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The Wandering Life of Sanmao

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Wandering Life of Sanmao

Barbara Rosen (bio), Norman Bock (bio), Ching-Lan Jen (bio), and Guo Jian (bio)

Cute kids and comic animals have long been a staple of those newspaper cartoons and comic strips which cater to a mixed audience of adults and

children; but their popularity presents a danger. Stephen Jay Gould has wittily demonstrated how Mickey Mouse's character has lost its satiric and subversive edge as his physical appearance has undergone "progressive juvenilization." Trina Schart Hyman notes that the popular images of child and animal have become so stylized that they have begun to merge—the characters in family stories, for instance, may be drawn as prettily dressed kittens. The cultivation of artificial cuteness as an end in itself undercuts the possibility of serious satire inherent in a Lilliputian world and trivializes both protagonist and subject matter; Peanuts and Snoopy now inhabit a parentless, airtight world where only personal feelings are of interest.

But since the 1970s there has been a growth of critical interest in strip cartoons and an attempt to analyze the underlying appeal of these bland or quirky little dramas. At one end of the spectrum Robert Short has discovered the *Gospel according to Peanuts*; at the other, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart (creators in 1971 of a Chilean children's cartoon called *Cabro Chico*, Little Kid) have taught us, ferociously, *How to Read Donald Duck*. For Dorfman and others, such cartoon characters in a capitalist society are deliberately used *against* the reader; they control or nullify political change by associating the natural world of animals and children with conservative attitudes. But in revolutionary situations, where the cartoonist wishes to bring about very specific changes in thinking, the cartoon **[End Page 120]** child can play a diametrically opposite part—intensifying instead of blunting social criticism.

The makers of Chile's *arpilleras*, or cloth pictures, use the stylized figures of suffering, excluded, or hungry children to express criticism of the system under which they live (see Hernan Vera's "Arpilleras" below). The Japanese cartoon story of Barefoot Gen, which expresses through the actions and sufferings of the boy-protagonist the author's own experiences at Hiroshima, is a clear and deliberate plea for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Such child-figures can be particularly effective when the society in question is deeply traditional. Through identification with the actions of the child-hero, young readers are encouraged to break

the social fetters of respect for the past and its representative elders, first by strong criticism of, or active struggle against, the adult society and next by setting an example of revolutionary heroism which will, in turn, reeducate the old. The child-hero—almost invariably male—becomes the revolution and follows its sometimes sorry decline into the Establishment. Nowhere have cartoon and comic strip been more consciously used for this purpose than in China; and yet, despite the growing number of encyclopedias and surveys of international comics and cartoons, we are still remarkably ill-informed about this movement.

We know that the union of Chinese poetry, calligraphy, and painting goes back for centuries. By the nineteenth century, information and propaganda were being spread by cartoon strips with captions or a type of "balloon" speech. The arrival of Western cartoons (including Mickey Mouse) in the concession cities in the 1920s and 1930s led to the founding of publishing houses for political, educational, or entertaining cartoons and comic books, and the potential of the comic book for mass education became clear (Wilkinson xii-xiv).

Of the great cartoonists whose work developed in the 1930s, Zhang (or Chang) Leping produced the best-loved and most durable character—Sanmao or "Three-hairs." Yet, outside the Chinese communities, Zhang Leping is almost unknown in America; copies of his cartoons are extremely hard to find and solid or scholarly information about his life and artistic milieu remains inaccessible, even to readers of Chinese (Alessandrini 53-54). Introductions to collections of Zhang Leping's work provide little specific information. The dates and factual account of his life which follow are taken from articles in the Overseas Edition of the Chinese *People's Daily*, [End Page 121] which in 1985 published two interviews...

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