

Presseinformation

Museum am Rothenbaum

Rothenbaumchaussee 64 | 20148 Hamburg
Germany | markk-hamburg.de

Hot off the Press

Impressions of Modernity in 1920s China



Press Conference: 18 September, 11:00 a.m.

Exhibition Dates: 19 September 2025 - 12 July 2026

China's modern era is one of the most fascinating periods in its history. After the fall of the empire in 1911, the country underwent an unprecedented cultural transformation in the 1920s and 1930s, driven by revolutionary printing technologies. Modern printing centres in Shanghai had a lasting impact on culture, commerce and communication. From hand-carved woodblocks to offset printing, technical innovations made images, news and ideas circulate faster, while also becoming more affordable and accessible to broader audiences. Drawing on its unique collection of prints from this period, the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) presents an exhibition devoted to this flood of images and media.

Two elegant young women in fashionable, figure-hugging dresses sit facing each other in a former imperial park, softly smiling as they converse. The scene reflects the transformations of 1920s China: the appropriation and use of once-imperial spaces, such as this park, and the emergence of the “new woman” in public life.

Weitere Medieninformationen und Bildmaterial:

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MARKK
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Despite its romantic appearance, this scene was originally an advertising poster for the German chemical company I.G. Farben (BASF), designed and produced by the successful Chinese Zhiying Studio. In the exhibition, the image illustrates the complex commercial, cultural and political contexts explored in *Hot off the Press*.

For the exhibition poster, designer Weng Xinyu adapted the motif by replacing the advertised products with a print showing classical representations of beauty from the MARKK collection, highlighting changing representations of women and their artistic depiction between tradition and modernity.

From Nation-Building to the “New Woman”

Divided into six thematic sections, the exhibition offers multifaceted insights into the Chinese Republic. It illustrates how newspapers, magazines and political pamphlets became driving forces in unifying a fragmented country following the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911. Modern educational institutions further shaped a shared vision of China's future through their textbooks.

The exhibition places particular emphasis on urban print culture and the evolving image of women in the metropolises. During this period, women became symbolic figures of social modernisation: their entry into education, the workforce and public life made them a projection screen for political debates on emancipation and nationhood. The form-fitting, high-collared *qipao* emerged as a visual symbol of the urban, educated “new woman”, representing both social participation and political discussions of women's rights. These shifts were facilitated in part by new printing technologies introduced during mechanisation, which enabled images and texts to be distributed widely for the first time.

Theatre: The Multimedia Stage of Modernity

The theatre served as a stage on which politics, identity and social change were negotiated – a completely new function in China at the time. Stage stars were the influencers of their era; they were widely celebrated, receiving extensive press coverage in media outlets with nationwide circulation. Theatre, printmaking and popular culture reached a broad audience and actively shaped modernity.

Consumption as a Patriotic Project

Of particular interest, the exhibition highlights the emergence of a consumer culture closely linked to nation-building. The National Product Movement promoted “national” products and local manufacturing while restricting the import of foreign goods. Consumer culture was considered an integral part of constructing a strong nation.

“Hot off the Press impressively illustrates how mass production, shaped by the influence of print media, transformed the zeitgeist of an entire generation. At the same time, the exhibition reveals the historical context of the collection and tells a fascinating chapter in transcontinental museum history”, notes Ricarda Brosch, curator of the exhibition.

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Unique German-Chinese Research Collaboration

The majority of this globally unique collection of prints arrived at the museum through one of the earliest German-Chinese research collaborations. Between 1927 and 1932, the objects were brought to Germany through a cooperation between the Academia Sinica in Nanjing and the then Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg (Museum of Ethnology). This collaboration was initiated by Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), under whose leadership the Academia Sinica was intended to become the intellectual centre of the young Republic.

The MARKK's collection of nearly 1,300 popular prints, a selection of which is on display in the exhibition, is being examined as part of a research project funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation). "What is remarkable about the MARKK's print collection is that Chinese scholars were involved in its creation in the early 1930s, which was hardly the case in any other ethnological museum. This collaboration influenced the image of China that the museum conveyed in its exhibitions for a long time", explains Bernd Spyra (Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg), co-curator of the exhibition. All prints are being comprehensively catalogued and will be accessible via the museum's website.

"This exhibition showcases a special part of the museum's collection that reflects a period of social change in China. The interplay of powerful prints with selected objects and fashion ensembles tells the story in a particularly compelling way", adds Barbara Plankensteiner, director of the MARKK.

The exhibition is funded by the Exhibition Fund of the Hamburg Ministry of Culture and Media, the German Research Foundation and the Mara and Holger Cassens Foundation. An extensive programme of events and an exhibition publication accompany the show.

Image information:

Hot off the Press, edited image by Weng Xinyu, YUUE Design Studio, based on the I.G. Farben advertising poster "Indigo" two ladies in *qipao*, signed Hang Zhiying, Zhiying Studio, Shanghai, China, ca. 1925, colour lithograph, 74.2 × 50.7 cm, on loan from BASF Corporate History, Ludwigshafen a. Rh., obj. no. 2892, © MARKK