



Shock of the Nude: Pioneering Women Artists and the Cultural Politics of Modern China

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Part I. The Nude Model Controversy: Does modernization mean westernization?

- The nude was a foreign concept to Chinese culture. A century ago, China's greatest minds were divided by a passionate debate regarding the future of their art. The core issue stemmed from a ban on the use of nude models.
- The historical context: Momentous changes had taken place since the Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860), bringing a wide range of political, social, and cultural reforms. In 1912, following decades of internal crises and external imperialist exploitation, the last imperial dynasty fell. In its place, the Republic of China (1912–1937) was established. It was Asia's first democratic republic, led by the Nationalist Party, though actual governance remained fragmented under a variety of warlords.
- This nascent nation sought rapid transformation. Intellectuals spearheaded the New Culture Movement, an ideological awakening that called for a thorough revolution of China's cultural and political landscapes.
- Three main schools of thought emerged in the debates, driven by competing views on beauty, truth, and the body's philosophical meaning.

Why Science Carried the Day

- The May Fourth Movement named “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” as its ideal pillars, and the Life and Science debate swept the entire intellectual sphere.

- The nude had already arrived through medical images. In 1851, British missionary Benjamin Hobson and his Chinese colleagues published the first systematic anatomical treatise in the Chinese language.
- It was also medical images that first undressed the Chinese female body.
- The fact that the anatomical vision of the body and the introduction of the classical nude occurred as simultaneous events that entered Chinese consciousness means that one can no longer view these interconnected historical modes of the body separately.
- Chinese intellectuals realized that treating the body as an object of knowledge meant its aesthetics were inherently political, informed by evolutionary theories, scientific racism, and eugenics.

Part II. The Nude in Print Media: Who has authority over women's bodies?

- It was in print media that the nude became increasingly gendered. The boundaries between the medical bare, the tantalizing naked, and the aesthetic nude fully broke down.
- In *Shanghai Manhua* (Shanghai Sketch), image practices across genres and the very medium of image-making served as an alibi while women's bodies were subjected to the intersecting gazes of X-ray machines and cameras, as well as eugenic anatomical procedures of measuring and contouring.
- In *Liangyou* (The Young Companion), images of classical sculptures frequently filled the void of the invisible Chinese female body, signifying emotions and feminine virtues.
- Government also used nude photographs for their reform the female body.

Part III. The Subversive Nude: How do women empower themselves with their insurgent bodies?

- Yu Feng's drawing voices a critique not only of her fellow male artists but of metropolitan art institutions disconnected from the conditions in which most Chinese people lived.
- Artist Xiaoyun's drawing depicts the 1927 Women's Naked Protests in Wuhan, China.
- Artist Pan Yuliang's Nude Paintings: Orphaned at a young age, Pan was tragically sold to a brothel by her uncle during the final years of the imperial dynasty. However, with the assistance of her future husband, an official in the new Republican government, she managed to escape the

brothel and subsequently enrolled in the Shanghai Art Academy, becoming one of its first female students. Following her return from Paris after a decade-long study, she made history as the first female professor at the Shanghai Art Academy.

- One of her nude paintings documents Pan's encounter with the Nazis in Paris.
- Pan's nude paintings highlight the transnational, intimate, and interracial bonds.
- Coda: The profound cultural critiques of this era shaped the outlooks of the Nationalist and Communist Parties, even though the civil war between them (1927–36, 1945–49), combined with the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), ultimately curtailed the process of Chinese intellectual experimentation. Since the 1970s, the nude has continued to set off many waves of Chinese cultural politics in the post-war era.

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