

Body Un/Dis-covered: Luoti, Editorial Agency and Transcultural Production in Chinese Pictorials (1925-1933)

In the past ten years, art historians have done research to explore the Chinese “tastes” for luoti (literally: “uncovered bodies”) in Republican China, mainly focusing on the visual representations of nudes in fine art history as well as the related history of Western artistic education in the Shanghai area. Many scholars have noted that nudes, especially “Western” female nudes, appear frequently in print media; however, existing studies have not yet explored the following questions: how was luoti understood in the Republican Era? How was luoti represented in the popular press, particularly in pictorials? From where did the “Western” nudes “flow” to China, and eventually appeared in Chinese media? Who produced the nudes? Who (re-)arranged the nudes in the pictorials? How and why?

The dissertation examines a large amount of textual and visual representations of luoti which were discussed, debated and presented in illustrated newspapers and magazines of the 1920s-30s, such as Peiyang Pictorial News (Beiyanghuabao 北洋畫報, 1926-1937), Shanghai Sketch (Shanghai manhua 上海漫畫, 1928-1930), Pictorial Weekly (Sheyinghuabao, 攝影畫報, 1925-1937) and Linloon Magazine (Linglong 玲瓏, 1931-1937). On the one hand, I investigate the genealogy and formation of a Chinese understanding of the term luoti, and analyse its linguistic and discursive variations in Chinese literature and public debates of the period. On the other hand, I deal with visual materials of the period, the theme and form of which did not only root in Chinese historical heritage, but also largely resulted from the “cultural flows” at the time. Having systematically traced the (often Western) origins as well as the trajectories of dissemination of nude photographs, this study scrutinizes editorial strategies that aimed at incorporating nudes into periodical publications. Ultimately, I argue, editing visual and textual representations of luoti into pictorials was part of transcultural production, and “editorial agency” played a pivotal role in selecting, framing, contextualizing, and interpreting nudes. The culture of “uncovered bodies” was thus discovered.