



Exploring the Artistic and Cultural Conditions of the Republican Era through Comics

A Case Study of "Self-Conceited" in "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government"

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Abstract. This study investigates the development of art and culture during the Beiyang Government period through the lens of Republican-era comics. While the artistic and cultural boom and transformation resulting from the awakening of thought during that time are well-documented, analyzing these changes through the medium of comics may offer new insights. This approach underscores the significance of art history research. Furthermore, this paper focuses on "Self-Conceited" from "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government" as a case study. By adopting this specific and narrow perspective, the study utilizes concrete examples for validation and observation, leading to a novel and distinctive line of inquiry. This method aims to provide a detailed, nuanced, and multi-dimensional understanding of the artistic and cultural conditions during the Beiyang period.

Keywords: Beiyang Government, "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government", Artistic and Cultural Thought Transformation Collision of Eastern and Western Art

1 Introduction and Research Background

The Republican era represents a distinctive period in the development of Chinese intellectual and cultural history. On one hand, Yuan Shikai's actions during the Beiyang Government period, driven by his quest for power, led to widespread darkness, despair, and suffering. On the other hand, this era was also marked by a flourishing of ideas, with art emerging as a key medium for intellectual expression. The rapidly developing field of comics during this period courageously satirized contemporary issues and voiced the concerns of progressives, cultural figures, and the general populace. The Republican period is thus considered a golden age for comic development, with comics quickly becoming a distinctive artistic form and cultural medium. "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government" is a well-preserved example suitable for study, with the comic "Self-Conceited" serving as an ideal case study [1].

Research on Republican-era comics, though covering specific events and artistic forms, tends to focus more on general introductions, with relatively few academic papers, making comprehensive literature collection challenging. Studies specifically related to "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government" are particularly scarce. However, due to its well-preserved condition, this book provides valuable primary source material for the research. While some information exists about its illustrator, Qian Binghe, it is largely unrelated to his work in comics and thus holds limited value for this study.

The research materials can be categorized into three main types:

1. **Republican-era Comics:** These primary sources, such as "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government" and "The History of Shanghai Painting," provide direct examples of the comics of the time.
2. **Works Related to "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government" or Qian Binghe:** These include monographs and periodicals that primarily focus on Qian Binghe's life and contributions or describe the content, background, and impact of "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government," offering useful context.
3. **Academic Research on Republican-era Comics:** Although specific studies on "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government" are limited, broader research on Republican-era comics provides valuable context. These studies often use comics as tools for examining specific projects and can corroborate the findings of this research, reflecting the state of Republican-era comics. This research is significant for understanding how comics were influenced by contemporary thoughts and Western ideas during the rise of new cultural movements in the Republican era.

Research on the imagery and content of "Self-Conceited" is relatively scattered but offers a wealth of resources. International research on this topic is harder to find; however, due to the unique international context of the time, relevant materials or studies may potentially be discovered in the future.

2 Research Objectives and Significance

The Republican era was a tumultuous period in China, marked by widespread darkness and despair, exacerbated by Yuan Shikai's actions in his quest for power. Despite the bleakness of the time, the period was also characterized by a flourishing of ideas, with comics emerging as a courageous medium for satirizing the status quo and voicing the concerns of progressives, intellectuals, and the general populace. This era is recognized as a golden age for comics, with the medium rapidly evolving into a distinctive artistic form and cultural vehicle.

"The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government" is a well-preserved and representative example of Republican-era comics. Its illustrator, Qian Binghe, combined historical and political satire with artistic techniques, reflecting the artistic characteristics and common practices of the time. This work provides valuable insights into the clash of old and new cultural ideas and trends of the era, offering significant research value.

It also allows for an exploration of the cultural background of the time, as interpreted through the author's expressed thoughts.

In summary, studying the unique comic art form of the Republican era provides meaningful insights into its artistic, cultural, and historical contexts. Given the flourishing of art and culture during this period, such research is highly relevant. Using "Self-Conceited" from "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government" as a case study offers substantial academic value and contributes to the understanding of this era's cultural and artistic developments.

3 Historical Context

3.1 Background

With the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, the feudal imperial system in China collapsed, leading the country towards a republic. Yuan Shikai, leveraging the strength of the Beiyang Army, attempted to seize the fruits of the revolution. The year 1913 in "The Illustrated History of the Yuan Government" roughly corresponds to the suppression of the Second Revolution and the period when Yuan Shikai was elected President of the Republic of China. His dictatorial methods and the dire living conditions led to widespread discontent.[2]

As feudal ideologies crumbled, societal instability prevailed, and the collision and integration of old and new cultures occurred. Both Eastern and Western concepts began to influence Chinese thought and art, leading to rapid cultural and artistic development.

For instance, Zhang Nan summarizes in "Modern Art Transformations Seen in Beiyang Pictorials" [7]: "The first half of the 20th century was both a golden age for modern media development and an unprecedented period of artistic transformation. The two went hand in hand, creating an era of flourishing literature and art. Mass media played a crucial role in the transformation of modern art from traditional, closed, elitist forms to modern, open, and diverse forms, providing meaningful insights into contemporary art and media relations." Similarly, in "A Brief Analysis of the Causes of Intellectual and Cultural Development During the Beiyang Government," [5] it is stated: "The intellectual and cultural development during the Beiyang government was greatly influenced by the dissemination of Western culture and the development of traditional Chinese culture. As Mao Zedong remarked, 'Its momentum and power were almost invincible.' The cultural flourishing during this turbulent period resulted from the combined force of multiple factors, which merits further contemplation."

These perspectives affirm that the early Republican period was marked by significant changes and development in intellectual and cultural fields.

3.2 Exploration of the Causes Behind Art and Cultural Development

With the collision of Eastern and Western cultures, the development of art during this era was indeed distinctive.

"Exploration of the Causes Behind Cultural Development During the Beiyang Government Era" attributes the historical background primarily to the failure of centralized

control and the imperial examination system, the ideological transformation at the end of the Qing Dynasty, the influx of Western culture, social turmoil, and national capital [6].

My interpretation is that the era's distinctive character arose from the weakening of centralized control and strict order, the promotion of intellectual freedom, and the accompanying social chaos and progress.

From the time of Shang Yang's Five Techniques for Governing, stability was emphasized above all else. The Han Dynasty's promotion of Confucianism and the examination system up to the eight-legged essay all stressed obedience and order, suppressing individual personality and treating people as mere tools of production. In contrast, Western societies, having experienced the Enlightenment and various revolutions, emphasized the importance of individual personality and spirit. This made Western ideas more attractive, and the Republican-era advocacy for a republic reflected this orientation. Although a chaotic society was detrimental to production and development, the lack of control in intellectual and artistic environments promoted cultural growth. Hence, the Republican era was marked by numerous prominent masters and a variety of unique elements, similar to how the Weimar Republic later tolerated the development of movements like Nazism and Dadaism. However, blindly accepting this as positive is limiting; just as Nazism brought disaster to the world, such an environment fosters diverse artistic and cultural experimentation and competition. Ultimately, national capital—the transformation of productive forces and relations—shapes thought. Compared to feudalism, the benefits of capitalism and the industrial revolution led people to abandon intellectual constraints. A capitalist, by reducing formal controls, can achieve greater profits and productivity, which in turn induces such behavior. Despite the presence of stubborn individuals clinging to "ancestral methods" or "national conditions," they are forced to adapt to competition or face elimination and loss of influence. Ironically, Yuan Shikai, the central figure in "The History of Yuan's Government in Cartoons," exemplifies this, as he chose to force the Qing Dynasty to abdicate rather than accept high office and rewards promised by the Qing government.

The caste system in India was softened by capitalism and industrialization, and Louis XVI was executed by revolutionary forces—these are all examples of how ideological, economic, and cultural changes exert their influence. Such forces loosened the artistic constraints during the Beiyang era, leading to significant ideological development, which is not surprising. This influence is evident in art as well. For instance, the depiction of Napoleon and the use of Western artistic techniques, such as shading and the distinctive Western highlight on Yuan Shikai's shoes, alongside traditional Chinese art features like calligraphy and the artist's signature (presumably by Qian Binghe), illustrate the collision of Eastern and Western thought.

Another dimension of the conflict was between the conservative and progressive factions. Before the literacy movement, China had low general education levels, and new ideas were accessible only to the educated. Some people, educated with old concepts, were resistant to change or suppressed emerging ideas to maintain their own interests and status. This created a divide between those holding new ideas and those adhering to traditional views, resulting in ongoing clashes between old and new concepts and between Eastern and Western art forms.

4 Comic Analysis

As shown in Figure 1, the comic itself features a relatively simple composition with few key motifs [3]. For example, it depicts two men in military uniforms, with notable elements including the hat and sword of the man on the left, and the vest or armor visible beneath the coat of the man on the right.



Fig. 1. Self-Exalted [3]

Analyzing these motifs in conjunction with Figures 2 and 3, we identify the two figures as Yuan Shikai and Napoleon. The hat and sword on the left signify the equipment of the Beiyang Army. Yuan Shikai's posture reflects ambition and arrogance [3][4][9]. Therefore, the symbolism and meaning conveyed by these elements relate to the relationship between Yuan Shikai and the Beiyang Army, Yuan Shikai's imperial ambitions, and the comparison or satire of Yuan Shikai with Napoleon as portrayed by the artist.



Fig. 2. Shikai yuan [9]



Fig. 3. Napoleon [10]

Refer to the two portraits in Figure 2 and Figure 3 while observing the cartoon in Figure 1. Our analysis thus indicates that the imagery suggests Yuan Shikai’s attempt to claim the throne, akin to Napoleon, with the support of the Beiyang Army. The title **Self-Exalted** explicitly denotes Yuan Shikai’s self-comparison to Napoleon. The artist emphasizes similarities between the two or uses their differences to satirize Yuan Shikai. This interpretation aligns with the thematic expression of **The Illustrated History of Yuan’s Government**.

In terms of technique, **Self-Exalted** features shadows on Napoleon’s face and highlights on Yuan Shikai’s shoes, reflecting the influence of Western and modern art styles on Republican-era comics. Additionally, the signature and line work noted in the historical context earlier highlight the retention and development of traditional Chinese artistic characteristics.

4.1 In-depth Study of the Napoleon Portrait

In the previous iconographic analysis, a connection was identified between the depictions of Yuan Shikai and Napoleon in the comic. If the author had extensive historical and scholarly knowledge, there might be even more historical and intellectual layers embedded in Napoleon’s portrait.



Fig. 4. Napoleon [12]



Fig. 5. Napoleon [11]

Upon searching for Napoleon portraits [11][12], we found two highly similar images, Figures. 4 and 5. The main differences between these portraits are whether Napoleon's hands are inserted into the seams of his coat and the medals displayed on his chest. If these images are indeed the source for the portrait of Napoleon in the comic, it allows us to conclude that the chest item in the comic is a white vest rather than armor. In Portrait Four, Napoleon wears two medals: the left one is the French Legion of Honour, and the right one is the Iron Crown of Lombardy. Although the Iron Crown medal is somewhat unclear, the French Legion of Honour medal is distinct.

Referring to figures 6 and 7, the French Legion of Honour was established in 1802, while the Iron Crown was awarded from June 5, 1805. The exact last issuance date of the Iron Crown is difficult to verify, but the Legion of Honour continues to be awarded today. Thus, we can confirm that this portrait must be from after 1805, but the exact end of the time range cannot be determined solely from these medals [13][14].



Fig. 6. The Iron Crown of Lombardy (Italian: Corona Ferrea) [13]



Fig. 7. Légion d'honneur [14]

Portraits Four and Five are difficult to trace through official channels [11][12]. However, many related videos and websites mention that these portraits are of Napoleon from April 6, 1814, or from the time when Napoleon signed his abdication at Fontainebleau.

From the expressions and posture in the portraits, Napoleon appears very dejected and somewhat angry. His demeanor seems disheveled, with a posture that resembles slumping against a chair. His hair looks unkempt, and his clothing is not neatly arranged. This state of disarray corresponds with the historical context. Additionally, it bears a strong resemblance to Napoleon's depiction in the circular frame of the comic.

Given that Napoleon and Yuan Shikai were from different centuries, the comic artist would have been aware of Napoleon's historical context. One might speculate that the portrait is used to foreshadow Yuan Shikai's inevitable failure. In the original portraits, Napoleon's hands are either in the seams of his coat or at his sides, whereas in the comic, Napoleon's hands are crossed. This could suggest that Napoleon is gazing sternly at Yuan Shikai, indicating the gravity of the situation, or even questioning Yuan's actions. Another interpretation might be that the portrait is intended to criticize Yuan Shikai as more autocratic and darker than Napoleon.

If we are to be more speculative, considering the Hundred Days of Napoleon's return, the artist might have thought that Yuan Shikai could still make a comeback despite his apparent failure.

However, it is also possible that the artist of *"The History of Yuan's Government"* did not delve deeply into these interpretations.

4.2 Analysis of Other Cartoons in "The Illustrated History of Yuan's Government"

In the analysis of art, the manifestation of new and old ideas each presents distinct characteristics. Taking "Self-Appraisal" as an example, it is indicative of the broader phenomena present in "The Illustrated History of Yuan's Government." To illustrate this, we can compare it with other cartoons from the collection, considering the

characteristics of ideological collision and development, as well as the cultural context of the time.

Firstly, we should address the concept of abstract art in China. Direct abstraction did not develop extensively in Chinese art. In Zhong Yueying's work [8], *The Evolution of Abstract Art in Eastern and Western Art Histories and its Vulgarization in Contemporary Art*, traditional Chinese abstract art is often characterized by capturing the spirit of the scene. This is known as "expressing the spirit," focusing on the essence of the artwork. Later, a certain degree of abstraction in relation to reality also emerged. In contrast, Western abstract art, which began during the Renaissance, focused on realistic depictions of vivid human figures. As Western art evolved, it became more expressive and centered on personal feelings, even if it diverged from reality. Thus, any direct abstraction in the cartoons is likely a result of Western artistic and modern influences.

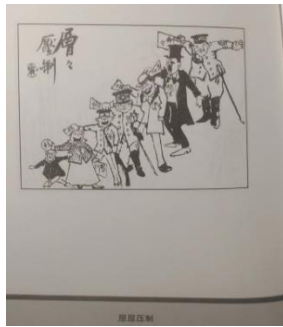


Fig. 8. Layered Suppression [3]

Figure 8 [3], from "The Illustrated History of Yuan's Government," depicts exaggerated and simplistic characters, showcasing strong modern characteristics. The direct satire of bureaucrats is something traditional art typically avoided. The simplistic style resembles Western sketch comics rather than the serious and realistic trends of traditional art. However, the exaggerated portrayal of key figures and traditional-style signatures within the circle suggest an integration of traditional Chinese art elements. The satire of bureaucrats reflects an openness of thought that was no longer constrained, consistent with the previous analysis.



Fig. 9. The Erratic Aristocrat [3]

Figure 9 [3], titled "The Erratic Aristocrat," features exaggerated expressions and abstract descriptions, reflecting a modern, open, and culturally mixed influence. The use of dashed lines to indicate presence and absence signifies a more abstract representation, showing a clear innovation from traditional art techniques. The mention of cities like Nanjing, Wuxi, and Shanghai indicates constant movement of the characters. This abstract approach is likely influenced by Western styles, demonstrating the relaxation of ideological control through direct satire of real-world issues.



Fig. 10. Despot's Meeting [3]

Figure 10 [3], titled "The Despot's Meeting," stands out with its traditional brushstroke characteristics, resembling elements from Chinese calligraphy and traditional painting. The figure depicted in this cartoon is the most akin to classical Chinese painting among the examples. The traditional artistic influence is evident in the signature within the circle. However, the abstract representation of resources and departments as building blocks, using lines to create shadows and volume, reflects a significant influence from Western abstract art. Traditional Chinese painting generally did not emphasize such techniques, whereas Western art did. It is important to note that while some new trends are influenced by Western innovations, they also represent a broader modernizing thought within Chinese art.

These examples illustrate that changes in art driven by economic, cultural, systemic, and ideological factors are widespread and represent significant trends.

5 Conclusions

First, a macro overview of the artistic and cultural landscape of that era: it was a time marked by darkness and widespread suffering, a period of turmoil and instability. However, from another perspective, amid the chaos, art and culture were rapidly evolving. The upheaval brought about by ideological changes introduced new thoughts into the society. The societal disorder prevented stable control over the development of art and culture, while industrialization and capitalism disrupted many old norms. The competition between new ideas and conservative forces further fueled diversification,

allowing art and culture to flourish with renewed vitality. Cartoons, in particular, emerged as a prominent manifestation of the rapid artistic development of this era.

This paper uses the example of "Self-Appraisal" from **The Illustrated History of Yuan's Government** to analyze the perspective of Republican-era cartoons. It first examines the techniques and content of the cartoon itself to demonstrate the fusion and clash of Eastern and Western cultures. The influence of Western art is evident, as well as the preservation of traditional artistic characteristics. This amalgamation has made art more diverse, liberated, and free. Through the content of the cartoons, we can infer that at least a portion of the cultural figures and artists of that time opposed Yuan Shikai and the autocratic bureaucratic regime. The cartoon's depiction of Napoleon's failure as a satire of Yuan Shikai, possibly by Qian Binghe, reflects this sentiment. From this perspective, we observe that despite the historical descent into Yuan Shikai's dictatorship, art gradually moved toward greater freedom and advanced thought. It courageously opposed darkness, sought new freedom and republicanism, and pursued a better future, much like an art form long numbed by darkness suddenly acquiring wisdom and boldly steering toward truth.

Although the ideological and cultural situation of that era is well-known, exploring it through the specific lens of cartoons in **The Illustrated History of Yuan's Government**, such as "Self-Appraisal," offers unique insights and value. It is hoped that future research will continue to uncover new dimensions and significance.

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