. 2016. Source: author's profile on Twitter. Copyright: Rebel Pepper.

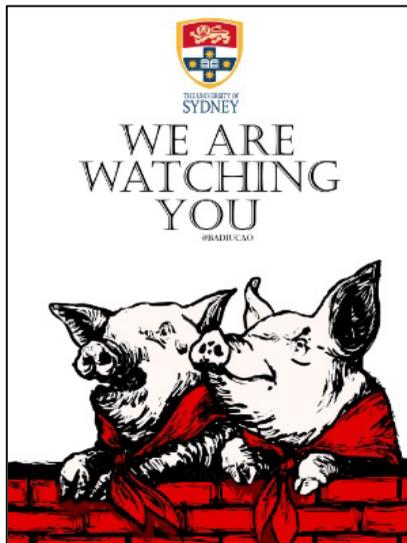


Fig. 8. Ba Diucao, *The pink fanatics are watching you everywhere around the world* (Xiaofenhong zai quanshijie kanzhe ni 小粉红在全世界看着你), Apr. 2106. Source: author's profile on Twitter. Copyright: Ba Diucao.

³³ As the other cartoonists cited in the present paper, also Ba Diucao 巴丢草 resorted to a pseudonym to protect his identity. Although he's currently living in Australia (and has the Australian citizenship), he still happens to wear a mask or a balaclava during artistic performances. See the photo-gallery: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/07/arts/badiucao-chinese-artist/index.html>

In order to address the issue of Chinese cartoon's dissemination/control from both a national and global perspective, one could approach the relevant production on microblogging platforms such as *Weibo* and *Twitter*. These media have become, for example, the selected space for contemporary cartoonists to discuss foreign and national affairs in an international scenario, by reinventing the iconic role of a “traditional” animal, the pig. While it mainly symbolizes China mainland and the Chinese Party-state in political cartoons dealing with foreign affairs (fig. 7), cartoonists appear more willing to divert from the main (i.e. transnational) visual grammar when it comes to addressing national concerns. For example, when Ba Diucao resorts to the image of the pig in fig. 8, he refers to those students “returned from abroad” (haigui 海归), also called “sea-turtles” (haigui 海龟)³⁴. While his visual satire is clearly built, the online jargon that labels those students as pigs “tun 豚” (an archaic term for *zhu* 猪, pig)³⁵, a reference to another term, “xiao fenhong” (literally “little pink”)³⁶, is also inferable. By representing these new and influential political subjects as “angry pigs” (fig. 8), the cartoonist manages to further condemn their aggressive attitude, accusing them of being brainwashed and uncritical of the Party.

Following, and visually pairing, with the “Australian case” (Aozhou shier 澳洲事儿) exploded in April 2016³⁷, this provocative use of animal symbolism has caused a strong reaction backlash, especially from the Chinese netizens abroad, who felt particularly sensitive on the topic and expressed their opinion through

³⁴ “Sea-turtle” (haigui 海龟) is the animalized variant to the homophonous slang (yet not derogatory) word for Chinese people who eventually come home after a long period of study abroad. The literal translation is, in fact, “returned from the sea” (haigui 海归).

³⁵ According to Wai Ling Yeung, the definition of “tun” in the cyberspace is even more specific: “It is actually a euphemism used online to refer to *guanerdai*, the second-generation [offspring] of [Communist Party] officials who have gone overseas to study” (Wen, 2016).

³⁶ The term defines the group/gang of young nationalist netizens, who “fly into cyber-rage for the slightest provocation” (The Economist, 2016). Although they can be still considered as a minority, their frequent outburst proved to be effective in many occasions (e.g. the “Lady Gaga case”).

³⁷ The so-called “Australian Case” is related to the news about Wu Wei 吴维, tutor at the University of Sidney, who resigned after his derogatory remarks on *Weibo* (he defined his Chinese mainland students as “pigs”) had caused a strong reaction among Chinese netizens, some of whom even organized a petition against him. In that occasion, many dissident artists stood for the tutor's freedom of expression. See, for example: <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/university-of-sydney-racist-tutor-wei-wu-row-inspires-dissident-artwork-20160419-goacyq.html>

comments and posts on their social media profiles³⁸.

Although the major media companies tend not to support dissidents, and often choose to deactivate cartoonists’ profiles on Chinese social media and other online platforms³⁹, these works still circulate on the authors’ personal profiles on Twitter (which is censored in China mainland). This allows them to keep participating in what has been defined as the “online carnival”, a “less rational and more chaotic and emotional space” and a “locus for ‘free’ public interactions” (Herold and Marolt, 2011:11).

With the following and last two exempla, I intend to compare the different styles of two cartoonists who are equally committed to criticizing the government by defining it as a violent “police state”. Animal symbolism proves again to be one of the favorite tools used by cartoonists to satirize a country’s self-imagining on a global-sized dimension scale. The choice of a panda as the main subject is functional to both cartoons to build their visual strategy on the homophony between “national treasure” (guobao 国宝) and “national security” (guobao 国保, abbr. for Guonei anquan baoweiju 国内安全保卫局).

In his cartoon (fig. 9), Crazy Crab plays with the WWF symbol by making it wear dark glasses, the iconic accessory identifying blind activist Chen Guangcheng’s cause: China is thus labeled as a “police state” which, despite being represented by a formally endangered species, is, in fact, all the more dangerous for Chinese citizens.

The second cartoon is by Wang Liming (better known as *Rebel Pepper*, Biantai Lajiao 变态辣椒), a Chinese cartoonist whose political artworks made him the object of the authorities’ attention. One of them, *Pandaman Vs Batman* (fig. 10) features a violent panda that, in a security agent attire, knocks Batman (Christian Bale) down.



Fig. 9, Crazy Crab, *Police State (Jincha guojia 警察国家)*, 2011. Source: hexiefarm.wordpress.com Copyright: Crazy Crab.

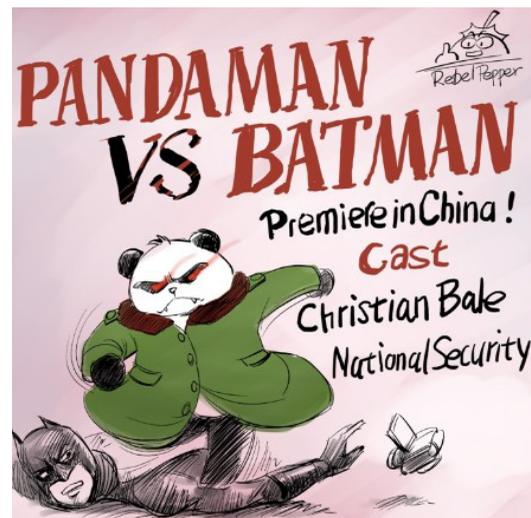


Fig. 10, Rebel Pepper, *Pandaman Vs Batman*. 2012. Source and Copyright: Rebel Pepper and *China Digital Times*.

Being linked to a trending news of the time⁴⁰, the cartoon thus became part of a complex system of intertextual references in ridiculing the excessive reactions of the Chinese police. Therefore, it became extremely popular online, causing Rebel Pepper to face censorship and “visits from state security agents”, while “his account on the social networking platform *Sina Weibo* has been deactivated over 180 times” since the publication of the cartoon (Rawlinson, 2015).

³⁸ For more information about the impact of the “case” on Chinese social media, see the article on *Sina Weibo* <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-04-15/doc-ifyriqqx2465976.shtml>.

³⁹ Rebel Pepper’s followers were almost one millions when *Sina* (Weibo) and *Tencent* decided to close down his microblog in July 2014 (Stone Fish, 2015). The cartoonist Ba Diucao also recalls that, “after having more than 30 accounts deleted, he felt forced to give the platform up” (Griffiths, 2017).

⁴⁰ In 2011, the “The Dark Knight” movie star Christian Bale was stopped by the local police in his attempt to visit blind activist Chen Guangcheng. Eventually, he was sentenced to four years in prison.

In conclusion, although Chinese authorities generally “appear to be more lenient towards online provocation” (Harold and Marolt, 2011:12), cartoonists who critique contemporary China’s socio-political scenario come across different kinds of control-related issues. They hide their identity behind nicknames and constantly risk the deactivation of their social-media accounts and the shutting down of their websites. Sometimes, however, they even have to fear for more than just a *virtual death*. Exemplary is the case of Rebel Pepper⁴¹, who chose to leave China in a self-imposed exile.

Conclusions

The overall contribution of this paper to the integration of visual studies, media theory and Chinese studies is twofold. Firstly, the present research is instrumental in the assessment of (Chinese) cartoons as primary objects of study and not as supporting material (i.e. bi-products of other historical or communication phenomena). Secondly, it embraces an original perspective as compared to other works in the field of Chinese cartoon studies. The paper does not focus on a singular epoch/cultural product (Hung, 1994; Altehenger, 2013) and it does not represent a contribution to cartoon historiography (Bi and Huang, 2006; Gan, 2008). Instead, it follows a specific “narrative” that allows to *travel through time* and illustrate how the history of Chinese cartoon has been influenced by intertwined factors throughout a century of great change. In other words, it embraces a media approach, showing how cartoonists’ communication choices have been informed both by ever-changing personal, economic, and political factors, and by unchanging needs related to a specific system-environment dynamic.

By analyzing the cartoonists’ use of animal symbolism and allegory, in different epochs and media, both sub-narratives demonstrate Chinese cartoonists’ participation in the formation of an internationally-shared iconography (e.g. using feral beasts to represent and ridicule power-

holders). At the same time, they explain how these very same rules of this visual grammar adjust to specific contextual needs (e.g. re-contextualizing the image of the tiger according to a timely political discourse).

In this light, the first section reveals both the existence of a coherent trajectory that encompasses diachronical developments, and cartoonists’ creative ability to depart from the original models, being them “Western” or Soviet, in order to build innovative and catchy products that highlight different aspects of similar issues. The main discriminating factor is, clearly, the scenario where political satire is projected: Foreign Affairs bear a more rigid structure of references than the National ones.

Furthermore, the second sub-narrative shows how dissent and censorship have shaped, and still shape, the features of Chinese cartoon. Although the New Era of Deng Xiaoping and his media reforms seemed to open new horizons for cartooning as compared to the time-span, that stretches from the late 1940s to the late 1970s, yet several authors kept (and/or justified) the limits of their freedom of expression, also describing them as self-imposed (Liao, cit. in Lent, 2007). In this regard, the Internet has offered a “mediated” chance for Chinese cartoonists’ visual satire to take part more boldly in a national, as well as international public discourse, over the last two decades. The case of Rebel Pepper proves how Chinese political cartoon have gained a growingly influential position in the most recent “online carnival”, both inside and outside China mainland, while Ba Diucao’s case unfolds another interesting aspect of contemporary online cartooning, which is the confrontation with the opinion of the Chinese community abroad.

To conclude, it is possible to maintain that the facilitated access to Chinese production that the global media attention on cartoons is providing, guarantees an alternative space for the *survival* of cartoons’ original “power of irreverence”.

⁴¹ Because his cartoon had grown popular on Chinese social media and alarmed the authorities, in October 2013 Rebel Pepper received a subpoena. Once interrogated by the police, he was advised to proceed with caution. Afterwards, Wang tried to be more cautious and prone to self-censorship. Therefore, he could never imagine that in May 2013, “when he was on honeymoon with his wife in Japan and collecting items for his Taobao store [...] mainland authorities would level accusations of being a “pro-Japanese traitor” against him.” (inmediahk.net, 2014).

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