

The Transformation of Early Chinese Comics in the Context of Art Deco

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Abstract

In the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese art was in a transitional period marked by the integration of diverse cultures. As an intuitive form of visual narration, comics became an important medium for exposing social realities and conveying public appeals. Taking the Chinese-Western integrated style comics published in major pictorials in Shanghai during the Republican period as the research object, this paper explores the influence of Art Deco on the transformation of early Chinese comics. It clarifies that local Chinese comics were not simple reproductions or passive absorptions of Western Art Deco-style comics, but rather outlined the complex context of urban cultural development through the translation and reconstruction of visual symbols amid the collision of Chinese and Western cultures. The study finds that the interaction between Art Deco and the arts across various fields not only promoted the formal innovation of early Chinese comics but also opened up a modern developmental path for Chinese urban culture, providing an important perspective on the construction of modernity in Chinese art.

Keywords

Art Deco-Style Comics, Integration of Chinese and Western Cultures, Urban Culture, Modernity, Transformation of comics

1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, exchanges between Chinese and European and American political satirical cartoonists and their cultural impacts constituted an important research topic, with both depth and breadth, in the history of modern art communication and the study of the modern transformation of Chinese culture. Through the direct or indirect influences of Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias and Italian painter Paolo Garretto on the creative activities of Republican-era

cartoonists such as Zhang Guangyu and Hu Kao, the communication trajectory of modern art in China in the first half of the century and the response and changes of the Chinese cultural system can be observed from three interrelated dimensions.

First, the exchanges between Chinese and Western satirical cartoons in the early 20th century revealed how modern art deeply penetrated the cultural life of the Chinese intellectual class with “cartoons” as the medium. Its influence went far beyond simple stylistic imitation and the restoration of individual artists’ careers, becoming an important carrier for the communication of cultural modernity.

Second, from the perspective of art communication to cultural localization practice, Chinese local cartoonists have always been committed to responding to the political predicaments and cultural puzzles faced by the times through cultural carriers understandable to Chinese audiences and familiar cultural motifs. Although the modern civilized world exerted a profound impact on the development history of modern Chinese comics, the modernization path of Chinese comics ultimately resulted from independent exploration by local creators grounded in China’s internal cultural context.

Third, due to the strong social radiation of satirical cartoons and their creators, exchanges and practices between Chinese and Western satirical cartoonists not only reflected their artistic attitudes but also revealed their political cognition and participation in society. This provides multiple perspectives and research methods for addressing important propositions in art history and sociology, such as “the localization of modern art” and “the cultural construction of modern China”.

2. The Rise of the Exotic Art Deco Style and a Preliminary Exploration of Its Localization in China

Art Deco (the Art Deco movement) emerged in the 1920s and gradually became popular in the Western world between 1925 and 1935. As an important artistic trend connecting classicism and modernism, it later developed into a cross-disciplinary design trend that spread globally. As a derivative of the European Art Nouveau movement and a cultural product of the Industrial Revolution, Art Deco inherited the tradition of art serving patrons. Its creations were oriented towards the wealthy upper class, and its exquisite and rare materials and elegant and unique decorative style catered to the aesthetic tastes of the upper class, being widely applied in various artistic fields such as sculpture, architecture, painting, and design.

The core appeal of the Art Nouveau movement was to oppose traditional historical styles and construct a new decorative art paradigm consistent with the spirit of the industrial age. On this basis, Art Deco further realized the integration of art and industrial civilization, meeting people’s growing demand for artistic life amid social material prosperity.

In the 1920s, Shanghai, a Chinese treaty port, became the primary gateway for the Art Deco trend to enter China, thanks to its unique geographic location and

cultural inclusiveness. Frequent exchanges between overseas Chinese scholars and Western designers enabled the Art Deco style to quickly permeate Shanghai's urban life. Especially in the field of apartment buildings, its decorative elements were gradually internalized into the lifestyle of Shanghainese, forming an ingenious integration with traditional flower and grass pattern decorations.

It is worth noting that Chinese artists did not mechanically copy the Western Art Deco style, but combined traditional Chinese decorative themes with the unique geometric line patterns of Art Deco, forming a distinctive "Shanghai Deco" style. This style quickly became the mainstream of artistic design at that time, marking the official start of Chinese artists' independent exploration of the new Art Deco decorative art style.

The diversity of themes and the interest in images in Art Deco art endow it with a natural tendency to adapt to and integrate diverse cultures. Its works include elements of modern civilization such as metropolises and factories, and this strong construction of modern urban images is the core embodiment of its cross-cultural "adaptability". The inclusiveness of the Art Deco decorative art style enables it to not only absorb the cutting-edge concepts of contemporary art, but also inherit the core elements of traditional art: it draws on the geometric processing method of Cubism to realize the unification of fragmented forms, breaking the rigorous conventions of academicism and the blurred texture of Impressionism, and constructing pictures through the collage of irregular geometric figures; it absorbs Fauvism art and exotic decorative styles, adopts strong color contrasts and flat painting techniques to form a concise and vigorous visual effect, which is both sensational and exotic; it cleverly uses the mysterious decorative themes of Oriental, African and ancient civilizations, advocates traditional decorative art, and conveys national emotions.

The inclusive nature of Art Deco decorative art provides rich expressive tension for the shaping of images in early Chinese satirical comics. On the one hand, the combination and evolution of the unique geometric patterns of Art Deco and traditional Chinese patterns constitute a dynamic exploration process of the Sinitization of the Art Deco style. Its openness to exotic cultures provides multiple possibilities for the modern extension of traditional Chinese culture.

On the other hand, the popularity of the Art Deco style in China prompted the early Chinese satirical comics to consciously adopt modern forms. This choice was not merely a formal imitation in the field of comics, but also an active response and self-expression by Chinese cartoonists to the formation of modern urban culture, demonstrating the deep bond between art and the historical context of the times.

3. The Interactive Generation and Local Innovation of Chinese and Western Comics in the Art Deco Field

At the end of the 19th century, modern art began to be introduced into China, promoting exchanges among cartoonists across all social strata and driving the

diversification of the content and expressive forms of comic creation. Comics of this period covered a wide range of themes, including sharp exposure and satire of imperialist aggression, the corruption and evils of warlords and bureaucrats, and true accounts of national hardships and the sufferings of the people. The introduction of Art Deco decorative art provided local painters with a “modern” stylistic medium, enabling them to shape public opinion through this medium and construct a set of comic symbol systems to comment on political current events. Among them, the decorative works of cartoonists such as Zhang Guangyu, Hu Kao, Zhang Zhenyu, and Wang Zimei were particularly prominent, each with its own characteristics. Their creative practices all had a profound origin in the works of Mexican cartoonist Miguel Covarrubias and Italian cartoonist Paolo Garretto.

Italian artist Paolo Garretto (1903-1989) was a world-renowned cartoonist in the 1920s and late 1930s, as well as a creative master of advertising design and editorial art. His works were published in major American magazines, including *Time*, *Vogue*, and *The New Yorker*. As one of the core creators of *Vanity Fair*, he used airbrushed comics to embody the Art Deco decorative style, capturing the romantic temperament of the industrial age through distinct geometric designs (**Figures 1-3**). In 1925, Garretto began creating comics for Roman newspapers and satirical magazines, and later moved to Paris, where he created hundreds



Figure 1. Paolo Garretto, “Benito Mussolini”, *The Graphic*, 1926.



Figure 2. Paolo Garretto “Gabriele D’Annunzio”, *The Graphic*, 1927.



Figure 3. Paolo Garretto, Adolf Hitler, *Vanity Fair*, November 1932.

of works for various clients and started his “international artistic adventure”. He used techniques such as superimposition and collage to shape figurative characters with a deliberate sense of form, reshaping the modern spirit of the Art Deco style (Cai, 2014). The 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in France showcased the artistic achievements of French Art Deco. Influenced by this, the insight and ideological depth contained in Garretto’s works were unparalleled by other cartoonists of the same period. The mechanical geometric beauty advocated by Art Deco was not only influenced by and echoed the contemporary modernist design, but also absorbed nutrients from artistic trends such as Cubism, Structuralism, and Futurism (La Vie, 2013).

It is worth noting that in 1928, *Shanghai Manhua* published Garretto’s works (Figure 4, Figure 5) (1928a, 1928b). These works shared themes with local Chinese satirical comics but, due to the limitations of China’s printing and publishing technology at the time, their presentation had to adapt to Chinese-style lines and coloring, while still retaining the unique flat geometric decorative texture of Art Deco. After the 1950s, Garretto’s works gradually faded from public view; in 1983, Condé Nast Group revived *Vanity Fair*, attempting to replicate its early fashion style, but failing to reproduce the insight and ideological depth of Garretto’s



Figure 4. Paolo Garretto, Douglas Fairbanks, *Shanghai Cartoon*, No. 3, May 5, 1928.



Figure 5. Paolo Garretto, Pola Negri, *Shanghai Cartoon*, No. 17, August 11, 1928.

works, nor could it endow the publication with nostalgic artistic value. The core reason Garretto's decorative works entered the vision of Chinese cartoonists lies in their popular and avant-garde creative characteristics, which closely aligned with the trend of the times and social issues, providing an important opportunity for the exchange and collision between Chinese and Western comics.

Zhang Guangyu occupied a pivotal position in the history of Chinese comics, having been active in satirical comics for a long time. His work was always committed to exploring diverse artistic styles and to exposing all aspects of society with sharp brushwork. The new look of his satirical paintings was concentratedly reflected in the decorative and interesting style that combined content with public opinion—abandoning the previous expression method of metaphor through popular sayings, the picture design no longer relied on simple line drawing for detailed depiction, but tried to outline the outline with simple geometric shapes, and the colors adopted a light dyeing transition technique, presenting a distinct pattern decorative interest as a whole, which was relatively rare in satirical painting creation at that time. In 1932, Zhang Guangyu published *Ideology* (1932) in *Time*, Volume 2, Issue 10 (Figure 6, Figure 7), integrating mechanical aesthetics into the decorative style, with lines tending to be more geometric, emphasizing a sense of symmetry and neatness, and the pyramid-shaped step composition forming a strong visual impact and unique sense of rhythm. The seemingly complex patterns in the Art Deco decorative style are all based on lines and geometric



Figure 6. Zhang Guangyu, *Ideology*, Portraits of Lin Sen, Sun Ke and Chen Youren, *The Modern Age*, Vol. 2, No. 10, July 16, 1932.

shapes, combined through aesthetic techniques such as repetition, symmetry, and gradient, making the picture full of layering and rhythm; among them, squares, rhombuses, and triangles are the core basic shapes, which construct the picture through simple duplication and regular changes. In addition, abstract geometric shapes of plants are also relatively common.

Between 1932 and 1933, Zhang Guangyu successively published the series of works *Characters on Stage* (1932-1933) in *Time Pictorial*. His style was deeply influenced by various parties: he not only absorbed traditional Chinese Peking Opera elements, but also developed a strong interest in decorative taste, drawing extensively on traditional art forms such as folk woodcarvings, paper-cuts, and ancient patterns. Throughout Zhang Guangyu's career in comic creation, he always maintained a clear understanding of the trends, nature, and times of social culture, insight into social reality with a sharp vision, and a deep sense of compassion for the fate of the people. As he said in the preface to Zhang Guangyu's *Satirical Collection*: "Satirical painting is a serious comedy, and the satirical painter is a tragic clown. Seriousness and tragedy are our argument; performing comedy and being a clown are our way of life." This statement accurately summarizes the spiritual core of his satirical painting creation.

In the 1930s, Mexican satirical cartoonist Miguel Covarrubias visited Shanghai twice. His works combined fluent sketching expression with sharp satirical humor, forming a simple and vigorous style with concise and sharp lines, and the three-dimensional geometric decorative characteristics were particularly prominent (**Figures 7-9**) (Covarrubias, 1932; Covarrubias, 1933; Covarrubias, 1934). He exerted a profound influence on Zhang Guangyu and other Shanghai cartoonists, helping them gradually develop a unique personal decorative style. Taking Zhang Guangyu's *Characters on Stage* series as an example, the works had rich colors and strong contrasts, and the character shapes extensively used colorful geometric patterns, integrating both traditional Chinese elements and national styles, as well as exotic decorative sentiment; they cleverly combined traditional Chinese Peking Opera character shapes with satirical objects, demonstrating the in-depth

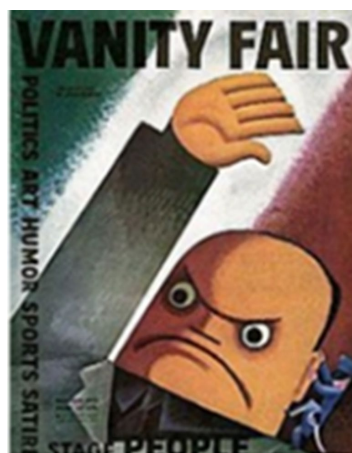


Figure 7. Miguel Covarrubias, Benito Mussolini, *Vanity Fair*, November 1932.

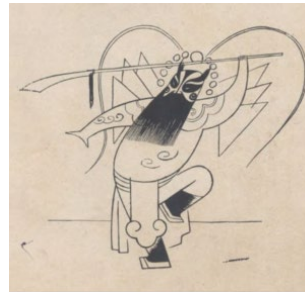


Figure 8. Miguel Covarrubias, Illustration, *The Modern Age*, Vol. 5, No. 4, December 16, 1933.



Figure 9. Miguel Covarrubias, Mexican Women in the Revolutionary Army, *Modern Sketch*, No. 2, February 20, 1934.



Figure 10. Zhang Guangyu, The Four Heavenly Kings, *Wan Xiang*, No. 1, 1934.

integration of national characteristics and Art Deco geometric patterns. In 1934, Zhang Guangyu published *The Four Heavenly Kings* (1934) (**Figure 10**) in *Panorama*, among which two works—Mussolini, the Italian King of Fascist Remonstrance; Hitler, the German Swastika King and Stalin, the Soviet Iron-Arm King; Roosevelt, the American Blue Eagle King—hardly adopted traditional Chinese decorative elements, but continued to use geometric patterns, cleverly applying collage and Cubist styles. It can be seen that his comic creation did not simply adopt the Art Deco style but integrated a variety of stylistic techniques to enhance the decorative effect of the picture. Zhang Guangyu did not fully inherit the aesthetic spirit of Art Deco, but responded to the modern Art Deco aesthetics that

was still being explored and practiced in Europe, constructing a modern urban image full of scientific rationality through geometric figures and abstract lines, and emphasizing the high decorativeness of the picture with an innovative personal style.

In the same period, Zhang Zhenyu published *The Big Head of the Party and the Country* in *Time*, Volume 2, Issue 9 in 1932, continuing the decorative style of Zhang Guangyu's character comics, which was completely different from the political character comics (1928-1929) published in *Shanghai Manhua* from 1928 to 1929 and Douglas Fairbanks published in *Shanghai Manhua*, Issue 95 in 1930. This work absorbed the popular Art Deco style at that time, integrated geometric decorative elements into the background, and used colorful blocks and lines for decoration, achieving a modern breakthrough from the traditional style, conveying inner emotions in a humorous way, and satirizing current political reality.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the domestic and foreign political struggle situation was sharp and complex. A series of political satirical comics and social satirical comics created by Zhang Guangyu clearly showed the gradual evolution of his comic style. As he wrote in the inaugural issue of *This is a Comic Age* in 1948: "This is a comic age... The devil's situation is getting worse and worse, like clinging to a red-hot pot. The angry masses surround this fire-playing guy, who shows his sharp fangs in the face of danger, trying to devour all democratic forces, and his rough hands are trying to strangle a girl. All tyrants in history have ended up like this, and the comics of this era can only depict such a shape. May I ask who is creating such evils? Who is creating such comics? It can be said that all the confessions of the crazy fascist followers are the best creations. However, our nibs will eventually write the ending for you and complete the mission of the times." This passage accurately outlines the creative context of early Chinese satirical comics—in the midst of suffering and entanglement, comic artists strived to create works that met the needs of the times, absorbed diverse styles, created impactful and inspiring artistic expressions, and issued a powerful cry to the times.

The geometric worship, pursuit of rationality, and minimalist philosophy permeated by Art Deco, as well as the neat yet hierarchical mathematical logic displayed in its image layout, conveyed a balanced and regular structural beauty, and this layout style gradually became the aesthetic consensus of the time. Its unique style endows the works with high recognition, which can effectively magnify the depicted objects and achieve an inspiring communication effect. From the perspective of comic creation, the absorption of modern art elements such as Art Deco style and Cubism from the works of European and American political satirical cartoonists such as Covarrubias by Zhang Guangyu, Hu Kao, and others provides an important perspective on the impact of early Western modern art on China. The core value of Covarrubias lies in providing the Chinese comic circle with a world style that combines modernity and decorativeness during the social changes and artistic movements in the early 20th century. When this style was combined with Chinese folk art forms, it generated new artistic vitality (Wei,

2021). After Covarrubias' works were introduced into China, a large number of political satirical comics by Zhang Guangyu emerged, especially the Decameron series, which later formed a widely praised new style later, incorporating Covarrubias' Cubist and Expressionist techniques and Zhang Guangyu's own creative thinking.

The works of Hu Kao and other cartoonists of the same period also reflected the influence of European and American Cubism and Art Deco—this period was a crucial stage for the inheritance and development of their styles, and from the new gestures presented in their works, we can clearly see the bit-by-bit penetration of modern art in China. From the perspective of artists' identities, Zhang Guangyu, Hu Kao, Zhang Zhenyu, and others were not merely political satirical cartoonists, but also had multiple identities including watercolor painters, oil painters, designers, filmmakers, and art critics. This diverse professional identity enabled the influence of foreign styles to shape their creation into a complete system, extending from modernist painting to film, design, literature, and other fields, and deeply penetrating the entire system of Chinese culture and art at that time.

From a sociological perspective, political satirical comics are not only the presentation of picture narration and aesthetic style, but also an important medium for artists to express their political positions. Publications such as Decameron, Shanghai Manhua, and Time, which published these works, gradually became important platforms for artists to participate in social, cultural, and political life. The identity settings of political cartoonists such as Hu Kao, Liao Bingxiong, Te Wei, and Zhang Zhengyu also drew on the social roles of European and American political cartoonists. In other words, what was imported from the West was not only the superficially gorgeous forms of modern art, but also the enthusiastic visions, value attitudes, and practical methods of European and American artists and intellectuals towards modern culture and political life. Republican cartoonists used political satirical comics deeply influenced by foreign countries to praise or criticize current politics, guide social opinion, spread modern civilization, and participate deeply in the turbulent cultural life of China at that time. In contrast, publishers and intellectuals such as Shao Xunmei and Wang Zimei, as patrons and social partners of cartoonists, formed a joint force with artists, actively introducing Western avant-garde culture, improving literature and art, and “building a team of 100,000 people”, exerting an important influence on the development of Chinese social culture in the first half of the 20th century.

4. The Transformation of Art Deco-Style Comics and the Construction of Chinese Modern Urban Culture

Many works in the history of Republican comics emerged in the intertwined contexts of colonial and urban culture. Their aesthetic vitality stems from the organic integration of world styles and traditional Chinese folk art, and at the same time, they have realized the transformation and reconstruction of traditional art,

becoming an important model of the modern style of Chinese comics (Song & Ju, 2023). The Chinese-Western integrated Art Deco decorative comics, to a certain extent, reflect artists' diverse understandings of urban civilization—modern cities, trivial cities, and alienated cities, which respectively depict the urban forms imagined by cartoonists. These forms complement each other and “cooperate leisurely”, jointly constructing a three-dimensional and diverse urban world (Wen, 2021).

As a streamlined, modern, and luxurious decorative art style, Art Deco, like the new look of social culture at that time, was of great significance to the development of modern art. The Ballets Russes led by Sergei Diaghilev, with its exotic stage sets and costumes, set off a fashion upsurge of pursuing Oriental and Arabian costume styles at that time; in 1922, the excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb triggered an Egyptian-style fashion, and its patterns and metallic luster were highly sought after; American jazz culture, dancers such as Josephine Baker, and “primitive” African sculptures also received widespread attention during this period. With its simple form and strong colors, Art Deco was highly compatible with graphic art. It could be seen everywhere from jewelry design to film sets, from home interior decoration to cinema spaces, from streamlined trains to the exterior of luxurious hotel buildings, cleverly combining popular elements of the times with luxurious material culture. The vitality and fantasy characteristics revealed by Art Deco exactly catered to the spirit of the “Roaring Twenties” and also served as a spiritual outlet for people to escape the reality of the Great Depression in the 1930s.

It should be clarified that after early modern art was introduced into China in the early 20th century, it presented diverse construction levels and social impacts. Modernist art, with its elitist, idealistic, and utopian colors, emphasized that art serves all the people, showed limited interest in decorative elements, and even adopted a repulsive attitude. With the times, the upsurge of Art Deco decorative art represented the aesthetics of the upper class, gradually faded out of the vision of artistic creation, the characteristics of Art Deco-style comics no longer stood out, and decorative style comics gradually withdrew from the forefront of the trend. Although the popular cycle of Art Deco-style comics was relatively short, its Art Deco genes were deeply rooted in the development process of Chinese comics, its aesthetic value was undeniable, and it had an irreplaceable historical significance in the transformation process of early Chinese satirical comics.

Louis Wirth, a representative of the Chicago School, believed that the modern urban environment gave birth to a unique form of social life (Zhang, 2011). Shumei Shih pointed out that the participants and constructors of modern urban culture are all subjects pursuing their own contemporaneity. The spiritual core of comics lies in the sincere and straightforward expression of reality. By depicting the funny entanglement of contradictions in the world and exposing the nature of ugliness and hypocrisy, it has sharp dissecting and impartial judgment (Bao, 2002); comic works are essentially the expression of creators' enthusiasm and

emotions. In a series of imitated and reconstructed comic works, the swing and exploration of styles are worthy of attention, and this collision and attempt between tradition and modernity has unlimited space for significance. Artists examined traditional Chinese satirical paintings from a new perspective and affirmed the value of their own cultural traditions with confidence. This creative attitude was not a dissolution of Chinese cultural traditions, but a modern continuation and innovation.

The core task of political satirical comics and social satirical comics is to serve as an important means of social commentary; among them, social satirical comics with a wide range of themes and free topic selection have the most extensive readership and are highly influential weapons of criticism and education. Early Chinese cartoonists explored a new direction for comics with unique symbolic implications by inheriting and developing the decorative symbols and geometric patterns of Art Deco. Art Deco decorative art played a unique role in the transition period of early Chinese satirical paintings, and its modern symbols formed a certain connection with modern art. Although the comic works of this period differed in their positions, viewpoints, expressive forms, and artistic styles, they were consistent in using comics to sharply satirize and expose the domestic and foreign realities of the time. This creative consensus provided a broad position for comic creation and was also the core reason for the unusually active comic creation during this period.

The unique charm and modern lifestyle of Art Deco pervaded many artistic fields. Its mixed characteristics of the mechanical age and luxurious, gorgeous exoticism penetrated all links in the formation of modern urban culture. Art Deco-style comics came with the “Western wind”, thrived with the “Eastern wind”, and finally gradually integrated into the various aspects of modern cities. In the tide of art communication, they explored the direction of interpretation across multiple fields, and together with other art forms, constructed a complete and unique urban aesthetic system, promoting the development and maturity of Chinese modern urban culture.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the Art Deco artistic style is an important cultural medium in the process of Chinese art transcending tradition and moving towards modernity, and Art Deco-style comics offer a highly valuable observation perspective for contemporary scholars studying Chinese modernity issues and modern urban culture. The development of Chinese comics influenced by Art Deco artistic style actually masks an active “upsurge of modernist thought”. Chinese comics in different fields and with different styles, with popular culture as the core content and the broad public as the communication object, have gradually formed a diversified divergence in comic creation. The once “excessive dissemination” of Art Deco-style comics reflects the contextual construction of China’s urban cultural field. Also, it explores the specific process of the “Sinicization” of early modern art from

the side, providing important theoretical support and practical reference for answering extensional art history questions such as “how to establish the modernity of Chinese art” and “the artistic construction of modern Chinese society”.

In addition, beyond the specific perspective of “comics”, the emergence of modern civilization should be regarded as a dynamic process that will inevitably promote the creation of new knowledge and culture within the social system. Exploring how new civilizations can form through complex information flows among sensitive groups and how they gradually move from specific groups to the general public is not only an important topic in art history research but also key to understanding the transformation of modern Chinese culture.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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