

## Hu Kao and *Shanghai modeng*

In an article written in 1939, Trinidadian born journalist Jack Chen described the Chinese cartoonist Hu Kao as “among the foremost of China’s younger modern artists.” Chen’s approbation of Hu’s work also occurred in articles written to promote the travelling exhibition of “Modern Chinese Art” he had taken to Europe and the USA in 1937 and 1938.

Hu Kao had already made a name for himself in Shanghai as a cartoonist and illustrator, having begun his career at the age of 20 in 1934. After escaping from war-torn Shanghai in 1937, he made his way with Jack Chen, via Hong Kong to the Communist base in Yan’an, where he took up a teaching post at the newly established Lu Xun Academy.

Hu’s early work had appeared in popular cartoon magazines such as *Shidai manhua* ‘Modern Sketch’ and *Lunyu*, where his art-deco-inspired cartoons and humorous sketches depicted well-known film stars, sports-personalities and politicians. Hu’s striking, geometric style exhibited the height of 1930s Shanghai fashion, known in China as *Shanghai modeng* - ‘Shanghai Modern.’ However, his drawings for the Chinese classic drama *Xixiang ji* were singled out for criticism by the polymath Lu Xun for what he saw as the artistically constraining use of draftsmen’s tools in their execution. Lu Xun’s comments were perhaps more a reflection of his own taste in art, as the leading advocate of the German-expressionist-inspired New Woodcut Movement. I argue that this highly individual ‘art-deco’ geometric style should be seen as one of Hu’s main artistic strengths.

The left-wing cartoon movement of wartime China, to which Hu belonged, remains largely unknown in the West. In China, Hu has been overshadowed by those considered to be China’s cartoon greats: Ye Qianyu, Ding Cong and Zhang Leping. This paper attempts to redress this imbalance.