

Epilogue

“Professor Crespi, there’s an app for that.”

In my modern Chinese literature and culture course, we had been discussing the full-page of caricature and comics from the 1929 issue of *Shanghai Sketch* shown in figure 10, the one with the fashion illustration of the stylish young man set above several advertisements for local clothing shops. As class let out, a student mentioned to me that now, if you wanted to locate and purchase clothing seen in an image found online, or even a photograph you had taken yourself, you could load the image into a smartphone application, which would point you to online retailers carrying similar items.

That small observation is a reminder of how the modernity expressed in a handcrafted illustrated magazine like *Shanghai Sketch*, published ninety years ago, remains with us in today’s hyperindustrialized digital age. It is not going too far, I think, to say that the smartphones and tablet computers ubiquitous in our daily lives are digitally enhanced versions of the pictorial magazines that preceded television and the Internet. David Bolter and Richard Grusin call this repurposing of one medium into another “remediation” and have argued that this process is “a defining characteristic of the new digital media.”⁷¹ Thus pictorial magazines like the ones examined in this book, with their continuous clamor of written and visual genres brimming with timely ephemera of local and global interest, supplied the template for the multiwindowed world of personal digital media that we experience today. Like readers of *Shanghai Sketch* and *Resistance Sketch*, we delight at seeing enhanced representations of our own selves playing across manufactured surfaces, be it paper or a touchscreen. Like the king in Zhang Guangyu’s *Manhua Journey to the West*, we are enthralled by the interlinked kaleidoscopic visions of the world flickering through our own private, handheld orbs. Even a publication like *Manhua yuekan*, easily written off as a relic of a bygone Cold War age, portended the syntheses of propaganda and entertainment found in the politically

themed pop songs, animations, and memes piped into China's "Intranet" by the party's cultural organs.

The ability to disclose resonances like this, between the manhua pictorials of the past and the social media platforms of the present, is one justification for why I have insisted—rather willfully some will surely say—on talking about manhua rather than Chinese cartoons or Chinese comics. To reiterate my reasoning, words such as “cartoon” or “comic” tend to confine the field of vision to a certain category of popular, pictorial art, while the expression manhua unfolds into the medium of the illustrated magazine, which in turn opens out into the lived experience of readers who relied on these magazines to enhance and expand their imagination of themselves and the worlds they inhabited. Where would such an account of manhua go beyond the last chapter of this book?

It could perhaps move beyond the illustrated satire magazine. In this brief study, my attention to the magazine form has served as a heuristic device, to the neglect of many other formats in which manhua appeared through the five or so decades covered in the preceding five chapters. Newspapers, cousins of the illustrated magazine, printed manhua constantly, generating a huge though more dispersed body of work available for analysis in situ. Another format was, of course, exhibitions. I have mentioned some of these in passing: the First National Manhua Exhibition in Shanghai in November 1936, the wartime manhua exhibitions in and around Nanjing and Wuhan early in the War of Resistance period, the exhibitions by Zhang Guangyu and other manhua artists during the later years of the War of Resistance and into the Civil War period, and manhua shows in Beijing during the late 1950s. Not to be neglected, either, is the use of manhua as propaganda and protest art painted on walls or carried on placards and cloth banners all through these same years. Artists like Lu Shaofei and Ye Qianyu even created manhua-like propaganda posters during the Northern Expedition of the mid-1920s, examples of which have only recently been rediscovered.² Hundreds of collections of manhua by author or by theme were also published in book form, and manhua artists contributed manhua-style illustrations to works of fiction. The genre of picture-stories, or *lian-huanhua*, offer another vast reservoir of graphic art related to manhua.

One could also, of course, extend the study into the decades that came after 1960. Many of the formats mentioned above evolved through the ensuing decades. Manhua as public art thrived during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) alongside the period's ubiquitous big-character posters (*dazibao*). Next, an explosion of strident caricatures denouncing the political ringleaders of the Cultural Revolution, the Gang of Four, marked the transition into the post-Mao era. Relaxation of cultural controls during the period of reform and opening up that came after 1978 brought back illustrated serials devoted to manhua. The most prominent among them, *Satire and Humor* (*Fengci yu youmo*, 1979–) in Beijing and *Manhua World* (*Manhua shijie*, 1986–99) in Shanghai, thrived as regular supplements to *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) and *Xinmin Evening News* (*Xinmin wanbao*), respectively.

China's opening up to the world from the 1980s onward also brought an influx of foreign influences that altered the practice of creating, publishing, and consuming manhua. In terms of mass-market publishing, starting in the mid-1980s, imported (and frequently pirated) Japanese *manga*, followed in the 1990s by Chinese domestic versions of *manga*, displaced *lianhuanhua*, whose popularity had plummeted in the second half of the 1980s. At the level of independent, underground manhua art, the advent of the Internet around the turn of the twenty-first century not only offered access to nonmainstream comics from Japan, Europe, and the United States but also gave young artists weary of formulaic commercial manhua the ability to discover one another and share their work. The result over the past fifteen years or so has been a quiet revolution in experimental comics initiated by a loose confederation of creators that quietly disseminates its edgy, idiosyncratic work in the legal gray zone of self-published collections, often in the form of limited-run zines and art books available at exhibition openings, online retail platforms, and international independent comics fairs.

Much more readily visible to anyone who has traveled in China are forms of propaganda manhua promoted by the Chinese Communist Party, from amateur wall art in urban and rural neighborhoods to mass-produced educational posters and comics.³ State sponsorship of amateur propaganda art continues, too, as I was recently reminded at a local exhibition of works by local elementary school children in the Zhang Leping Memorial Hall. There, on display for the Fifth "Sanmao Learns the Law" Manhua Competition, were colorful felt-tip pen renditions of China's most beloved comics character, Sanmao, reading a book on "socialist values" alongside Xi Jinping, sucking up society's "forces of darkness" (*hei shili*) with a huge vacuum cleaner, and smashing Hong Kong protests with giant fists. More subtle, fugitive, and spontaneous is the quick-moving cat-and-mouse game of crafty memes and linguistic innuendo evolving and mutating on multifunction platforms like WeChat in China today. This is the world of the "edge-ball" (*cabianqiu*), memes and images that, like a ping-pong shot that grazes the edge of the table, score a point but are impossible to return. Examples are legion. One master of this elusive art is the Guangzhou-based Kuang Biao, a student of the elder manhua satirist Liao Bingxiong, whose deft use of symbol, allegory, and the color red carefully presses against the ever-shifting borders of the permissible.⁴

All these phenomena deserve further examination from any number of disciplinary perspectives. This book has shone a narrow and selective beam of light into some forgotten and neglected corners of manhua. It has advised against the tendency to let the existing categories and narratives predetermine, and thus diminish, the meaning of these polymorphic pictures, arguing instead for wider recognition of how manhua converse with their own history and with the words and images that surround and sustain them. Put another way, it has encouraged us to respond to the manifold ways that pictures—*hua*—participate in the expansive, spontaneous, interactive, and free-flowing spirit of *man*.