CHAPTER FOUR

SELLING MODERNITY:
HOUSEWIVES AS PORTRAYED IN YUEFENPAI (CALENDAR POSTERS)
AND MAGAZINE ADVERTISEMENTS IN SHANGHAI OF THE
1920S AND 1930S

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INTRODUCTION

Yuefenpai are the calendar posters that were used for advertising consumer products in the international city of Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s (Fig. 4.1). These commercial posters were first introduced by Western

Fig. 4.1. Yuefenpai calendar poster for tobacco showing a military fort, British-American Tobacco Company, 1930s, by Hu Boxiang.

Fig. 4.2. Yuefenpai calendar poster for a Japanese stomach medicine called ken-i-kocho-jo, Gu Hui Chun Tang, 1931, by Xie Zhiguang.

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trading companies in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century to sell tobacco, medicines, cosmetics, textiles, oil and other products. Later, they became widely used by Chinese stores and companies as free giveaways to promote their products. They were initially called *yuefenpai* because they featured calendars. *Yuefenpai* have their origins in Chinese New Year posters, which are rooted in traditional genre paintings where the outline is drawn in black ink and then the rest of the picture is colored in. New Year posters originally featured such traditional images as the gods of fortune and wealth (like *Ebisu*, *Daikoku* and the other Seven Gods of Fortune in Japan). Other popular lucky symbols were the golden tree and the Kitchen God who would ensure prosperity for the family (Laing 2004: 23). In the early twentieth century, artists who had mastered watercolor painting, suifen (water powder) painting, oil painting and other decorative arts of the West started drawing these posters featuring historical figures, myths and legends, traditional theater, *shan shui* (mountain-water scenes) and female beauties. Zheng Man-tuo, a painter in the early days of the Republic of China, invented a rub-and-paint technique in 1914. He first put carbon powder on an unused brush and scrubbed the paper with it to make a shaded black-and-white base, then added layer upon layer of colors by carefully applying water-soluble paint. Artists used this light-color brushwork to make their female subjects in calendar posters appear lifelike and attractive. Most *yuefenpai* during the 1920s and 1930s are multi-colored posters featuring female beauties using this rub-and-paint technique (Fig. 4.2).

*Yuefenpai* is a form of advertising art that helped create a sense of “modernity” in consumption culture in modern China. A typical calendar poster consists of figures or a landscape in the center, a background where the figures are placed, a frame, advertising logos, product images, and a calendar for daily use. In the 1930s and 1940s, the calendar was dropped and *yuefenpai* became pin-up posters. The birth and development of *yuefenpai* owes much to the introduction of lithographic printing and offset printing technology that enabled multicolored printing and the mass production of paper-based media. The history of *yuefenpai* is thus classified into three stages: growth and development in the 1910s; prosperity in the 1920s and 1930s; then decline in the 1940s. The main “stage” for the heyday

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1 At the beginning, *yuefenpai* were printed in small quantities by advertisers to present to their customers. However, with the development of publishers and printing technology, and the female images in the posters becoming welcome commodities, *yuefenpai* became mass-produced and a kind of decoration that could also be easily purchased in bookstores and street stalls in the 1920s and 1930s.