



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2010

The Growth of Manhua in China: An Overview

De Masi, Vincenzo ; Chen, Chwen Chwen

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-41351>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

De Masi, Vincenzo; Chen, Chwen Chwen (2010). The Growth of Manhua in China: An Overview. CMO Newsletter, (6):7-10.

The Growth of *Manhua* in China: An Overview

Chwen Chwen Chen, China Media Observatory, USI, Lugano, Switzerland.

Vincenzo De Masi, Zurich University Seminar für Filmwissenschaft, Réseau Cinéma and USI, Switzerland.

To interpret this article correctly it is important to note that the word *manhua* is used in China to refer not only to cartoons and comics published in China but also to translations of Japanese works and, in general, to comics in the Chinese language. On the contrary, the Japanese word *manga* (from which *manhua* takes its name and style) is used only for comics produced in Japan. In any case, the word *manhua* has now been adopted also in Japan.

The development of Chinese *manhua* has been closely bound to the main historical and political events that have shaped China's history. According to some authors, *manhua* was born in the years straddling the 19th and 20th centuries, roughly between 1867 and 1927 (e.g. Wong, 2002). Indeed, 1867 saw the creation in Hong Kong of the first Chinese satirical comic magazine called 'The China Punch': this magazine was in English and the style was that of the modern *manhua* while the stories were political satires full of humor and pictures (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 - The China Punch, 1867

Although there were other kinds of comics circulating in this period, the satirical *manhua* was the most important as it marked the birth of China's modern *manhua* which developed along with the bourgeois democratic revolutionary move-

ment and mass demonstrations against imperialism and foreigners in the early 1900s. These events inspired the creation in 1900 of a comic called 'Shoot pig cut sheep pictures' (*shezhu zhanyan tu*), where, by playing with Chinese characters and sounds, 'pig' indicated the Christian God and 'sheep' stood for the Christians. From an aesthetic point of view, this comic is relevant in the history of Chinese *manhua* as it combines folk pictures with more traditional Chinese pictorial elements (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 - Shezhu zhanyan tu, 1900

Manhua appeared for the first time in a Shanghai newspaper in 1903; after this more and more newspapers in other important Chinese cities such as Beijing, Tianjin and Guangzhou began to publish comics and comic magazines. The main aim of these was to criticize and highlight the weaknesses of the Qing dynasty and, after 1911, of the Republican government. One of the most important comic magazine was 'The Journal of Current Pictorial', created in 1905 by a revolutionary group called the "Chinese Alliance" that depicted an emblematic history (Fig. 3). Because of its political nature, this magazine was banned on mainland China two years after its creation but it continued to be published in

Hong Kong for some years until it had to shut down because of the continuous pressure exerted by the Qing government on the British Colonial government. In 1912, with the fall of the Qing dynasty



Fig. 3 - *The Journal of Current Pictorial*, 1905

and the founding of the Republican government in China, the "Chinese Alliance" began publishing again on mainland China and created the magazine 'The True Record' (*Zhenxiang Huabao*) in Shanghai. However, this magazine was soon banned by the Provisional President of the Republic of China, Yuan Shikai, because it criticized the new Republic of China government.

Although a number of comics and comic authors began to emerge and become familiar names with the public in this period, it was only in 1925 that the word *manhua* was used for the first time in association with Chinese comics, when Feng Zi-Kai used it for a collection called 'Zi-Kai manhua'. More notably, *manhua* gained increasing importance with the rise of the Communist Party of China (CPC) - founded in 1921 - as a propaganda tool for Party activities and events aimed at workers and peasants throughout China.

From the late 1920s to mid 1930s, considered the golden age of *manhua* in China, Shanghai became the most active comic production center in China: in 1927 *Manhua hui*, China's first cartoon and comic arts organization, which

published 17 magazines for around 15 years, was established, leading to more coherent and systematic growth of the cartoon sector. The Association was important in the history of Chinese *manhua* as it contributed to the cohesion of the loosely organized group of artists. One year later the 'Shanghai Sketch', the first Chinese *manhua* magazine in the Chinese language, was created. It is interesting to note that the 'Shanghai Sketch' was largely influenced by Western comic works such as 'Ally Sloper's Half Holiday' (Gilbert Daziel, 1884) and 'The Yellow Kid' (Richard Outcault, 1896): for example, the Chinese works 'Mr. Wang' by Yeh Qianyu and 'Dr. Reform' by Lu Shaofei had a similar design to the Western comics. The importance of Shanghai as a creative center of *manhua* also influenced Hong Kong's cartoonists of that time as they created comic characters inspired by Shanghai-based authors.

The publication of *manhua* continued even with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937 and, two years later, of World War II, as well as during the civil war between Communists and Nationalists after the end of the war. During this period of conflict, the focus of the content and themes of most *manhua* was on the war and political events.

A number of scholars hold that the 1950s marked a revival of *manhua* in China (e.g. Lent, 2001; Wong, 2002). Indeed, the new political and social phase China entered with the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949 offered opportunities for new ideas and inspiration for comic authors. 1950 saw the creation of a comic monthly called 'Manhua', which contributed to enhancing the creativity and quality of comic works in China and cultivated talented young people in this field.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) *manhua* became a tool of propaganda and education

in the hands of the Chinese government because of the very simple language and repetition it used, making it easy to promote and disseminate also in the furthest flung and poorest areas of mainland China.

The launch of the reforms in 1979 opened up a new phase for comics in China. On one hand, the CPC's official organ the 'People's Daily' began to publish a series of satirical and humoristic comic works, followed by other major national dailies and specialized comic magazines in the following years and research and conferences flourished throughout the country; on the other hand, an impressive inflow of foreign comics, above all the Japanese *manga* - with well-known titles such as 'Doraemon', 'Dragon Ball', and 'Saint Seiya' - dominated the market for a long time. The *manga* had a huge influence on Chinese *manhua* and its development in the following years not only in terms of design and content but also as regards the organization and the market of comic works.

In order to limit the "Japanese invasion", in 1995 the Chinese government made a first attempt to launch its domestic comic and animation sector by promoting production with the first official package supporting the sector, but this strategy failed because the funds were handed out without conducting any kind of market or target research. Another explanation for this failure was the commonly held opinion - still advanced by some - that animation and comic arts are minor arts. Indeed, in the eyes of mainland China's government and the public, comics have always been considered products for children, used most commonly for propaganda and educational purposes. This in part explains why, although the Chinese *manhua* have begun to reach readers throughout the world, the creativity of the authors has been limited by the taboo

on sex.

Nonetheless, the cultural, social and economic implications of having China's own animation and comic sector was clear to Chinese leaders, above all in view of China stepping onto the global stage through membership of the World Trade Organization in December 2001. The official recognition came in October 2000 during CPC's 15th Congress and, one year later, animation and comic arts were made an eligible sector for government funds in the 10th Five-Year Plan.¹

In 2008 the Ministry of Culture launched a project which allocated a total of RMB7 million (€748,190) to the promotion of 101 publications. This investment was doubled one year later, with 108 comic works receiving funds and adopting a more advanced industrial strategy (Shanghai Daily, 2010); indeed, the *manhua* authors and stories were chosen for their creativity and their sales potential.

The Ministry of Culture has also encouraged the exploitation of merchandising (gadgets, clothes, toys, etc.) because comics and animation on their own are not profitable: in fact, in developed markets such as Japan and the US, comics and animation are sold with their side-products to create a profitable "industrial chain", says Professor Chen Shaofeng, deputy director of the Peking University Institute for Cultural Industries.

Thanks to the government's support and better targeted publication and marketing strategies, in the last five years new *manhua* and animation production companies have been set up and more than 20 provinces consider it a new industrial sector which needs support. Some cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Dalian and, above all, Shenzhen

¹ *Animation, Comic and Game (ACG) have been recognized as "creative cultural industries" in the State Council's "Plan to develop the culture industry" (wenhua chanye zhenxing guihua) dated July 2009 as a key sector to be developed and to be promoted abroad under the framework of the 'go out' (zouchuqu) strategy.*

have created new *manhua* and animation production studios, granting the sector preferential policies. Today more than 200 universities offer masters courses in animation and comics.

A successful example is the animation and comics production company Summer Zoo which, thanks to the funds from the Ministry of Culture, has launched a new team comprising 30 famous cartoonists and six authors. In just a short time the company published 20 *manhua* with a circulation of 500,000 copies of which 'Little Piggy's Time Machine' and 'Traveling with Ruffle' are the most successful. In addition, 10 serials produced by Summer Zoo are published in the major comic magazines in China (Shanghai Daily, 2010).

In particular, two series of comics produced by Summer Zoo have reaped much success even in Japan, the homeland of the *manga*: 'Zibuyu', and 'Confucius Did Not Say'. These *manhua* are published by Tokyo-based Shueisha Publishing Co. Ltd, one of the largest production and distribution companies of Japanese cartoons and manga.

There are also cases of exploitation of the popularity of animation TV series and movies to launch *manhua* series for children. For instance, after the resounding success of 'Big Big Wolf and Pleasant sheep' as an animation TV series first, and on the Internet and at the cinema later, a new series of *manhua* based on this title has been launched recently with children as the main target.

According to the Ministry of Culture, China now has around 10,000 companies located between Beijing and Shenzhen which produce cartoons and comics and employ more than 200,000 people. To foster the development of the national animation and comics industry the Chinese government has declared "war on the Japanese invasion" in an ironic way, urging the Chinese studios to forge close

relationships with companies based in Hong Kong with a view to creating a common front not only against the *manga*, but also against the Korean *manhwa* and the American comics.

References

China Daily (2009), "Animation becomes big business - and not just for children", October 21, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2009-12/21/content_9205462.htm. Accessed on October 29, 2010.

Lent, John A. (2001), *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humor Magazines, and Picture Books*. University of Hawaii Press.

Shanghai Daily (2010), "Comic book culture gets a boost", September 9, <http://news.cultural-china.com/20100909150247.html?PHPSESSID=7ba33317674e668e003f5754bfb77a39>. Accessed on October 23, 2010.

Tan, Ling and Yin, Juan (2009), *Dongman chanye* [*The Industry of Animation and Comics*], Chengdu: Sichuan University Press.

Xinhua (2010), "Cartoon industry rebuilds with dreams", August 15, <http://english.cntv.cn/20100815/102412.shtml>. Accessed on October 15, 2010.

Wong W. S. (2002), *Hong Kong comics: a history of manhua*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York.

Zhongguo manhua, <http://www.chiculture.net/20504/html/d01/20504d01.html>. Accessed on November 25, 2010.

Vincenzo De Masi is a PhD student at Zurich University Seminar für Filmwissenschaft, at the Réseau Cinéma and at the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI), Lugano, Switzerland. For contacts: vincenzo.demasi@usi.ch