

# Media Sensation

## *Public Justice and the Sympathy of an Urban Audience*

Filial daughter Shi Jianqiao avenged her father's death by killing single-handedly Sun Chuanfang, the Leader of Five Allied Provinces, in Tianjin's lay Buddhist society. . . . Her sincerity and purity are without limits; her filial revenge ranks in the top ten (in history) . . . learning of the news, the entire nation sympathizes with her.

Jingbao (*The crystal*), 8 December 1935

After assassin Shi Jianqiao killed Sun Chuanfang to avenge the death of her father, Shi Congbin, a national sensation ensued, and a sense of justice gladdened the hearts of the people; local theaters competed to perform the tale of the avenging daughter, and the force of the people's sentiment was truly great.

Fu'ermosi (*Holmes*), 6 November 1936

In a decade when high-profile news events seemed to be the norm, the case of Shi Jianqiao managed to stand out. The 1930s saw several assassinations of political figures, and high-profile female murderers emerged with considerable frequency. The Nationalist regime relied upon an informal military corps to engage in political murder of its enemies, and revenge killings of militarists were not unprecedented. A strikingly similar case of filial revenge had taken place just three years earlier when Zheng Jicheng assassinated retired militarist Zhang Zongchang to avenge the death of his uncle (*wei shu baochou*).<sup>1</sup> Plenty of women were also engaging in public acts of violence. Just a few months before Shi Jianqiao killed Sun Chuanfang, urban China had witnessed a highly sensa-

tional crime of female passion in which a woman by the name of Liu Jinggui had assassinated her rival in love.<sup>2</sup> Yet, neither the killing of Zhang Zongchang nor the near-concurrent crime of passion by Liu Jinggui made as much of a splash as did Shi Jianqiao's case.<sup>3</sup> One contributor to *Ling Lung*, a Shanghai women's journal, wrote explicitly about the impact of the Shi case. "In recent years women who have surprised the entire country with a deafening blow have not been rare. But, recently, the matter of Shi Jianqiao shooting retired militarist Sun Chuanfang, now that is especially unique!"<sup>4</sup>

Though remarkably astute in her dealings with the media, even Shi Jianqiao could not have foreseen the extent to which the media would appropriate her tale, enlarge it, and turn it into a sensation. Journalists clamored to cover the unfolding case, and theaters fought over performing the story. The assassination and trial spawned serialized fiction in newspapers, reality-based novels, and sung performances on the radio. The photos of the case's protagonists were splashed across a variety of pictorial magazines and supplements.<sup>5</sup> Writers remarked about the reach of the case in retrospect. In his memoirs, Zheng Yimei describes in astonishment how the affair was covered in detail in the daily papers, adapted into drama, and even brought to the silver screen (Zheng 1992, 73–76). Although there is little evidence that a film was actually made, there were rumors of plans to make one. An article in 1936 stated that after Shi Jianqiao had been invited to the Huale theaters to view the film *Qingcheng shijiu xia* (Nineteen knights-errant of Qingcheng), talk immediately circulated that the Lianhua Studio of Shanghai was going to turn her story into a movie entitled *Xianü fuchou ji yingpian* (The account of the avenging female knight-errant). But, as the article noted, in the end there was no truth to such speculation.<sup>6</sup> It was simply that the sensation itself had made the news.

How do we understand the significance of such sensation? The quotations at the beginning of this chapter suggest that the widespread news coverage and adaptation of Shi Jianqiao's case into forms of entertainment were crucial in creating collective sympathy. The *Jingbao* contributor noted that once the nation learned of the news, it quickly came to sympathize with daughter Shi. The anonymous contributor to the *Fu'er mosi* forged a link between theaters adapting the story and the sentiment of the people becoming a "great force." This chapter explores the media events surrounding the case to understand how news coverage and fictional adaptations of the Shi affair created opportunities to explore topics that might otherwise not have found public airing in the increas-

ingly repressive political environment of the period. It was in these arenas of fiction and theater that collective sympathy for the avenging daughter grew. This sympathy, in turn, validated the topics and norms being explored and promoted through the adaptations. As some of these norms carried implicit and, at times, not so implicit social and political criticism, public sympathy itself became politicized.

#### SERIALIZED FICTION, THE AVENGING WOMAN, AND MODERN ETHICAL SUBJECTIVITY

Fictional adaptations of the Shi Jianqiao affair appeared almost immediately. This section examines some of them, focusing in particular on one of the longer-running fictional series, the Beijing *Shibao's* *Xianü fuchou* (Avenging daughter). In these adaptations, Shi Jianqiao's persona as a female knight-errant proved to be a particularly powerful iconic vehicle through which the urban media audience could entertain new ideas of womanhood, modern subjectivity, and even national identity. Drawing from critical discussions on the role of "sentimental" literature in the modern world, I argue that these adaptations, in conjunction with the actual news story, helped turn the case of Shi Jianqiao into a compelling narrative of ethical sentiment. As such, the case helped articulate the ideal ethical and sentimental modern subject.

Scholars have for some time now examined the role of *qing*-based ("sentimental") fictional narratives in shaping early twentieth-century urban subjectivity in China. In one of the earliest English-language studies to pay attention to the issue, Perry Link (1981) classifies writing by a group of authors who printed their stories of love and romance from 1911 to 1918 in newspapers like *Libailiu* (Saturday) as "middlebrow fiction." Participants in the New Culture movement had disparagingly labeled this group the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly school because of their abundant use of the classical symbols of mandarin ducks and butterflies to connote lovers, and by the early 1920s, the label was further expanded to refer unsympathetically to all kinds of popular, old-style fiction, including not just love stories but also social novels, knight-errant novels, scandal novels, detective novels, and so on. Until Link's work, much of modern Chinese literary history had been shaped by this New Culture bias. Link's study is thus pioneering in its documentation of a whole category of long-neglected urban culture. However, his study stops short of examining the sentimentalism of these novels in any critical fashion. For Link, the sentimental nature of the literature had no real

significance beyond enabling so-called Butterfly fiction to serve as a form of escape for China's urban *petit bourgeoisie* struggling with the uncertainties associated with the changes and vicissitudes wrought by modernization and reform.

More recently, scholars of literature have started to use *qing* less as a descriptive and more as a critical term to consider how *qing* might have played a more constitutive role in social history. Some have used the term *melodrama* to characterize such *qing*-based cultural productions of the late Qing and early Republican period. Properly speaking, *melodrama* is a term used to describe popular stories of sentiment that first appeared in post-revolutionary France. Peter Brooks (1976) identifies the melodramatic mode as being associated with French literature written between the dawn of the nineteenth century and the 1840s, when the authority of the church and state were on the wane, and a sense of the sacred was no longer possible. With traditional ethics and imperatives thrown into question, melodramatic tales, Brooks argues, helped legislate a "new regime of virtue" through the prism of personal morality and emotions.<sup>7</sup> Uniquely characterized by moral Manichaeism, hyperbolic gestures, high emotionalism, dramatized moral dilemma, and conflict between good and evil where one force must prevail, the literature rehearses this new moral regime in a post-sacred world.

The term *melodrama*, while not indigenous to China, is certainly useful when discussing vernacular fiction around the turn of the twentieth century, an arguably "post-sacred" period when the adequacy of the orthodox Confucian response to restoring societal and national strength was increasingly being questioned. Chinese translators of the late Qing were translating quintessential melodramatic texts from France and England, including Alexander Dumas's *La Dame aux Camelias*. Authors of that time, including Wu Jianren, drew from these translated novels when writing Chinese novels, such as *Henhai* [*The Sea of Regret*] (1905), to address the social and political perils of foreign imperialism. Such novels moreover initiated an exploration into the emotional and psychic landscape of individual characters as a way to articulate an alternative "regime of virtue" (Hanan 1995; Tang 2000).

The predominance of *qing*-centered narratives continued into the Republican era, though scholars differ on whether the term *melodrama* remains useful to describe these later narratives. The adaptation of novels like *La Dame aux Camelias* into film, along with other films that were characterized by extreme sentimentality, have prompted scholars like Paul Pickowicz (1991) to use *melodrama* to describe certain early twentieth-

century Chinese films.<sup>8</sup> Other China scholars, however, have shied away from the term. In her discussion of Butterfly fiction, Haiyan Lee (2001) draws primarily from David Denby's (1994) work on eighteenth-century French sentimental literature to introduce the term *sentimentalism*. For Denby, melodrama requires a clear threat posed to virtue by a strongly personified villain or principle of villainy (e.g., peripety and deceit) and expresses a fear or reflection of desacralization in a new secular order.<sup>9</sup> Far more optimistic than melodrama, sentimentalism affirms the possibility of transcendence and locates that possibility in the moral authority of lived experience. Denby writes, "The individual (person, act, feeling) operates in the sentimental text as a sign, a cipher of abstract, universal categories. . . . [T]his weeping mother, this unfortunate child, and this dying father all refer beyond themselves to the whole of humanity" (89). Featuring individual stories of sentimental virtue in which new collective virtues are articulated, sentimentalism, argues Denby, lies at the heart of Enlightenment notions of community, middle-class bourgeois identity, public opinion, and even revolution.<sup>10</sup> For Haiyan Lee (2001), Chinese Butterfly fiction of the early twentieth century functioned in a similar manner. No longer faced with a sense of crisis that informed late Qing writers like Wu Jianren, Republican writers of Butterfly fiction were instead more concerned with the constitution of a new, urban, Republican identity. Whereas French sentimentalism promoted sentimentalized and sacralized virtues of the Enlightenment, Butterfly fiction promoted sentimentalized Confucian virtues such as passionate filial piety as the basis of both modern, urban Chinese subjectivity and the collective identity of a sentimental reading audience.

By introducing and promoting ideas of ethically sentimental individuals and national virtue, fictional adaptations based on the actual media story of Shi Jianqiao functioned as narratives of moral sentimentalism. These serializations read just like some of the sentimental Butterfly novels discussed by Haiyan Lee (2001). The cast of characters—a rapacious warlord, an honorable father, an avenging daughter—corresponds closely to Butterfly fiction archetypes. The themes of filial piety, heroic passion, and fated retribution are also ubiquitous in the Butterfly genre. Most notable is how these fictional adaptations, like the Butterfly novels, provided a model for subjectivity in the Republican era, which turned on a heroic and sentimentalized motive of virtue. Haiyan Lee discusses how Butterfly fiction sentimentalized the motives of virtue that drove its protagonists and shows how they moved readers to sympathize with the plight and actions of the characters. In fictional adaptations of the Shi

case, the heroic daughter's virtuous motive was fused with emotion. Hardly a disciplined, ritualized expression of filial piety, Shi Jianqiao's devotion to her father was passionate and heroic; as such, it inspired readers to consider new ways of being.

To illustrate how this was so, let us turn in detail to some of the adaptations. Adaptations occurred in several different forms. One example was a pictorial series. The *Xiejian jushilin* (Bloodbath in the Lay-Buddhist Society), ran in the *Xin Tianjinbao* from 20 November 1935 to 11 January 1936 and recounted faithfully the key events behind the affair. Every day the series featured a lithographic image, accompanied by a brief written text, to tell the story over time. It recounted the dramatic assassination, moved through the history behind the revenge, and ended with Shi Jianqiao in jail. Scenes from the affair were depicted in dramatic, black-and-white strokes. Readers could both read about and see a visual depiction of Shi Jianqiao mimeographing materials for distribution at the crime scene. On the next day, they saw her taking a hired car. The day after, they learned of her retrieving the gun from her bedroom drawer. And two days later, they witnessed how Shi Jianqiao shot Sun Chuanfang in the head.

On the same day that this pictorial series began, the publisher of the *Xin Tianjinbao* printed the serialization ads for *Chantang liuxue* (The flow of blood in a Buddhist hall), a "reality-based" novel (*shishi xiaoshuo*) that was also based on the revenge case. From November 20 to December 19, 1935, newspaper advertisements promised that the book would reveal the true "causes and effects" (*houguo qianyin*) behind the event. These advertisements also granted a price break: while the book was normally priced at four *jiao*, customers who pre-ordered the book could get two for the price of one. It appears that the book was quite popular. On December 24, 1935, an advertisement informed the reading public that the first five thousand volumes, printed on December 10, 1935, were sold out and that five thousand more copies of the six-thousand word novel would be published because of further demand. Each copy of the second printing would sell for two *jiao*, and 5 *fen* would be added for postage. To urge consumers on, the ad read, "Not many copies left! Hurry and order now to get your copy soon."

Adaptations of the affair were not restricted to print. "Xiejian fotang" (A bloodbath in the Buddhist hall) was a *kaipian* performance that was broadcast on the radio a month after the killing.<sup>11</sup> *Kaipian* were originally the opening songs of *tanci*, longer prosimetric narratives that were part of a storytelling tradition known as *pingtan*. Probably appearing

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

Figure 5. Shi Jianqiao entering a taxi on her way to retrieve her gun, from the pictorial series *Xiejian jushilin* (Bloodbath in the lay-Buddhist society), printed in *Xin Tianjinbao* (Tianjin), 24 November 1935.

around the late Ming, *tanci* traditionally drew from recent events, were often associated with female authors and audiences, and were sung or chanted, often accompanied by a lute or banjo.<sup>12</sup> The genre proved easily adaptable to radio performances in the twentieth century, and by the 1930s, the genre of *kaipian* had become so popular that many radio stations dropped the main *tanci* program and performed *kaipian* alone (Benson 1995, 122–23). On air for almost a week in mid-December, “Xiejian fotang” was one such *kaipian*, and was performed on the radio station Huiling, number 1380 on the dial, from nine to ten in the evening, prime time for adults. In rhyme and verse, the piece addressed what it claimed were recent complaints about the lack of luminaries emerging from the women’s quarters (*guige*). The song assured listeners that with Shi Jianqiao they redressed this lack and found a true woman warrior (*jinguo yingxiong*). The piece then went on to provide an explanation of Sun’s violent death in the popular Buddhist terms of fated retribution, and described the tense moments before and during the killing and the dramatic details of the assassin’s last-minute dash home to retrieve her gun.

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

Figure 6. Shi Jianqiao shooting Sun Chuanfang, from the pictorial series *Xiejian jushilin* (Bloodbath in the lay-Buddhist society), printed in *Xin Tianjinbao* (Tianjin), 26 November 1935.

One of the most remarkable adaptations of the affair was a serialized novel in Beiping's *Shibao* (The truth post) called *Xianü fuchou* (The avenging daughter).<sup>13</sup> Given its length and richness as a text, it deserves closer attention and can illuminate well how fictional adaptations of the Shi case qualified as forms of sentimental narratives that helped shape modern subjectivity. Starting only a few days after the assassination and lasting until April of the following year, the novel chronicles on a daily basis Shi's life from the moment her father was still alive to the announcement of the verdict of her first trial. The generic structure of the series is a curious mix of popular love stories and martial-arts fiction. It also includes a chapter on Shi's dramatic trial that was reminiscent of the contemporaneous genre of detective fiction and its Chinese precedent, court-case fiction.<sup>14</sup>

In the story, Shi Jianqiao is portrayed as a *xia* hero who has the qualifications needed to transgress socially accepted norms to explore new ways of behaving as an exemplary New Woman. By acting under the auspices of filial piety, she avoids offending classical norms of female

propriety. From the start, protagonist Shi displays a disposition of pure filial piety (*chunxiao xingcheng*). In the first few installments of the series, the heroine immediately proposes to sacrifice marriage to care for her parents. Then, upon finding out that her father is being called back to the battlefield despite his advanced age, she expresses a desire to follow her father into battle. In the second chapter, fittingly entitled “Learning of One’s Parent’s Death; Losing One’s Will to Live,” a servant who had loyally served her father in battle hesitates to break the news of Shi Congbin’s tragic death to the Shi family because he fears that Shi Jianqiao, with her disposition of complete loyalty, will die of grief. When he does, Shi, despite being devastated, realizes that her own grief and paralysis would result in compounding the pain of her stepmother, Lady Li. Thus, instead of committing suicide, she decides to seek revenge.

Echoing Shi Jianqiao’s real-life portrayal of events, the serialization has protagonist Shi assuming heroically active personae such as the woman warrior (*jinguo yingxiong*) and the female knight-errant (*xianü*). It is as both woman warrior and female knight-errant that Shi upholds the principle of exemplary parental devotion. But the two personae differ in terms of the objects of filial piety and the exact implication of this virtue. Shi Jianqiao as classic woman warrior acts for her *own* father and embodies in her filial piety the cornerstone of the family-based Confucian order. Shi Jianqiao as *xia* heroine exhibits more vigilante tendencies; she employs her impressive martial-arts skills in the pursuit of justice and for the purpose of upholding the universal principle of filial piety (*xiao*) indiscriminately. This shift in personae is marked in the series by a shift in narrative style. Shi is a dutiful daughter who models herself after the Mulan warrior when the series follows the events of the real case of Shi Jianqiao. When the protagonist assumes the *xia* persona, the series shifts to the narrative style typical of *wuxia* fiction at the time.

In this series, the term *jinguo yingxiong*, literally, “the hero in female military headgear,” and often translated into English simply as “woman warrior,” is applied to the character of Shi Jianqiao at two crucial junctures. At both points, she engages in extreme acts of filial piety that go beyond what a conventional daughter would do. The first time is when she feels uneasy about her father’s purported military promotion.<sup>15</sup> She cites the virtuous Mulan as a model, offers to cut her hair, don military gear, and follow him into battle. While Mulan cross-dresses and enters battle, the modern series has the father bequeath to Shi the responsibility to stay home and care for her stepmother. The second time is when she hears the news of his untimely death and resolves to take on the no-

ble task of revenge. As in the first instance, she expresses the desire to cut her hair, a symbolic gesture by which she reigns in her *yin*, or female, sexuality, a gesture necessary for her to transgress boundaries.

The series also showcases Shi Jianqiao as a *xia* heroine and scatters references to her *xia* nature throughout. Readers learn that Shi Jianqiao had acquired martial-arts skills in her youth, which she continues to pursue as an adult.<sup>16</sup> The story emphasizes that Shi is not merely schooled in the martial arts, but can also write poetry, an unmistakable attribute of the talented woman, or *cainü*, another celebrated female archetype. The fictional detail that Sun Chuanfang and her father were once sworn brothers (*mengxiong mengdi*) also functions to establish her *xia* nature, for by killing Shi Congbin, Sun does not simply murder Shi Jianqiao's father, he violates the venerable *xia* principle of brotherhood. Shi Jianqiao's alliance to Sun Chuanfang, a sworn-uncle (*mengshu*), is immediately displaced by intense hatred. He becomes the sworn enemy (*choudi*) and provides her with the opportunity to display her true *xia* colors.

One segment in particular detours from the style of a melodramatic social narrative into a style more reminiscent of *wuxia* fiction.<sup>17</sup> This shift is marked by a shift in time, in the setting of the story, and in tone. Whereas most of the story takes place in Tianjin and Anhui, the *xia* segment relocates the story back in time to Taiyuan, Shandong, where the real Shi had, in fact, lived for a few years. It leaves behind the emotion-laden description typical of love stories and adopts a more fantastic narrative tone common to the fanciful adventure of *wuxia* tales. It features action sequences that verify Shi's physical *wu* skills and focuses on the indiscriminate morality of the heroine's *xia* spirit. We are told at the beginning that Shi Jianqiao can do what even eight to ten strong men cannot do. To demonstrate this, the story tells how Shi Jianqiao once saved Lady Qian, an elderly neighborhood woman who is being abused by her wayward son and evil daughter-in-law.<sup>18</sup> As a young woman, Lady Qian marries into the wealthy Zhao family and serves them well by giving birth to a son. Unfortunately, this son, named Jinfu, is wild in his youth and not willing to be formally educated in Chinese boxing (*guoshu*) by his father. Instead, he befriends unsavory types, and brings home as his wife a Lady Sun who is from the circus and knows martial arts (*wuyi*) very well. Soon Jinfu's father dies, and the couple begins abusing the widowed mother, Lady Qian. In time, Lady Qian decides her only recourse is to make the abuse public. She sneaks out one day while the two are taking their mid-afternoon naps and happens upon the road where the famous *xianü*, Shi Jianqiao, lives. Upon learning of the old woman's plight, Shi

Jianqiao immediately becomes incensed and assumes the responsibility of helping this old woman. Lady Qian cautions Shi that both know martial arts and fears that she is asking too much from the female knight-errant. Shi responds by saying that she has no fear and has her own reasons for acting. In the next scene, Shi Jianqiao successfully makes the pair cower in submission with her courage and brilliant swordsmanship. Shi's reputation spreads even more widely as a result.

The shift to a more fantastical *xia* segment in the series assumes a crucial narrative function of illuminating the heroic qualifications necessary for protagonist Shi to be a modern woman in the “love-story” section. In other words, it is only through embodying the *xia* attributes of unmitigated bravery, an unstinting sense of moral justice, and absolute virtue that Shi proves capable not only of seeking filial revenge, but also of being a true modern woman. The fact that this series ultimately explores issues pertinent to modern womanhood is evident in several installments that focus on the heroine's involvement in two complicated marriage scenarios. The marriage theme was popular in urban fiction of the Republican period, including what Link (1981) calls the “love-story” genre. While the term suggests romance, Link defines this genre less by its romantic content (though many of the stories certainly included a strong dose of love) and more by its central preoccupation with the issue of free marriage versus arranged betrothals. This trend, of course, must be understood within the larger cultural context where marriage was a burning social issue. Redefining the institution as an antidote to the “traditional” arranged marriages that lay at the core of Confucian patriarchy, May Fourth intellectuals imbued the topic with particular urgency. They advocated an iconoclastic vision of the marriage union based on free love, romance, and individual choice. Marriage was to be a genuine emotional bond at the core of a modern nuclear family and, by extension, May Fourth cosmopolitanism. While by the 1930s the right to choose a marriage partner was still important, there was a discernable shift away from individual romantic love toward family reform that would benefit the Nationalist state.<sup>19</sup>

*Xianü fuchou* (The avenging daughter) is a love story in the sense that it explores the issue of marriage for modern women. In the first part of the series (the first three chapters), readers learn from daily cliff-hangers not about protagonist Shi's heartbreaks, but about how she resolves scandalous betrothals and arranges her own strategic marriage. Shi Jianqiao's handling of nuptial arrangements on her own becomes a mark of modern womanhood and is portrayed as a noble, even heroic (*xia*) task. In

the fourth chapter, Shi Jianqiao boldly undertakes unconventional female behavior both to seek revenge and to arrange her own future. The scene unfolds the events leading up to Shi's decision to marry Shi Jinggong. At their initial meeting, she laments the lack of heroes in the world and states that she wants a husband who is a gentleman with the stomach and gall for *xia* justice. Shi Jinggong proceeds to win her heart by asserting that the ideals of a *xiake*, including helping the poor, repressing the strong, publicly encouraging good, and detesting evil, are the natural duties of humanity. What is most unconventional is that the protagonist then proposes to Shi Jinggong. The decision to propose is presented as heroic both in furthering the ultimate goal of revenge and as groundbreaking female behavior. The fictional Shi Jinggong expresses admiration for Shi Jianqiao's refreshingly bold behavior, and the plot makes clear that her action is yet another sign of her dedication to the pursuit of justice.<sup>20</sup> In short, by rejecting the traditional convention of going through a family matchmaker, Shi inverts gender roles and assumes the task of proposing—unusual behavior that would have been startling even in the most progressive circles of Republican China. Shi's moral passion for revenge serves both to offset any temporary moral impropriety and to introduce new, daring behavior for women to the reading public.

Heroine Shi's handling of difficult marriage scenarios moreover put forth a modern notion of individual responsibility in the High Republic. Defining moral character was a general didactic concern of Butterfly fiction at the time. In his discussion of modern *wuxia* fiction, Chen Pingyuan argues that a central artistic achievement of the twentieth-century martial novel is its focus on individual ethical sentimentality. Speaking specifically of chivalric and sentimental fiction (*xiaqing xiaoshuo*), Chen explains that the *qing* of these novels went beyond love and romance to include a more abstract sense of the moral sentiment at the core of being a person. As he puts it, *qing* was that which was necessary for the perfection of one's humanity or the realization of one's life's worth (Chen 1995, 116–19). The primary purpose of the *xia* hero then was not simply to engage in martial exploits and uphold justice, but also to acquire a *qing*-based personhood or humanity through his or her adventures.

Read in this light, the heroic undertakings of Shi Jianqiao in the *Shibao* series—be it filial revenge or arranging her own marriage betrothal—did more than introduce new norms of female behavior. They also showed that the basis of modern subjectivity revolved around, above all, ethical sentiment. This focus on individual subjectivity is evident as early as the first chapter, “The Annulment of Marriage to Uphold One's Moral Char-

acter,” in which Shi decides to annul the betrothal despite her father’s objections.<sup>21</sup> Presenting a fictional account of Shi’s real-life success in disentangling herself from a scandalous betrothal, the chapter shows how, after discovering that her future father-in-law was involved in the Case of the Tongue scandal, Shi Jianqiao seeks to annul the prearranged marriage betrothal in order to defend her “individual moral character” (*geren rengen*).<sup>22</sup> Her father objects to her handling the matter herself, but Shi Jianqiao insists that the situation is urgent enough for Shi herself to get involved. Shi prevails in the end and, moreover, convinces her father by arguing that society is more open, women are now liberated, and speaking about these issues as a woman is no longer shameful. In the end, she resolves the matter smoothly, wins the respect of outside observers, and saves face for her entire family.

As a tale of heroic and ethical transgression, Shi’s story was thus centrally invested in locating a newly reconfigured notion of heroic filial piety at the heart of moral personhood in general.<sup>23</sup> Didactically powerful, it introduced norms that sought to *change* the social order in a new era when change was valorized. Previous scholars who have studied the “middlebrow” genre of serialized fiction tend to see an ambiguous conservatism with regard to the West as a distinguishing feature of the genre (e.g., Link 1981). In this series, while the tension between old (Shi’s parents) and new (Shi Jianqiao as modern woman) is central to the story, filial piety and female *xia* heroism are hardly signs of conservatism or a return to the comforts of tradition.<sup>24</sup> Filial piety is the primary motivation for the protagonist’s groundbreaking forms of female behavior and engagement in modern *xia* pursuits; it was the crucial ethical sentiment required for modern moral subjectivity.

The novel’s emphasis on filial piety and the cultivation of a modern moral subject coincided with a more widely held belief that individual morality was linked with national strength. Whereas in May Fourth thought, individualism was as important as nationalism, by the Nanjing decade the more statist, corporatist discourse on the nation had taken hold, and individual morality was not celebrated as an end in itself, but was mobilized in the service of national collective morality. This tendency appears in a newspaper editorial entitled “The Morality Movement of the Republican Era” that appeared a little over a month after the killing of Sun Chuanfang (Wu 1935). Identifying the material and the spiritual as two central aspects of national defense, the editorial emphasizes the need to build moral fortitude before buttressing physical strength. Morality was crucial, it argues, because it serves as the lifeline of “individual

moral character” (*geren rengen*) and thus as the strength of the nation. This link between individual morality and national strength was at the heart of the state-engineered New Life movement. While the 1934 movement has been described as rather lackluster in retrospect, its goal of reviving the spiritual life and national strength of modern China by promoting individual Confucian virtues along with militaristic discipline and Christian spirituality was based on a genuine belief that national strength started with individual morality. In this larger political context, protagonist Shi Jianqiao was not simply a social exemplar in the High Republic. As a modern *xia* woman, her bold heroism, assertive confidence, and above all, filial and loyal motivation coincided with the virtues of an ideal nation.

#### THEATER AND PUBLIC JUSTICE

In addition to prompting fictional examinations of new womanhood and ethical subjectivity, Shi Jianqiao’s case also inspired public exploration of forms of justice in the realm of theater. This section uses theatrical adaptations of the sensational affair to examine how, for theatergoers, Shi Jianqiao embodied a form of righteousness that could serve as an alternative to official definitions of order and justice. Differing from traditional Confucian norms of justice based on ethical reciprocity, as well as from reformist ideas of the rule of law, the form of justice served by Shi Jianqiao was rooted in chivalric righteousness (*xiayi*). It was, moreover, a form of public justice that was not provided by the courts (*ting*), but arose in the spectacular space of urban performance and theater, a realm of the *jianghu*, a term that is literally translated as “rivers and lakes,” and metaphorically refers to the traditional imaginary setting where *xiake* roam and engage in righting wrongs. This examination, in turn, allows us to consider how dramatic and fictional adaptations of Shi’s story cast doubt upon the justice meted out by the Nationalist state.

During the 1920s and 1930s, there was a proliferation of novels, newspaper serializations, radio plays, theatrical productions, and films that featured gallant outlaw heroes and assassins as self-appointed champions of justice. Scholars have noted how China’s weak national image in the early twentieth century was a key reason for this *xia* renaissance. For example, Gu Mingtao, a writer of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly school of the time, credited the popularity of the *xia* story with creating a picture of China’s timeless martial vigor to compensate for the early twentieth-century international image of China as the “Sick Man of Asia”

(Link 1981, 14). The *xia* ethos was not merely a sign of an imagined martial vigor, but also a symbol for the idealism behind the Nationalist attempt to unify China and champion national justice. It may not have been a coincidence that the popularity of *xia* fiction peaked between 1927 to 1930, just around the time of the Northern Expedition (Link 1981, 22). By the mid-1930s, however, the euphoria of national reunification had worn off, and the looming presence of the Japanese in North China underscored the extent to which unification had failed. In this context, the *xia* ethos was no longer a quality ascribed to the ruling regime but had become increasingly associated with alternative expressions of national justice.

In the world of urban media and entertainment, adaptations of Shi Jianqiao's revenge qualified as one such expression. Public celebration of the Shi Jianqiao case as an expression of *xia* justice was particularly evident in theatrical renditions of the affair, which rendered the stage into a *jianghu*-like space. Specifically, theater provided the opportunity for a public exploration of real-life matters that was not possible in conventional journalistic venues subjected to state control at the time. This exploration is not surprising if you consider how theater in China had long been seen as a potential arena of illicit, heterodox activity, where the sentiment of the people could be easily stirred. Traveling troupes and street performers had long been characterized as being part of the *jianghu*. Discussing theater in the late Qing, Meng Yue (2000) argues that popular forms of urban theater beyond the control of officials and arbiters of taste often aggravated these elites. They described theater as a potential site for the moral corruption of women, as well as a place of danger with a potent ability to foster deviant emotions and morality. The tendency to draw on real life in its productions made late-Qing theater all the more problematic. As early as the 1880s, the Shanghai stage started to feature operas based on the "real," "the immediate," and current events (as opposed to traditional opera that featured highly stylized performances of the fantastically imagined past). Meng alludes to the increasing politicization of this new kind of "real-life" theater, writing that "the theater of the immediate later widened its means from *seeing* into *engaging*, [from] *showing* to *commenting*, and if only indirectly, *criticizing*" (301).

Early twentieth-century reformists came to appreciate the political implications of such "illicit" drama. New drama that first appeared in the late Qing, for example, appealed to reformist intellectuals because of its potentially powerful, if heterodox, ability to arouse the people (Mack-

erras 1975, 117). Late Qing reformist Liang Qichao, for one, promoted vernacular fiction and popular drama as a way to mobilize the “people.” In his essay, “Popular Literature in Relation to the Masses,” he wrote that “popular literature influences the way of the world . . . [and] arouses (*ci*, “to spur or pierce”) people with the force of shock. . . . [N]othing delivers the astounding *ci* more powerfully than popular literature forms such as vernacular novel and drama.”<sup>25</sup> In 1904, Chen Duxiu expanded upon Liang’s argument, emphasizing in particular how theater was able to move audiences emotionally: “Theater . . . is an art form that can easily get into people’s heads and touch their hearts. . . . Theater has the power to take possession of its audience, making it happy and joyful one moment and sad and mournful the next, making it dance in delirium one moment and cry in a flood of tears the next. It doesn’t take much time to make incredibly great changes in people’s minds.”<sup>26</sup> By the May Fourth period, progressive dramatists found modern spoken drama to be particularly useful for commenting on society and contemporary affairs (Mackerras 1990, 104–12).

Drama in the 1930s continued to draw from current events, move the audience, and exhibit potentially heterodox, or *xia*, implications. Adopted into spoken drama almost immediately after the actual assassination, dramatic renditions of Shi Jianqiao’s real-life story were examples of theater based on current events.<sup>27</sup> Given the unique size and nature of Shanghai’s flourishing entertainment culture, it is hardly surprising that several plays based on the story appeared in Shanghai. *Shi Jianqiao Shoots Sun Chuanfang* was performed by the Period Drama Troupe at the famous Shanghai Public Stage playhouse run by gang boss Huang Jinrong. Originally planned for a limited, two-day performance on December 5 and 6, the show was extended for one extra day.<sup>28</sup> Another production with almost the same name, *Ms. Shi Shoots Sun Chuanfang*, was performed by the Daybreak Spoken Drama Troupe at the Southeast Grand Theater for a few days starting on November 25, 1935. It was then performed as a night show at the *Xinxin* garden theater, from November 29 to December 8, 1935. *The Chronicle of Sun Chuanfang’s Assassination* played on November 29 and 30 at the Fujian-Anhui Traveling Theater and also had a short run at the Small World Theater from December 7 to December 10, 1935. One of the most extravagant and longest-running productions was *All About Sun Chuanfang*. Performed daily from December 20, 1935, until January 14, 1936, at the newly renovated Tianchan theater, the title of the production was suddenly changed midway in its run from *All about Sun Chuanfang* to *All about an Aveng-*

ing *Daughter*, perhaps because the theater realized that the story of a living female assassin would sell more tickets than the story of a dead warlord.<sup>29</sup> It was reported that troupes from other cities like Jinan and Qingdao also adapted Shi's story into dramatic performances.<sup>30</sup>

The exact reach of these theater adaptations is hard to assess, and reliable numbers for the audience are difficult to establish, but we can identify some characteristics of the audience. Audience members had enough leisure time and money to afford tickets. While they may not have drawn the vast crowds that traditional theater continued to draw, these plays were more inclusive than early spoken drama productions. Dominated by left-leaning dramatists, spoken drama in the 1920s generally tended to be fairly exclusive. By the mid-1930s, however, plays based on Shi's case enjoyed a broader appeal, catering to Shanghai's growing population of so-called petty urbanites (*xiaoshimin*), the same audience that read Butterfly fiction, lived in Shanghai's unique alleyway homes (*longtang*), and became the audience for early films.<sup>31</sup>

The broader appeal of many of these productions is apparent from their being performed at popular theaters. At the Public Stage playhouse's production of *Shi Jianqiao Shoots Sun Chuanfang*, tickets ranged from two *jiao* (twenty cents) for a seat upstairs to three, four, and even six *jiao* for more desirable seats downstairs. Ticket prices were thus reasonable, particularly compared to the cost of admission to films.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, some of the advertisements suggest that, just as the real-life sensation appealed to a broad, mass audience, these productions were meant for "all circles of society" to enjoy.<sup>33</sup> Serious drama critics of the day had little to say about the artistic value of these adaptations, which suggests that these productions were decidedly not highbrow. At most, *Xishijiebao* (Theater world) would run a brief, formulaic write-up of the production. There were also roaming troupes that performed plays based on the Shi Jianqiao case, which meant that dramatic renditions of the case reached an even larger audience beyond Shanghai. Productions by roaming troupes were more likely to have been improvised without scripts, shared among troupes, and performed for only a few days at most in a given location.

Sources on popular culture in China have always been hard to come by, and unfortunately this case is no exception. Given the vernacular, and at times improvised, nature of productions based on the Shi Jianqiao case, scripts were not likely to be preserved. Playbills and advertisements printed in daily newspapers were, however, remarkably detailed and provide us with a sense of the shows. Many such ads appeared in the more

commercial and major Shanghai dailies, including the *Shenbao* and the *Shibao*. Ads were also placed in theater-specific papers like the *Xishi-jiebao*. Overall, the ads promised productions that would enable the urban theater audience to enjoy a spectacle as well as to explore contemporary events.

An interesting tension between promises of spectacle and the guarantee of authenticity emerges from these advertisements. Theater production, in general, had moved toward portraying things more realistically. Whereas Peking opera was always highly stylized, so that a slight gesture of one's hand, the facial paint, or a wave of one's horsewhip was enough to hint at the action or meaning of a scene, Shanghai opera in the late Qing began drawing from real-life events and featuring "authentic" costumes and lifelike props. By the early twentieth century, new forms of theater were developed, including "civilization plays" (*wen-mingxi*), which were forms of modern drama that had developed in the May Fourth period, and the more popular and spectacular forms of current-events drama (*shishi xinju*) and contemporary costume plays (*shizhuangxi*). The latter forms, in particular, were characterized by a tension between delivering both authenticity and spectacle, and were generic forms that were well-suited to the theatrical adaptations based on the Shi Jianqiao case.

Claims of authenticity in such advertising may have lent an air of heightened drama and emotional power to the promised performances. In an era when daily news and newspaper coverage was so highly sensational, a real-life drama could appear more intriguing and spectacular than an invented one. For instance, a preview advertisement for *Ms. Shi Shoots Sun Chuanfang* promoted the drama as a current-events play and claimed that this coming attraction based on actual events was well worth a look.<sup>34</sup> Other advertisements publicized the ability of such performances to provide accurate renditions of actual military battles and courtroom trials of the case of Shi Jianqiao. The theater bill for *All About an Avenging Daughter* boasted that the genuine story of the military struggle between Shi Congbin and Sun Chuanfang would be told once and for all. It guaranteed that the costumes were to be authentic, the sets lavish, and the props—from cannons to machine guns—like the real thing. The same theater bill advertised as its grand finale a dramatic courtroom scene and promised a realistic reenactment of the drama that was unfolding in the courts of Tianjin.<sup>35</sup> In short, while reality in the Shi case had become much like narrative convention, narrative convention readily drew from reality. Pledges of authenticity made in play-

bill advertising sold theater tickets. Drama based on a real case was readily marketable.

The ads also illustrate that the productions, while promising to deliver authentic accounts, were at the same time intended as crowd-pleasers. They were depicted as extravagant affairs that could affect audiences on a basic emotional level. By the 1930s, much of Shanghai entertainment culture was marked by spectacle. Meng Yue (2000, 436–98) has argued that as entertainment culture moved from Yangzhou to Shanghai after the Taiping rebellion, there was a shift in the history of “exhibition-type landscapes” from Yangzhou’s extravaganza gardens (which had marked the city’s power in the imperium in the pre-Taiping era) to the exposition centers for mass entertainment embodied by famous Shanghai playgrounds, such as the Great World Playground. These new entertainment centers were spatial reflections of a new era of Shanghai cosmopolitanism. They were spectacular in their ability to bring all types of theater and amusement from around the world into one space, in an exposition-like manner (439). Similarly, in a recent study of Shanghai film, Zhang Zhen (2005, 42–88) uses the linguistic term *yangjingbang*, originally applied to the pidgin Shanghaiese that incorporated foreign words and grew out of treaty-port culture where different language and cultures intermingled, to describe the cultural cosmopolitanism of Shanghai’s migrant and working-class citizens. Slowly becoming the “petty urbanites” (*xiaoshimin*) of the city, this group displayed a voracious appetite for variegated attractions and experiences of play and entertainment. Such attractions included illustrated newspapers, amusement parks, rooftop gardens, teahouses, early films, and all types of theatrical performances.

Advertisements for theater productions based on the Shi Jianqiao affair reflected this vernacular cosmopolitanism of Shanghai. Some of these ads were themselves quite extravagant. Take, for example, the advertising for *All about Sun Chuanfang*, the play whose title was changed midway in its run to *All about an Avenging Daughter*. One of the regular commercials for this production was a lavish and variegated text that included visual material as well as textual information. At the heart of the ad were bold characters for *All about Sun Chuanfang*, and later for *All about an Avenging Daughter*. Above the name, in only slightly smaller characters, was “Tianchan Theater,” one of Shanghai’s major theaters for drama. Just under the title, ad copy strongly evoked the headlines about the case that were appearing in the same newspapers. These included “Injustice Done to Shi Congbin at a Train Station” and “Ms. Shi Sentenced to Ten

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

Figure 7. Advertisement for the theatrical production *All About Sun Chuanfang* (*Shenbao*, 26 December 1935).

Years.” Finally, five large photographs competed to catch the eye of the viewer. At the middle, under the title of the show, was a photo of an elaborate scene from the production and its stage setting. The other four photographs were placed in the four corners of the ads and featured the actors playing the main characters of Shi Jianqiao, Shi Congbin, Sun Chuanfang, and Shi Zhongcheng, Shi Jianqiao’s cousin. The title and theater name and the photographs were surrounded by text. Written both horizontally and vertically, the ad copy promised a wealth of attractions.

The content of this ad deserves some attention, as it gives us a sense of who in the theater world took part in such productions as well as the extent of the pageantry involved. The four oval photos show us the four main characters. We see the actors playing Shi Congbin and Shi Zhongcheng, dressed in military costume. The Sun Chuanfang character is

dressed in a traditional robe, his hands folded as in prayer. The photo of Shi Jianqiao has Shi wearing an extravagant dress—far more extravagant than the simple dress worn by the real-life Shi Jianqiao in the pictures being circulated in the news—and is also highly dramatic: Shi's arms are extended, and she is pointing a gun. In addition to the four photos, the accompanying list of actors and their roles indicates that at least sixteen other actors had substantial roles, including some performing as prostitutes.

For those familiar with the theater world, several of these actors were well-known figures. The actor portraying Shi Jianqiao was a famous Shanghai *dan* actor, a male performer of female roles, by the name of Zhao Junyu (1894–1945).<sup>36</sup> Trained in Peking opera, by the 1930s Zhao had moved to more contemporary forms of drama, performing in famous *wenmingxi* (civilization plays), as well as in more spectacular *shizhuangxi* (contemporary costume plays). While *dan* actors commonly performed female roles in Shanghai's theater world, the gender politics behind a male actor playing a gender-bending female knight-errant was an interesting twist and added to the theatrical aspect of the whole affair. The actor who performed the role of Shi Congbin was Zhao Ruquan (1881–1961), another established Shanghai opera star, who specialized in the role of the *laosheng*, older, heroic, male figures, as opposed to younger romantic male leads.<sup>37</sup> By the 1930s, Zhao had become highly influential in the Shanghai theater world and was the head of the Shanghai United Actors Association. In addition to moving freely between opera and theater, he was also involved in directing, writing, and making the music and stage sets. His writing was often inspired by contemporary social news that he adapted into reality-based new drama (*shishi xinxi*), and it is possible that he was not merely performing in *All about Sun Chuanfang*, but had also written it.

The advertisement of figure 7 also vividly illuminates the elaborate nature of the actual production, shown in the center photo. To the right of the photo is the caption “the climactic scene of this production.” The actors are dressed in seemingly authentic and up-to-date military garb, and cannons and live horses crowd the stage. The surrounding ad copy further emphasizes the pageantry that the image conveys. Marked by solid triangles are several sentences listed in a row on either side of the photo. These sentences promise “realistic and extraordinary settings,” “absolutely new and complete military attire,” “never before seen Russian-style troop movements,” “live horses that ascend the stage,” “heart-stopping cannons,” “magnificent dance productions, both glamorous and

sexy” and “better and more novel landscape sets.” Just as the Great World Playground provided all sorts of entertainment within a single playground, this production, it was promised, would deliver all forms of drama and performance on one stage.

In addition to the various photos, the language of the ad copy employs a hodge-podge of discursive methods, echoing the mixed array of attractions being offered in Shanghai’s entertainment culture more generally. Some of the text includes punchy, short promises such as “New production of Contemporary Sensation!” that echoed the headlines of newspapers. But some passages are written in the classical form of parallel couplets that liken the efficacy of this stage production to the power of nature in its ability to evoke a sensory response. They state that “the tense atmosphere of the drama is like the great Yangzi river; the more it flows, the more exciting it gets,” and then claim that “the grandeur of the sets is like famous mountains and elegant rivers; the more you look at them, the more you love them.” The ad also boasts that the event would be “exciting (*renao*) enough to render the atmosphere of the entire theater tense” and “comical (*huaqi*) enough to bring laughter that would split your sides.” In a review of another theatrical production based on the case, one *Xishijiebao* writer similarly guaranteed that the show would bring “laughter that rings through the heavens; you will laugh until your stomach hurts.”<sup>38</sup> Without the actual scripts, we cannot determine what aspects of the beheading of Shi Congbin and the shooting of Sun Chuanfang would have been considered funny. Yet the convergence in these descriptions suggests that they were quite formulaic and indicates that these productions sought to present themselves as shows that would entertain all.

The ad copy hints at how the experience of going to theater was itself a thrilling experience, and how the producers of the play were somewhat anxious about this. The ad for *All about Sun Chuanfang*, posted on December 26, 1935, alludes to the teeming crowds at the theater. In an apology to theatergoers at the bottom, the text explains that because the crowd the night before had been larger than anticipated, some customers had to be regretfully turned away at the doors. Though it is impossible to determine whether this was true, the comment stirred up sensation by suggesting that there was great demand for the performance. Even while noting the unexpected crowds, the advertisement took care to define and discipline a new theatergoing audience. It urges theatergoers to get their tickets early, not to crowd, and to show up on time. The telephone number for reservations is provided. In one corner of the

ad, the text says, “Take Note: *All About Sun Chuanfang* Starts Promptly at 8.” Finally, lists of different ticket prices are included to educate readers. Evening shows are more expensive and different tiers of seats are priced accordingly, from 6 *jiao* for the most coveted seats, to 1 *jiao* for the seats on the third floor. If the audience did not heed such information, the theater-going experience could easily move from excitement to chaos.

Interestingly, these ads were selling the genre of current-events or contemporary costume drama as a form of cutting-edge entertainment. This was an era of new film technology, when film productions increasingly competed with drama for audiences and lured potential theater audiences away with the technology and thrills found in movie theaters. Live theater had to reinvent itself. It sought to remain competitive with the promise of being able to adapt current events into entertainment (far faster than a film could do), and the promise of live extravaganzas on stage. The ad for *All about Sun Chuanfang* explicitly refers to the theater world’s need to renew forms of genre. For instance, it notes that this production “gets rid of the insignificant first act; (instead) the opening production will be a grand military spectacle (*da wuxi*), with more than 100 martial actors on stage at the same time.” The other side of the ad claims that this production is like “vanguard troops that can smash apart a dull atmosphere” and constitutes “a vital new force (*shengli jun*) that revolutionizes hackneyed, stale theater!”

The military metaphors used in these phrases were particularly effective in promoting such theater. The 1930s saw an exaltation of military strength and general militarization. The New Life movement urged military rigor and discipline as means to strengthen the Chinese nation and society. Leftist discourse of the time was also increasingly militaristic, emphasizing struggle and revolution. The language in this ad clearly draws from this contemporary emphasis on militarization. The urgency and excitement of military action had penetrated commercial and cultural discourse and, in turn, such ads, like the theater they are promoting, domesticated militarism for purposes of consumption and entertainment.

Such military metaphors also help characterize this new popular Shanghai current-events theater as a *jianghu* space. The military metaphors in the ads highlight how Shi Jianqiao’s story essentially revolved around martial issues, focusing on militarists and the battleground. These costume dramas of Shi Jianqiao’s affair were directly linked to the contemporary situation of a post-warlord yet highly militarized regime under the Nationalists, and thus lent themselves to exploring real-life social con-

cerns. For example, theater based on the Shi Jianqiao case might have shed rather unflattering light on the Nationalist regime's failure to control ongoing violence. By the mid-1930s, public anxiety regarding Jiang's rule was not limited to North China. In Shanghai and other southern cities, there was a growing sense that even though the arrival of the Nationalist state had put an end to the internecine regional fighting, it had not brought about any conclusive end to social turbulence. Urban centers were still rife with political insecurity. Underworld gang activity in Shanghai and elsewhere permeated society and hardly served as a harbinger of stable rule. Furthermore, the perception that the central regime was directly at fault increasingly gained currency. Jiang Jieshi's collusion with notorious gang bosses and paramilitary groups like the Blue Shirts was fairly well established, as was his tacit complicity with those engaged in political violence.<sup>39</sup>

In this context, dramatic treatment of the warlord period may have served as a metaphor for the Nanjing decade. By extension, in an era of skepticism toward the Nationalist regime, theater advertisements' emphasis on authenticity may have been intended to promote the dramas as a somewhat more "genuine" settling of accounts than the Nationalist regime was offering at the time. Ads for *All About Sun Chuanfang*, for example, guaranteed that audiences would see a lifelike rendition of the full story behind the killing. The drama would start with the warlord struggles of the 1920s and end with the district-level trial, which in real life had reached a verdict only a few days before the run of the show had begun.<sup>40</sup> Within the safe confines of the theater, the ads suggested, viewers could vicariously experience warlord disorder and then leave with a sense of restored control over the present situation, something that remained elusive in real life. Scenes of violence were to be staged and contrived to be *just like* reality so that they could be contained on stage just *as if* real disorder was being contained.

While the connotations of the plays cannot be firmly established without full access to their content, these dramatic performances were certainly often identified as more reliable sources of justice than the legal opinions of the regime's newly established courts. The public trial of Shi held in theaters and on street corners produced a sympathetic verdict far quicker than the legal resolution pending in real courtrooms. The court scene in *All about an Avenging Daughter*, for example, authoritatively sanctioned Shi's revenge during an evening performance a few days after her actual trial had only just initiated a complicated legal process that was to last for another nine months. Not surprisingly, one editorialist

advocated the use of dramatic precedent to dictate the outcome of Shi's court trial, suggesting that extra-judicial forums like the theater were more effective than the real-life courthouse in providing proper justice (Lingxiaohangezu 1935b). Pointing out that the real-life trial had been stalled by petty judicial debates over Shi Jianqiao's surrender, this author argued that drama would provide more effective standards with which to try Shi. He cites as an example *Zhen'e ci hu* (Zhen'e kills a tiger), a drama set in the late Ming about Fei Zhen'e, an avenging heroine who, in the name of her emperor, assassinates Bandit Chuang, a traitor to China.<sup>41</sup> The writer reasoned that since Shi Jianqiao, like Zhen'e, had risked her life in the name of someone deserving, the judicial issue of surrender was moot, and widespread sympathy for the female assassin was reason enough for judicial exemption. Rather than listen to legal specialists pontificate endlessly, he concluded, one might do better by drawing moral lessons from the world of theater.

#### CONCLUSION

In a context where Nationalist courts were failing to persecute warlord traitors and ensure national security, the media celebration and public investment in Shi Jianqiao's killing of a militarist threatened to shed critical light on the ruling regime's failures. Celebrated in the media and entertainment worlds as a heroic *xia* undertaking, Shi's successful killing of a warlord was seen as an act of national redemption and as an expression of *xiayi*, or public justice. Traditionally, a classic *xia* hero appears in times of moral crisis and social chaos to bring about public order by both containing bandits (*fei*) and setting right inept officials (*guan*). Shi Jianqiao proved to be a modern *xia* hero who, like her traditional counterpart, appeared in a time of national crisis to bring about justice. She had successfully killed a reputed traitor and warlord, a modern day *fei*, and her success and popularity sharply contrasted with increasing public dissatisfaction with the Nationalist state, the modern inept *guan*. Whereas the regime's New Life campaign met with utter public apathy, Shi efficaciously embodied the virtues of a strong China as a modern *xianü*. While the central government appeared to be lacking in resolve and cowardly by accepting a policy of appeasement with regard to the Japanese, Shi's killing of a traitorous warlord suspected of collaboration was swift, determined, and heroic. If Jiang Jieshi's regime failed to deal with either the warlord past or admit to its complicity in urban violence in the present, Shi's revenge and ensuing trial successfully established a sense

of national redemption. Public appreciation for the *xia* heroine, arising from the *jianghu* arena of media sensation, only made the failures of Nanjing all the more evident.

The media culture of the Republican period hardly seems a likely forum for the rise of a critical urban public. While not-so-subtle forms of control by powerful military patrons, influential families, and political parties had existed before the 1930s, it was in the Nanjing decade that a centralizing, modern state systematically began to contain and censor the press, periodicals, and the film industry.<sup>42</sup> The Nationalist regime used censorship to consolidate its rule from the start and imposed a restrictive publishing law in 1930 (Hockx 1998, 5). With state-building efforts proving only partially successful for the regime and rightists of the party increasing their sway over culture, the Nationalist authorities increased the suppression of “reactionary” cultural productions in the following few years. In 1934, comprehensive censorship regulations for books and periodicals were drafted (Hockx 1998, 5). In 1935, despite vociferous protests by journalists, harsh new press laws were enacted.<sup>43</sup> State censorship even became violent during this period. On November 14, 1934, Jiang Jieshi arranged for the assassination of Shi Liangcai, the editor of the *Shenbao*, who had consistently and openly criticized the official policy of appeasement with regard to the Japanese.

Scholars have not always agreed on their assessment of the impact of such censorship laws. Frederick Wakeman, for example, portrays the regulations as part of the Nationalists’ attempt to squelch any semblance of an autonomous civil society (1995, 235–40). Michel Hockx (1998) directly challenges that assessment, suggesting that such views are colored by the successful campaign by the Chinese literary field in the 1930s to fight such Nationalist regulations, and that in reality such writers were quite successful in negotiating with censors a considerable degree of autonomy. Hockx concludes that literature in the 1930s was not significantly restricted by censorship and proved, in terms of literary output, quite lively. Hockx is, of course, speaking primarily about the censorship of literature, and there may indeed have been more restrictions on non-literary print media, especially in the case of political essays and commentary. Nonetheless, his caution against drawing a stark picture of extreme cultural repression under the Nationalist government is well taken. Despite an undeniable increase in attempts to censor cultural production, the focus here is less on illustrating repression as the inevitable result of such laws, and more on how censorship regulations reshaped the conditions under which political commentary could take place. While con-

strained, political commentary found alternative arenas for expression, including sensational media stories and forms of mass entertainment.

To be sure, the mass media of this period have conventionally been seen as regrettably sensational. Historians and literary scholars have long complained that Republican-era reporting and serialized fiction are too trivial or sensational to merit serious scholarly inquiry. These contemporary views are hardly unprecedented. Some of China's most influential critics of the Republican period disparaged the possibility of critical political debate during their day and despaired over the sensational nature of the mass media in particular. In 1936, Lin Yutang, for example, attributed China's lack of a critical public opinion to the overly commercial and sensational nature of the press. Citing Shanghai's *Shenbao* as an egregious example, Lin bemoaned that the market-oriented nature of newspapers resulted in an overwhelming presence of commercial advertisements, as well as a predominance of sensational news items like legal scandals and suicides (1968, chap. 11).

The result of such a view is that little thought has been given to how media sensation, didacticism, mass entertainment, and "trivial" news items might have played constitutive roles in shaping and politicizing a new urban public. What the study of the Shi Jianqiao affair suggests is that the very qualities of commercialism, sensation, and sentimentalism that Lin Yutang and others bemoan as evidence of political apathy were, in fact, prime conditions for the making of a critical public. It was precisely the sensationalism in Shi Jianqiao's case that enabled accounts of her affair to fly undetected under the radar of state censorship, and thus provide a forum for the public airing of pressing social and political issues. Not subjected to the kind of control exercised over conventional venues of "serious" journalism, serialized fiction based on the case allowed the reading public to explore radically new gender norms during a period when calls for constraints on female morality were increasingly strident among Nationalist ideologues. Dramas inspired by the killing were also not strictly policed. By celebrating Shi Jianqiao as the female knight-errant antihero and a superior bearer of national justice, theatrical productions could articulate alternative forms of public justice that lay outside the official court system.

It was thus precisely because the Republican era was characterized by aggressive state censorship and rampant media commercialism that its media and entertainment culture could serve as a *jianghu* space, where critical public explorations of otherwise taboo subjects could occur. Just as Shi Jianqiao manipulated the gendered *xia* identity to create space for

herself to act in public as a woman, the *xia* idiom can also help us think about how media adaptations of the Shi Jianqiao case became an alternative space in which to explore issues in an era of state censorship. Or, put slightly differently, the *xia* concept of virtuous transgression embodied by Shi Jianqiao as an individual *xianü* became enlarged through the media to create a public whose sympathies for the avenging daughter were themselves expressions of *xia* justice able to deliver critical commentary in an age of media control. Attributing a subversive yet righteous quality to popular sentiment was certainly not unprecedented in Chinese history. As early as the fourth century B.C.E., Mengzi (Mencius) wrote about the apocalyptic “moral will of the people” as the basis of the right to rebel against tyrants. A more recent precedent can be found in the late Qing, when popular sentiment that served as the basis of political action in the Boxer uprising was mediated through rumors and transmitted via broadsheets and cultural practices such as martial boxing.<sup>44</sup> In 1920s rural Shanxi, as well, oral reports crucially mediated popular sentiment against the government at a point when newspapers were becoming a pulpit for regional ruler Yan Xishan (Harrison 2000). What this 1930s case illuminates is how sensational media coverage and entertainment surrounding a news event could function in a similar manner to broadsheets and rumors in the creation of sentiment in an earlier rural context. Not merely a mouthpiece for the government or modernizing elites, the commercial media and entertainment in the High Republic provided the consuming public with a forum from which their concerns could be addressed and their expression deemed “righteous.”

In the end, however, public sympathy and its *xia* attributes were not welcomed by all. Precisely because of its rising influence, neither the state nor intellectuals were completely comfortable with the sensation-consuming, sympathetic public so evident in the Shi Jianqiao affair. While the state attempted to co-opt the new public with high-profile pardons, urban critics and left-leaning writers condemned both official attempts at co-optation and the role of mass media in generating irrational, feminized sentiments in the new mass audience.