Old and New: Female Bodies and Male Anxieties in Republican China

Alyssa Jane Wang
St. Petersburg, Florida

Bachelor of Arts, University of Chicago, 2010

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of East Asian Studies

University of Virginia
May, 2016

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese reformers stressed the importance of establishing both a strong, modern nation state and a sense of nationalism among the population. They believed that a nationalist program of thorough-going reforms would prevent any future foreign aggression — a phenomenon that had greatly weakened the Qing and exposed the many inadequacies of Chinese society and culture in meeting the challenges of the modern world. While much of their rhetoric emphasized the need to abandon past Confucian beliefs and practices, they still understood the family as a central site for the creation of a new political society (Glosser 1995). It was only within the confines of the modern conjugal family (小家庭 *xiaojiating*) that Republican citizens would be birthed and nurtured. However, in the view of the reformers, there was still a critical component of the new small family that had not yet been fully reformed. Namely, given their many years of subordination, women were not prepared to shoulder the full responsibilities of citizenship. In order to break the hold of traditional culture and truly strive toward full personhood (人格 *renge*), women needed not only to be educated, but also to take up new social roles both prior to and after marriage.[1] In this way, the "old style woman" of imperial times would transform herself into the "new woman" that a modern society required (Hu 1918; Goodman 2005; Lu 1923; Luo 1996).

Although the reformers agreed in China's need for "new women," there was little agreement on what behaviors would fulfill their expectations, and little allowance for women's own voices to define their new social roles. Though they served as a symbol of the public's

---

[1] This was a point of significant debate among intellectuals. While some stressed the need for women to find minor professional roles outside of the home, others deplored the idea of women working after marriage. Nevertheless, most intellectuals agreed that the primary obligation of women was to help create a strong conjugal unit. Multiple volumes of both *jiating yanjiu* 家庭研究 (1920) and *linglong* 玲珑 (vol.24 1931; vol.58 1932) periodicals reveal this ongoing discussion.

continued oppression by past cultural and political forces that needed to be overthrown, in the reformers' view, women were still incapable of being fully liberated. Male reformers often preferred to see women as symbols of oppression to dealing with assertive women defending their own interests. The goal of this paper is to examine these contradictory frameworks through an analysis of two female suicides that were popularized by both intellectuals and the media during the early 20th century. Specifically, while Zhao Wuzhen killed herself on her way to being forcibly married to a man whom she believed to be an undesirable suitor, Xi Shangzhen was a young, educated, and gainfully employed woman in Shanghai who decided to end her life after losing a significant sum of money in the stock market. As such, for the male dominated public media, Zhao's death represented both the struggle of the old style woman to break free of centuries long oppression and the urgent need for male-led gender reform. Meanwhile, Xi's suicide raised concerns regarding women's ability to achieve full personhood and thus questioned the revolutionaries' actual progress. Ultimately, these two women's stories became critical to what would eventually become the modern conception of the Chinese female.

This thesis will be constructed through an examination of both primary and secondary source material dealing with late 19th and early 20th century China. Since the focus of this piece is to examine how male intellectuals' adjusted their reform programs regarding gender in response to major social events, the vast majority of this piece's sources come from these individuals' published manuscripts. Beyond books and journals designed for elite consumption, some of these writings were specifically produced for everyday individuals. One type of this material was women's journals. These magazines were an unprecedented opportunity for male intellectuals to directly communicate their ideas to the other sex. For example, the journal *funü*

zazhi (妇女杂志) not only boasted an impressive circulation that even included overseas markets, but also focused on building a readership that extended outside highly educated circles (Li 2008). Throughout its run from 1915 to 1931, the magazine was regularly purchased by female members of both the upper and middle classes, who were interested in the issues and trends affecting the modern woman and her family.

While intellectuals' publications offer insight into the major social reforms initiated in the Republican period, they do not provide a complete picture. Namely, a variety of forces influenced how elites both conceptualized and pursued their social agenda. Specifically, while local gazetteers and gossip networks were the main avenues of information gathering in Late Imperial China, newspapers and other forms of media came to dominate urban Republican China. Even though these news media corporations were often owned by male intellectuals, their primary purpose was not to advocate New Culture reforms, but to turn a profit. In this way, their coverage sometimes conflicted with reformers' priorities. As such, this piece draws upon multiple daily newspapers in order to better understand how intellectuals' positions were not only received by the larger population, but also complicated by major social upheaval.

However, engaging with these kinds of print material raises its own unique challenges. While scholars' beliefs can be verified by their actions and personal affects, it is difficult both to determine the validity of media reporting and to what extent it actually reflected the opinions of its readership. These problems become particularly magnified in relation to women's issues. Unfortunately, due to the educational and social restrictions placed on them, women rarely had opportunities to voice their own opinions. Thus, today's researchers have no choice but to use a collection of imperfect source materials to gain insight into the female narratives they suggest.

Many scholars have tackled this concern. Barbara Mittler has noted that the sheer amount of media material available has provided a means of teasing out trends that resonated with readers. For example, Mittler's analysis of major urban periodicals published during the late Qing and early Republican periods reveals that the public had a particular interest in stories regarding violence against women. The most disturbing reports would become the ones that would generally dominate headlines for weeks and sometimes even months (Mittler 2003). Also, her work with women's periodicals has established that the media deeply influenced the way that women understood their role in Chinese urban society. Specifically, she argues that male intellectuals had significant control over magazines designed for women. For example, out of the six editors-in-chief of the *funü zazhi* (妇女杂志) only two were women (Li 2008). It is clear that these men regularly used these publications as a way of subtly promoting their own notions of gender. In return, they found a ready audience in the urban female. Further, Eugenia Lean's book length work on how media spectacles interacted with social notions such as crime and gender in Republican China explores how the young woman Shi Jianqiao utilized the media in order to build public sentiment in her favor. In this way, she was able to avoid being punished for her revenge killing of the warlord Sun Chuanfang (Lean 2007). Namely, by explaining to the media that her action was committed in order to avenge the murder of her father, the public came to sympathize with Shi insofar as her story represented an actual realization of important cultural concepts such as filial piety and the loyalty among *jianghu* (江湖) members. This paper hopes to build on the works of these scholars by analyzing the issue of female suicide in the media and how it affected the agendas of male intellectuals.

In order to fulfill its thesis, this piece will first consider the historical and cultural milieu that produced the categories of old style and new woman. Next, there will be an overview of Chinese attitudes toward suicide, especially female suicide. Here it will be argued that the long history of the practice starting with imperial times coupled with its modern identification as female behavior led to its use as a gauge for the progress of gender reform in Republican China. Building on this analysis, there will then be a turn toward both Zhao and Xi's suicides. After reviewing each woman's story, the reaction of both public intellectuals and the press will be considered. Particular attention will be paid to how reports regarding their deaths quickly evolved into larger discussions on gender reform and ultimately, debates on the course of national modernization. The paper will then conclude with some remarks on the relationship between the general understanding of female suicide during this time period and the popular conception of Chinese women throughout the 20th century.

I. Historical Background

As mentioned, scholars during this time period were overwhelmingly concerned with building a strong state in order to avoid the serious political failures of the Qing court. Despite a deep sense of urgency, there was little unity in the programs put forward. Beyond a handful of overarching nationalistic principles, scholars both developed and debated a plethora of proposed solutions to the issues facing the Republican government (Dikotter 1995; Mittler 2003). However, despite this diversity of opinions, an important point of agreement among these thinkers was the need for China to find its own path toward modernization instead of blindly following Western models. Many scholars contended that this was why Meiji Japan had been so

successful at the turn of century — it had found a way to balance its own unique heritage with scientific progress (Huang 1982).

An important site of reform for the Japanese state had been women's education. While less than 10 percent of Chinese women were literate in 1904, around 90 percent of Japanese women were enrolled in school (Bernstein 1991; Rawski 1989). The education of women was considered essential to the Japanese government's plan for national development. However, these women were not necessarily engaging with radical Western literature; instead, the focus of their education was on ensuring the acquisition of the skills necessary to be a successful wife and mother. This "ideology of good wives and wise mothers" was exemplified by the thinking of Shimoda Utako, a prominent female schoolmaster (Judge 2001:771). Drawing on the language of Social Darwinism, Shimoda asserted that educated women were a precondition to the production of healthy children and a strong state. To this end, she outlined a curriculum that would foster traditional female piety among her students. In addition to her views on female education, Shimoda also supported Pan-Asianism, which led her to believe that a weak China would assuredly prevent East Asia as a whole from achieving true parity with the West. To spread her views, she produced multiple Chinese publications regarding gender reform and established a school in Japan for Chinese female students. Ultimately, Shimoda's institution would be responsible for educating the majority of the young Chinese women who came to Japan to study (Judge 2001, 783). This meant that many of the renowned Chinese female intellectuals of the Republican period had attended Shimoda's school.[2]

---

[2] Shimoda's students included women such as Qiu Jin and He Xiangning (Judge 2001).

Of course, a significant portion of the young female revolutionaries who had attended Shimoda's school eventually rejected the notion that the only proper place for a woman was as a nationalist wife and mother. Nevertheless, the idea of educating women did become popular in part due to Shimoda's efforts. Further, many of her beliefs resonated with Chinese men, who in the end had much more political influence than female revolutionaries (Glosser 1995; Glosser 2002). Thus, the overwhelming majority of both male and female students returning from Japan agreed that universal female education was a necessary prerequisite if China was truly going to become a strong, modern country. This view was exemplified by the concepts of 'old style woman' and 'new woman'. The old style woman had been physically and intellectually stunted by her environment. Illiterate and restricted by her bound feet, she struggled to fulfill the unrelenting demands of the traditional Chinese family (大家庭 *dajiating*). To intellectuals, her oppression deeply paralleled the experiences of the 19th century Chinese state. Unable to challenge her historical and cultural circumstances, the old style woman would need to be rescued by the Republican reformers' civilizing efforts. In this way, she would become a strong, physically able person who was worthy of being a "mother to citizens," or in other words, a new woman (Harrison 2000; Judge 2002).

According to Republican intellectuals, a defining characteristic of the old style woman was her dependence on the act of suicide in order to escape her social situation. They emphasized that past imperial practices coupled with the inherent disposition of females had led to the naturalization of suicide among women. Writing for an educated audience, the western-trained physician Gu Shi stressed that the weakness of Chinese women was even reflected in natural selection. Specifically, during times of hardship, families were more likely to have male

offspring, who could withstand these precarious conditions (Gu 1916). Accordingly, it was not unreasonable for medical professionals and public intellectuals to believe that under significant social pressure women would pursue suicide. In a special edition of the *funü zazhi* (妇女杂志), a group of prominent intellectuals discussed the currently available criticism and research on suicide. While they agreed that it was an international phenomenon that was more prevalent among men, all of the articles addressing the circumstances of suicide in China only considered female examples (Gao 1922, Wei 1922, Zi 1922). After discussing proses of female suicide, one author confidently concluded "[regarding suicide] it is obvious that the issues of today's marriage system and gender relationships between young people are most important" rather then the issues associated with cases of male suicides (Wei 1922). For scholars, it was clear that suicide in China was to be understood as an inherently feminine action. Furthermore, these scholars argued that old imperial policies regarding chastity suicides had created the false expectation among the public that females committed suicide in defense of positive characteristics such as fidelity and piety. Reformers emphasized that this mindset needed to be changed through the promotion of the new woman. For example, another issue of the *funü zazhi* (妇女杂志) argued that young women needed to learn that suicide was a last resort that was to be used only against the most evil of social ills (Ji 1922). If it was carelessly pursued for other reasons, this behavior indicated that the individual was treating her life lightly and therefore had a low moral character.

II. Suicide in Early 20th Century China

After the fall of the Ming Dynasty, the Qing court had worked to consolidate its power and to establish its legitimacy by implementing numerous social and legal policies that confirmed the Confucian foundations of its governance (Rowe 2009:24). One of these ends was emphasizing the need for female loyalty and chastity as a metaphor for a male's obligation to maintain "loyalty to only one dynasty" (Hsieh and Spence 1981:33). As Susan Mann (1987) has noted, the practice of promoting female chastity was not unique to the Qing. For instance, as early as the Song Dynasty, legal sanctions were utilized to ensure female chastity, particularly the chastity of widows. By the Ming, there were even more robust legal sanctions encouraging female chastity and numerous publications celebrating particularly excellent examples of the ideal loyal woman (Mann 1987:37). Over time, the examples began to focus more on women who demonstrated their loyalty by killing themselves. Therefore, exemplary female chastity and loyalty increasingly came to be represented via female suicide. What was new about the Qing's policy then was the extent to which that these suicides were promoted. For example, the Imperial Encyclopedia (古今全书集成) includes a significant number of gazetteers collected during the Ming and the early Qing that mention female suicides. For the entirety of the Ming Dynasty, 8,490 female suicides are listed in 45 *chuan*, and for the first eighty years of Qing rule, there are 2,749 in 20 *chuan* (Hsieh and Spence 1981:34).

Interestingly, linking suicide and female chastity was not an intended purpose of Qing policy. Rather, the imperial court became more and more concerned that the increasing number of female suicides "raised the question of the extent to which the government should encourage self-destruction" (Elvin 1984:127). This led court officials to implement some limitations on what cases would be recognized as honorable. For instance, women who followed their husbands

in death without another motivating factor were ineligible for honors and were considered to be "'treating life lightly'" (Elvin 1984:128). At the same time, some officials disagreed with these new restrictions and still found ways to honor some groups of ineligible women. Over time, it became clear that both the imperial court and public were at odds over the relationship between suicide and virtuous behavior. This conflict was so great that when reversing decisions of honorable behavior in the case of suicide, emperors would have to give robust explanations for them (Elvin 1984:128). Nevertheless, despite efforts against it, a clear consequence of the Qing's policy on female fidelity was the further entrenchment of the notion that the ideal female and her suicide were intimately related.

Additionally, the Qing transformed how Chinese society understood suicide as a whole through its legal system. Initially, the Qing rulers maintained the same legal code for suicide as the Ming: "Pressuring a person to commit suicide" (威逼人致死). However, there were limitations to this code. Specifically, in Chinese, the term *weibi* (威逼) means to coerce, but it implies coercion from someone in a superior position to the victim. As such, the legal code failed to capture cases such as the one of Jiang Yuanyi during the Ming Dynasty. After murdering his younger brother, he berated his mother to the point of committing suicide. According to the traditional Confucian system, Jiang was in a lower position vis-à-vis his mother. As such, the word *weibi* (威逼) did not properly apply to his case. To account for situations like this one, the Qing Dynasty eventually decided to change the law from *weibi* (威逼) to *bipo* (逼迫), which means to coerce someone into doing something without implying a hierarchical relationship between the aggressor and the victim (Hsieh and Spence 1981:36). This change was important

because regardless of someone's position in the Confucian hierarchy she could pressure someone else to kill herself.

The importance of the Qing Dynasty's policies toward suicide, especially female suicide, was two-fold. First, they further entrenched the acceptability of suicide in Chinese society, especially for women. The expansion of the Qing legal code in regards to suicide along with the publication of numerous gazetteers valorizing the suicides of women demonstrate that suicide was an everyday reality in Chinese society. Further, the abundant literature on it and the gossip associated with legal disputes over it provided an education in how to commit suicide for the population, especially for the female constituency. In this way, suicide became a socially sanctioned option available to women. Granted, traditional Confucian ethics regard suicide as an unfilial act, but this was not enough to prevent them (Zhang 2014:147). Instead, throughout Chinese history, Confucian ideals often conflicted with one another in practice. During the Qing, while the government tried to emphasize the sanctity of life, popular Confucian piety clung to the importance of female fidelity, the violation of which was a leading cause of suicide among women (Elvin 1984:128).

Second, Qing policies helped establish how Chinese society would understand suicide. As mentioned, the Qing legal code emphasized the culpability of the person *who* had driven an individual to commit suicide. Consequently, when a Chinese community sought to understand an act of suicide, it focused not on the suicidal individual's motives but rather on determining who was responsible. As Margery Wolf has aptly noted, "In China the question is more commonly 'Who? Who drove her to this? Who is responsible?'" (1975:112). For those committing suicide then, their actions became potential opportunities for them to repudiate and even retaliate against

those who had caused them substantial suffering. As such, this framework was important to how the public understood suicide at the turn of the 20th century.

By this time period, suicide had already become a means of determining what was morally correct. For example, during the year 1905, Chinese students in Japan had become increasingly frustrated by the failure of their more peaceful methods such as letter writing campaigns to bring about any substantial reform in their home country. This led to the group's increasing radicalization, which caught the attention of the Japanese government. Worried by the students' ever more militant rhetoric and behavior, Japanese officials imposed a series of restrictions on them. This action spurred the exchange students to participate in mass protests. Additionally, in reaction to this perceived mistreatment by the Japanese government and his belief in the need for Chinese students to return home in order to achieve their nationalist ends, one male student activist, Chen Tianhua, threw himself into the sea. After his suicide, Chen's sentiments were taken very seriously by his peers and over 2,000 of them chose to return to China (Huang 1982). To them, Chen's death was a clear barometer of their success in building revolutionary sentiment.

This relationship between suicide and the right course of action was also apparent with gender reform in Republican China. Given the already elucidated traditional understanding of suicide as a generally feminine action, this is not surprising. However, the significant change was that what was initially a marker of chastity and fidelity had become a sign of female inferiority. While women who died for noble causes could still be labeled as virtuous, they were no longer considered to be exemplary. Instead, their inability to pursue other means of recourse demonstrated not only their own oppression by traditional structures, but also their natural

weakness. Men, in contrast, had also been repressed by Confucian society, but it was not the case that they readily resorted to suicide in order to escape from their social situations. Rather, they had a repertoire of mechanisms that they drew upon in order to channel their emotions and demonstrate resistance— a skill that women needed to learn (Yun 1927). Thus, suicide became a symbol of the old style woman and a reminder of the need for reformers to modernize her.

III. Zhao Wuzhen and "Old Style Woman" Suicides

Accordingly, in 1919, the shocking suicide of Zhao Wuzhen became an opportunity for scholars to boldly proclaim the necessity of the new woman to a modern Chinese society. Zhao Wuzhen was a young woman from Sichuan whose parents had arranged for her to become the second wife of Wu Fenglin, a son from a wealthy family. Even though Zhao objected to the wedding and pleaded with her parents to call it off, they refused to relent; instead, they insisted that an auspicious date had already been chosen and it would have been socially embarrassing to end the engagement. As such, while in the "cage-like bridal sedan chair" on her way to the wedding, Zhao committed suicide by slitting her throat (Schram, ed. 1992, vol. 1:423). Given the very public nature of her suicide, Zhao's death caused uproar and led to intense discussion in the media by both intellectuals and reporters as to how such a tragedy could have occurred.

For example, a young Mao Zedong argued that Zhao's death was due to her being trapped in the "three iron nets" of Confucianism: one, Chinese society; two, her family; and three, the family of her fiancé (Schram, ed. 1992, vol. 1:421). Traditional Confucian society offered no recourse or other paths for young women. When another author posited that Zhao should have run away, Mao responded that there was nowhere for her to go. He went on to give a

hypothetical example of a young woman from Shaoshan who was forced to marry a man against her will. In her frustration, she had an affair with another man and then chose to run away from her loveless marriage. She was quickly apprehended by her family and severely beaten (Schram, ed. 1992, vol. 1:429). Mao's observations paralleled those already popular with other public intellectuals of his time period. These men all contended that Chinese women traditionally only had one place in society: within the confines of a usually loveless marriage under the tutelage of a domineering mother-in-law (Yun 1927). When a woman's situation proved to be too unbearable, she believed that her only option was to commit suicide. Therefore, Mao and other intellectuals proposed that the solution was the dissolution of the traditional Confucian marriage system, the acceptance of the freedom to love for young people, and the promotion of female education (Schram, ed. 1992, vol. 1:441).

Even after the attention given to Zhao's death, suicides of 'old style woman' continued to occur. From 1905 to the 1930s, statistics regarding suicide in Taiwan reveal that women were killing themselves at a rate equal to or higher than men (Wolf 1975:117). While statistics for this time period regarding other areas of China are quite inconsistent, what is available indicates that the ratio between female and male suicide was also surprisingly balanced (Wolf 1975:121). This is revealing because it not only confirms the patterns shown in Taiwanese statistics for Chinese societies in general, but also demonstrates a departure from the international trend of men being significantly more likely to kill themselves. While the data for most areas in China are limited, a closer examination of the Taiwanese ones indicates that the majority of female suicides were young women between the ages of 15 and 35. Additionally, while only about 30% of 15-19 year olds were married, at least 85% of women were married by the age of 20. By the age of 25, over

95% of women were married (Wolf 1975:123). As such, the majority of female suicides consisted of young married women.

This was the group of women that public intellectuals singled out as the most susceptible to the pressures of the Confucian family. At the same time, these women would reap substantial benefits from their new reform efforts (Goodman 2005). While scholars continued to point to suicides by old style women as a clear indication of the need for modernization, the topic quickly lost momentum with the press. This is indicated by the ever decreasing amount of coverage that these cases received in the media. For example, while Zhao's death in 1919 garnered significant commentary, a similar suicide in 1922 received only a few lines in major Shanghai publications (*Minguo ribao*, September 20, 1922, n.p.). It is clear then that the public had come to accept scholars' depiction of 'old style women' and their use of suicide as a means of dealing with social conflict arising due to the old society of extended families (大家庭 *dajiating*). That some kind of gender reform was necessary in order to curb these deaths had become generally recognized.

IV. Xi Shangzhen and "New Woman" Suicides

The public's belief in the new woman is what made Xi Shangzhen's suicide in 1922 so unsettling. Unlike Zhao and other reported suicides, Xi was an educated young woman who worked as a secretary at the widely distributed periodical *Shangbao* (Journal of Commerce). After losing a large sum of money in the stock market, she was found hanging from an electrical cord at her place of work by a fellow employee. Upon further investigation, it was revealed that this had not been Xi's first attempt at suicide. Instead, her sister-in-law reported that Xi had tried

to kill herself two times before at her place of work. Each time she was rescued by her boss, Tang Jiezhi — a highly respected, influential, and reform-minded businessman in Shanghai. When giving her statement to the police and media, Xi's sister-in-law stressed the significance of Tang's finding Xi every time. She contended that Xi's death was ultimately a protest against the unjust treatment she had received from Tang. By choosing to end her life at her job, Xi was indicting Tang who had been the one who had encouraged Xi to heavily invest her family's savings in the stock market. Tang had failed to give her a receipt for her stocks, and he later told her that the money had been lost due to the market's volatility and she was now in debt. This upset Xi and she demanded evidence of the transaction on multiple occasions. However, rather than respecting Xi's many requests, Tang repeatedly dismissed them until one day he suggested that Tang become his concubine in order to resolve her financial woes. Xi's sister-in-law then emphasized that this was an insult that Xi as a new woman simply could not accept (*Shenbao* September 10, 1922, n.p.). In an effort to reclaim her virtue, Xi decided to end her life.

While public intellectuals and the media had held the same views regarding Zhao's suicide, their reactions to Xi's death diverged. Initially, both of the groups were thrown into confusion over how a new woman like Xi could resort to the uneducated and self-destructive methods of the old style woman. The media came to understand Xi's suicide as a conflict between traditional female piety and the allures of the new market. The Shanghai stock market had been established in the early 1920s. During this time, financiers encouraged everyday people to invest. Given their lack of investment expertise and their desire to make a quick fortune, these individuals heeded this advice and often risked the entirety of their savings in trading. Unsurprisingly, financiers' purpose was not to protect the savings of these people, but to both

build up the capital of the volatile stock market and influence its movement. As such, many of them advised large groups of commoners to make the same risky investments, which would then allow these financiers to position themselves to make huge windfalls due to the market's movement. Beyond financiers giving unscrupulous advice, the new stock market lacked a solid regulatory foundation. Companies were traded without proper prior investigation into their finances to ensure their solvency. Documentation of trades was neither standardized nor regularly issued. Therefore, without securities regulations, numerous individuals found themselves losing substantial amounts of capital in the new market. These failures led to a general distrust in this novel capitalist institution and its elite cohort (Jiang 1922; Zhu 1998).

When the press learned of Xi's ventures into the stock market, it was quick to understand her death within the larger framework of the general population's losses due to market fluctuations and securities fraud. In this way, Xi was depicted as an innocent victim whose only desire was to improve her family's financial situation. Instead of giving her sound advice, Tang had taken advantage of her naivety. In the aftermath, she took the only course of action that she thought could properly express her discontent: committing suicide. This led the media to draw parallels between Xi and the chastity suicides of imperial times (Cui 1922:25). Even the new woman could be forced to resort to the truth telling mechanism of suicide. In this way, women were still popularly understood via traditional models that stressed not only their purity and helplessness, but also transformed them into symbols of greater social suffering.

Meanwhile, public intellectuals recognized that Xi's death had put them in an embarrassing situation and that they needed to react quickly in order to prevent loss of public sentiment for their reform program. Interestingly enough, these men had come to view their

"[p]ublic nurturance of the new woman" as a symbol of their "morality and maturity [as] modern [men]" (Goodman 2005). As such, they would not accept Xi's suicide as a failure of their reform regime. Instead, they rationalized her death in two ways. First, even though he had been widely praised by Shanghai intellectuals prior to Xi's suicide as a man dedicated to modernization, Tang was now a villain. No modern man who was truly committed to the goal of female education would have acted in such an unscrupulous and disrespectful manner. Additionally, through his behavior, he had failed to set a strong moral example for Xi, who as his employee and a woman, would have considered him an important authority figure (*Xin shenbao*, September 17, 1922). In this way, even though the evidence brought against him was seemingly insufficient to warrant prosecution, Tang's fellow intellectuals still supported the legal action taken against him and accepted his eventual incarceration as justified (*Xin shenbao*, September 17, 1922).

Second, intellectuals worked to rearrange the narrative of Xi's suicide. Instead of focusing on issues of class and financial fraud, they emphasized Xi's gender as the most important element in her death. Xi was an educated, new woman with an enviable job, but she was female and therefore, still inherently incapable of properly responding to overwhelming social pressure. Xi's suicide not only confirmed the need for continued gender reform, but also the public view that women still suffered from "biological" limitations that affected their judgment. In this way, intellectuals used this analysis as both a rallying cry and insurance. These men believed that they needed to redouble their efforts toward gender reform in order to protect women like Xi in the future. At the same time, now that women were seen as inherently stunted by their biology, there was a possibility that no amount of gender reform could help them evolve to the same level as men. This was a reality that society needed to not only accept, but also be

prepared to face. Through this kind of thinking, male intellectuals were able to place their agenda of gender reform beyond critique, while also justifying their continued stewardship of the female cause (Cui 1922:18).

V. Conclusion

Even though public intellectuals and the press disagreed over the larger causes of Xi's suicide, their reasoning confirms many of the same male anxieties regarding women and social reform as a whole. In order to assuage these fears, these groups largely dismissed Xi's education and work history. Instead, they focused on her status as a woman and therefore, someone who was the most likely to be a victim in both traditional and modern society. It would seem then that no matter what program of gender reform the Republican government chose to pursue, women —both old and new— would be unable to escape the inevitabilities of their gender. This type of thinking would only become more powerful over time. For instance, when the popular movie actress Ruan Lingyu committed suicide in 1935, the male public seemed to breathe a sigh of relief: the woman who had a robust film career, paid her estranged husband monthly alimony, and was raising their only daughter on her own, had been a weak female after all (Harris 1995:72). By 1949, this kind of deterministic conception of gender had been widely accepted by both the government and the population. While the CCP initially pursued a program of gender equality, women still participated in their own gendered work units, were encouraged to educate themselves only as much as was needed to be a strong housewife, and were expected to become mothers soon after marriage (Evans 2002). Even though male intellectuals throughout these periods fancied themselves as progressive reformers, they were actually creating a familial

structure that largely maintained the same expectations for women as the imperial period. Just as women were groomed from birth for the marriage market in imperial China, women in Republican China would pursue an educational curriculum designed to transform them into modern housewives (Mann 1991; Glosser 1995). For Chinese women, while the conditions of their circumstances would improve with the implementation of reformers' ideas, their destinies as wives and mothers remained fixed.

Ultimately, this inherent division between men and women continues to have widespread support today (Barlow 1997). Despite significant media attention toward the relationship between China's gender imbalance and how it should improve females' marriage prospects, the concept of *shengnü* (剩女) or "leftover woman" remains deeply influential. Under this paradigm, women ought to be married by thirty years olds, otherwise their value in the marriage market significantly declines. This drop is based on the notion that women experience an inherent biological decline that makes them less desirable to both men and in-laws. Accordingly, numerous "new women" feel pressured to choose between their hard fought for careers and social expectations. Often times, they have already internalized these narratives of biological difference and uncritically accepted them as fact (Johnson 2016).

Additionally, Zhao and Xi's suicides are significant insofar that they offer valuable insight into the mechanics of reformers' thinking. One of the most striking elements is the identity of the "obstacles" male intellectuals consistently understood to be the targets of their reform policies. While the traditional Confucian family had been justified by patrilineal desires for centuries, scholars did not focus on removing men from positions of power or even attempt to reorient the relationship between husband and wife (Glosser 2002). Rather, they advocated the

adoption of the modern nuclear family, and the "improvement" of women as both wives and mothers. Multiple publications were produced regarding how a "new woman" wife was a prerequisite for a strong household and family (Glosser 1995; Glosser 2002). Concurrently, there was no analysis on what constituted a modern husband or the need to reform men's relationships to women. Instead, it was taken for granted that urban males had already moved beyond traditional modes of thinking and behavior. Due to this, they were uniquely qualified to take on the challenge of gender reform. Unfortunately, this lack of self-reflection on the part of men would continue to inform their positions beyond the Republican period (Evans 2002).

Therefore, it is clear that Republican reformers were deeply invested in women's education and the ideal of the loving, supportive conjugal family. At the same time, what mattered most in this program was men's continued control over the family. Women would not be the ones to lead the strong, modern nation state; rather, this role would only be reserved for men. To this end, women's primary obligation would be to best integrate themselves into whatever positions male activists had conceived for them. While social upheaval would challenge the intellectual paradigms of male elites, the gender narratives they constructed during the Republican period would continue to resonate within each succeeding political apparatus. Accordingly, it seems that the calls for gender reform that dominated the pages of multiple publications at the turn of the century have not yet been heard and revolution remains postponed.

Works Cited

Periodicals Consulted

Funü zazhi, 1921, 1922
Jiating yanjiu, 1920
Ling long, 1930, 1931
Minguo ribao, 1922
Shenbao, 1922
Xin shenbao, 1922

Other Primary and Secondary Sources

Barlow, Tani
1997. Women at the Close of the Maoist Era in the Polemics of Li Xiaojiang and Her Associates *In* The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, eds. Pp. 506-543. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Bernstein, Gail
1991 Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cui, Weiru
1922 席上珍 [Xi Shangzhen]. Shanghai: Funü zhiye yanjiu she.

Dikotter, Frank
1995 Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Duara, Prasenjit
2000 Of Authenticity and Woman: Personal Narratives of Middle-Class Women in Modern China *In* Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond. Wen-Hsin Yeh, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Elvin, Mark
1984. Female Virtue and the State in China. Past & Present 104:111-152.

Evans, Harriet
2002 Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images of the Ideal Wife *In* Chinese Femininities Chinese Masculinities: A Reader. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, eds. Pp. 335-360. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Glosser, Susan
1995 The Business of Family: You Huigao and the Commercialization of a May Fourth Ideal. Republican China 20(2):80-116.

Glosser, Susan
2002 “The Truths I Have Learned”: Nationalism, Family Reform, and Male Identity in China’s New Culture Movement, 1915-1923 *In* Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goodman, Bryna
2005 The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic. The Journal of Asian Studies 64(1):67-101.

Gu, Shi
1916 人生二百年 [Man Lives for 200 Hundred Years]. Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan.

Harris, Kristine
1995 *The New Woman*: Image, Subject, and Dissent in 1930s Shanghai Film Culture. Republican China 20(2):55-79.

Harrison, Henrietta
2000 The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Hsieh, Andres C. K., and Jonathan Spence
1981 Suicide and the Family in Pre-modern Chinese Society. *In* Normal and Abnormal Behavior in Chinese Culture. Arthur Kleinman and Tsung-Yi Lin, eds. Pp. 29-46. Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Hu, Shi
1921 美国的妇人 [American Women] *In* 胡适文章 [Hu Shi’s Essays]. Shanghai: Yadong.

Huang, Fuqing
1982 清末留日学生 [Chinese students in Japan in the late Qing period]. Whitaker, Katherine, trans. Tokyo : The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies.

Jiang, Hongjiao
1922 对于商报女书记自缢之感想 [Thoughts Regarding the *Shangbao* Female Secretary’s Suicide by Hanging]. *In* 席上珍 [Xi Shangzhen]. Cli Weiru, ed. Shanghai: Funü zhiye yanjiu she.

Johnson, Kay Ann
2016. China’s Hidden Children: Abandonment, Adoption, and the Human Costs of the One Child Policy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Judge, Joan
2001 Talent, Virtue, and the Nation: Chinese Nationalisms and Female Subjectivities in the Early Twentieth Century. The American Historical Review 106(3):765-803.

Judge, Joan
2002 Citizens or Mothers of Citizens? Gender and the Meaning of Modern Chinese Citizenship *In* Changing Meanings of Citizenship in Modern China. Merle Goldman and Elizabeth Perry, eds. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

Lean, Eugenia
2007. Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Li, Shaohong
2008. 女性的声音 [The Voices of Women]. Shanghai: 上海：Xuelin chubanshe.

Lu, Xun
1973[1923] 诺拉走后怎样 [What happens after Nora leaves home] in Silent China: Selected Writings of Lu Xun. Gladys Yang trans. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Luo, Suwen
1996 女性与近代中国社会 [Women and Modern Chinese Society]. Shanghai: Shanghai rennin chubanshe.

Mann, Susan
1987 Widows in the Kinship, Class, and Community Structures of Qing Dynasty China. Journal of Asian Studies 46(1):37-55.

Mann, Susan
1991. Grooming a Daughter for Marriage: Brides and Wives in the Mid-Ch'ing Period *In* Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society. Ruby S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, eds. Pp. 204-230. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mittler, Barbara
2003 Defy(N)ing Modernity: Women in Shanghai's Early News-Media (1872-1915). 近代中国妇女史研究 [Research on Women in Modern Chinese History] (11):215-259.

Rawski, Evelyn
1989 The social agenda of May Fourth *In* Perspectives on modern China : four anniversaries. Kenneth Lieberthal, ed. Armonk, N.Y. : M.E. Sharpe.

Rowe, William T.
2009 China's Last Empire: The Great Qing. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Schram, Stuart R, ed.
1992 Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949, vol. 1: The Pre-Marxist Period, 1912-1920. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

Wolf, Margery
1975 Women and Suicide in China. *In* Women in Chinese Society. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke, eds. Pp. 109-141. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Yun, Shi [pseud.]
1927 妇女之百面观 [One Hundred Views of Women]. Shanghai: Wenyi bianyi she.

Zhang, Jie
2014 The Gender Ratio of Chinese Suicide Rates: An Explanation in Confucianism. Sex Roles 70(3-4):146-154.

Zhu, Yingui
1998 近代上海证券市场上股票买卖的三次高潮 [The Three Climaxes of Stock Purchasing in Modern Shanghai's Financial Market]. 中国经济史研究 [Research on Chinese Economic History] (3):58-70.