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Pillar of the Nation: Photographic Representation of “Modern” Chinese Masculinity in Liangyou

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INTRODUCTION: BEYOND THE “INVISIBILITY OF MAN” IN LIANGYOU

BEFORE I OPENED an actual copy of the pictorial Liangyou, I was eagerly anticipating an extravagant meal of modern female images. I felt as if I was sitting in front of a tiny table in a dimly lit restaurant in the French concession in Shanghai in the late 1920s or early 1930s, waiting for my order to be served—an appetizer of pretty cover girls, an entrée of beautiful women in all kinds of fashionable clothes, and a dessert of sexy female nudes. With Jazz music permeating the background, I was presented with the first issue of the pictorial. The cover girl was pretty, and my appetite was successfully stimulated. However, as I turned the page, I could not help but blurt out: “Wait a minute! This isn’t what I ordered!” On that page were five portraits of men (fig. 7.1). All of them looked deadly serious, if not hostile. They stared at me with no facial expression. The captions below the pictures informed me that these men were officials in the Guangdong government. All of them seemed to

“Chizi,” Liangyou, no. 60 (1931): 1, detail of fig. 7-6.
have an icy aura around their heads, which literally took me aback. I could no longer sit at ease; rather, I unconsciously straightened my back to maintain my distance from this unexpected dish.

I would not find it at all odd if other people share my surprise because the current studies on Liangyou have, despite their insight, consciously or unconsciously presented the magazine as one focused on women, modern women in particular. Leo Ou-fan Lee was among the first in Western academia to study Liangyou. In *Shanghai Modern*, his book on Shanghai urban culture between 1930 and 1945, Lee considers women to be of great significance in his analysis of the magazine. “Not only did women grace the front covers of *Liangyou huabao*, they also occupied a central space in the magazine’s contents.”\(^1\) This assessment seems to have become the premise of research into the magazine. Like Leo Lee, Yingjin Zhang, Carrie Waara and Shu-mei Shih, whose articles are collected in *Visual Culture in Shanghai 1850s-1930s*, also exclusively explore female images in *Liangyou*, although they cast a more critical eye on how the magazine portrayed women.\(^2\) All of them draw attention to the images of women but none of them examine the images of men in the magazine.

However, as one continues turning the pages of the pictorial, s/he will not fail to confirm again and again that *Liangyou* is not a magazine focused on women only. In fact, images of men significantly outnumber those of women in its earlier issues and are noticeably predominant in the magazine with the advent of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. This is by no means a coincidence because the editors were rather conscious about their choice of images in terms of gender. In its second issue, beside a photo of a female film star Liang Menghen, the editors wrote, “It is not easy (buyi) for our magazine to include photos of female stars, but we should not ignore them, so we only have one or two of them in each issue.”\(^3\) They did not explain why it was difficult to do this. It could not have been a matter of access, so the editorial intention behind this choice deserves further inquiry. It is also noteworthy that in its early issues, when there are photos of sexy women in bathing suits, they are always Japanese women (*Dongying nüzi*). The “Women’s Page” (*Funü jie*), which featured Chinese women, did not become a regular column until 1930. Images of women underwent a boom during the middle years of the magazine’s life; however, they are never unaccompanied by images of men. Moreover, the number of the female images was severely reduced from the end of 1937 due to the intensification of the Sino-Japanese War. In fact, between November 1937 and June 1938, before the publication of *Liangyou* was suspended for the first time, not only were images of women almost absent from the magazine, but they had also ceded their territory on the cover to male military figures.

Thus, it raises the issue of why scholars have treated the omnipresent male images as if they are invisible. It even encourages one to suspect that this “invisibility” actually suggests the centrality of male power; that is, there is nothing to say about men because people take everything about them for granted. Still, it is a curious phenomenon that while scholars have consistently argued that women are subjugated in visual culture because they are powerlessly positioned under the male gaze, very few scholars have cast a critical eye on men even though they are also on display. Also, when scholars discuss female images and femininity, they tend to take them as the major indicator of modernity, which is usually equated with Westernization. However, given the prominent presence of men in *Liangyou*, one is tempted to examine what Chinese modernity looks like when men enter the picture. This is the starting point of this chapter, namely to give men a long-overdue “gaze.” It endeavors to examine how men are visually presented in *Liangyou* and, through the lens of *Liangyou*, what Chinese masculinity and modernity were supposed to mean to Chinese people at that time. It is worth emphasizing at the beginning of this chapter that *Liangyou* was certainly not the only magazine being published at the time and it could not represent all the imagination and presentation of Chinese masculinity in those years. Rather, since *Liangyou* was one of the most popular magazines, it can be assumed that it embodied a significant kind of Chinese masculinity that no one can justifiably ignore.