Producing Norms, Defining Beauty: The Role of Science in the Regulation of the Female Body and Sexuality in Liangyou and Furen Huabao

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Liangyou (The Young Companion), one of the most popular pictorial magazines in Republican China, published an article in 1935 symbolically titled “Tanglang de beijù” (“The Tragedy of the Praying Mantis”). After a long and detailed description of the courting and mating behaviors of praying mantises, the article concludes with a highly controversial argument that some females in the human world are equally, if not more cruel, than the female praying mantises who kill and eat their partners. The author argues that female praying mantis carnage is performed for the survival of the species, whereas women’s brutality is often caused by personal jealousy and hatred. Coincidentally, Furen huabao (Women’s Pictorial), another influential magazine also published by Liangyou press, and targeting women, similarly emphasizes the links between women and female praying mantises, but from a slightly different perspective: “The male praying mantis, grabbed and engulfed by the female, never tries to free itself even if its life is in imminent jeopardy.” In addition, the female praying mantis also made an appearance as images in 1930s’ pictorials such as Shidai manhua (Modern Sketch). The very first issue of Shidai manhua in 1934 included a cartoon featuring a praying mantis and three women (fig. 5.1). The three women of different skin colors are positioned in a way to give space to a praying mantis emerging from the ground. This seemingly odd juxtaposition of human beings and an insect is explained by the title of the cartoon “Hei, hong, canrenxing yu nüxing” (“Black, Red, Cruelty and Women”), which explicitly points to the animalistic intrinsic character—cruelty—shared by modern women despite their outward distinctions and different skin colors. Guo Jianying (1907–79), the artist who contributed the cartoon to Shidai manhua, was, not by pure coincidence, the editor of Furen huabao.

Linking women and animals was not new. Positively or pejoratively, women had long been associated with animals in various discursive practices.
Nevertheless, if we compare the comments offered by Liangyou and Furen huabao to earlier references to the non-human world, we will notice a shift. Republican China witnessed the waning popularity of foxes and tigresses as metaphors for women. Instead, the image of the female mantis began to emerge in popular and scientific discourses. Furthermore, if the earlier comparisons were fanciful, even poetic metaphors, the mantis associations were presented as grounded in science. Both the Liangyou and Furen huabao pieces underscore new discoveries in science and natural history to lend legitimacy to their arguments. This chapter intends to explore how Liangyou, and Furen huabao, the women’s magazine run by Liangyou press, appropriated scientific discoveries, and how this scientific discourse contributed to new structures of knowledge, particularly new modes of writing about female sexuality and aesthetics of the female body in Republican China. I realize that this understanding of Liangyou and its sister magazine goes against two notions associated with Leo Lee’s influential assessment of Liangyou: First, his general positioning of Liangyou as the commercial bourgeois “surface” of modernity as opposed to the more substantially intellectual “ideas” of enlightenment advocated by more “serious” magazines such as Dongfang zazhi (Eastern Miscellanies). Second, his reading of women presented in Liangyou as “young, rich, and alluring” bourgeois women confined either by domesticity or by burgeoning commercial forces. My challenge to these two aspects does not diminish the importance of the “surface” dimensions that Lee believes are central to the mag-