CHAPTER 6

The First National Cartoon Exhibition

The First National Cartoon Exhibition (FNCE) opened in Shanghai on 4 November 1936, an event that was widely reported in both local Chinese and English-language newspapers. Most of the three hundred plus exhibits are now lost but many were reproduced in magazines and newspapers, notably, in a special issue of the magazine Manhuajie published to coincide with the exhibition.1 Approximately ninety cartoons associated with the exhibition are reproduced in this issue, together with several informative articles written by the cartoonists themselves. Most of the popular cartoon artists of the time were involved with the exhibition as both exhibitors and organisers and were almost exclusively Chinese nationals; the work of longstanding foreign cartoonists resident in Shanghai, such as Sapajou and Friedrich Schiff (1908–68) was not represented.

It has been shown in Part One that ten years prior to the exhibition, with the formation of the Cartoon Society, the cartoonists had begun to play an important role in a vital modern art scene in Shanghai. A decade later, less than a year after the 1936 exhibition had come to an end, the same artists would be engaged in anti-Japanese war propaganda with the formation of the National Salvation Cartoon Propaganda Corps (NSCPC). They would never look back at their work of the 1920s and early 1930s and indeed, some would become somewhat ashamed of what they had produced in the early part of their careers. In the 1920s the predominant call among many artists in Shanghai had been for “art for art’s sake” but by 1936 it had become for “art for life’s sake.” Engagement with “pure art” had given way to ideas loosely based on the principles of Socialist Realism, following a major trend in the Soviet Union, which had adopted it as a central tenet of Communist party ideology. The conflict between “art for art’s sake” and “art for life’s sake” had earlier been part of the literary discourse of the 1920s and a major topic of argument between members of the Chuangzaoshe 創造社 (The Creation Society) and their adver-

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1 In Shenbao it is reported that “more than 300” exhibits were on display. See Shenbao (3 November 1936): p. 11. The following day it is stated in the same newspaper that of the original seven hundred, only two hundred were selected for display, Shenbao (4 November 1936): p. 12. Lent claims that 600 cartoons were chosen from a sample of 2,000. John A. Lent and Xu Ying, “Cartooning and Wartime China: Part One—1931–1945” in IJOCA (Spring 2008): p. 88.
Art for life’s sake” became the call of the woodcut movement which took inspiration from Lu Xun, “Father of the Woodcut.” Just weeks prior to the FNCE, the Second National Travelling Woodcut Exhibition had opened at the Baxianqiao YMCA with the full support of Lu Xun, only days before his death that October. The two exhibition venues, both on Thibet Road (Xizanglu), were separated by a distance of just a few hundred yards.

The approach of the two artistic factions, cartoon and woodcut, had always been quite different. From the outset, the work of the woodcut artists had been politically driven. In contrast, many cartoonists during the late 1920s, although socially aware, were not politically active to anything like the same extent. By 1936, though, the move towards a politicization of the cartoon was well underway. Largely as a response to the encroachment of war, artists such as Cai Ruohong, Lu Zhixiang, Ding Cong and Zhang E, were now themselves looking to left-wing realist-inspired art. Left-wing ideals manifested themselves in the publishing world in Shanghai at the time, with the magazines of Zou Taofen and Jin Zhonghua such as Shenghuo xingqikan, Yongsheng and Shijie zhishi, where cartoons of an increasingly political nature appeared frequently. In 1936 Jack Chen arrived in China. As discussed in Chapter Five, Chen’s views on art followed the precepts of Socialist Realism. His ideas were in accord with the left-wing political ideologies advocated by these Shanghai magazines and with those propounded by the individuals behind their publication. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jin Zhonghua in particular, was to be highly supportive of Chen’s work while he was in China and Chen’s cartoons would appear regularly in the publications with which Jin was connected. It was at this time, when an increasing number of cartoonists were beginning to look to a lead from Soviet Russia, or at least to a heightened engagement with left-wing ideology, that the FNCE was mounted.

A Suitable Venue: The Sun Company Building

On Friday 10 January 1936 a new department store opened in Shanghai. This was the Shanghai daxin gongsi baihuo shangdian 上海大新公司百貨商店

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3 The exhibition opened on 2 October 1936, see Liangyou huabao (October 1936): pp. 46–47.
4 Shenbao (10 January 1936): front page.