

**Scandal and the New Woman:  
Identities and Media Culture in 1920s China**

**Qiliang He**

University of South Carolina Upstate

**Introduction**

In late 1928 and early 1929, a sensational elopement seized public attention in Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and many other Chinese cities. Huang Huiru (?-1929), a young woman from a wealthy family in Shanghai, eloped in August 1928 with her male family servant, Lu Genrong. They were soon caught in Suzhou, and Huang's family charged Lu with theft and seduction. The lawsuit lasted almost two years before Lu was released. During this time, newspapers covered the event in great detail. Novelists and publishers produced books regarding this case as soon as the Hang-Lu affair was reported.<sup>1</sup> Theaters kept pace with the development of the event and regularly updated their repertoires. Chinese filmmakers likewise used this love affair to make two feature films and one documentary in the late 1920s.<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, a researcher of Chinese popular culture asserts that the elopement outshone the famous wedding of Nationalist Party leader Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) and Mayling Soong (1897-

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, Wu Nonghua and Huang Huiru. *Huang Huiru Zishu*. Shanghai: Xinwen chubanshe, 1928; Lu Yiran and Yao Xiaoqiu, *Huang Huiru yu Lu Genrong*. Suzhou: Youshe, 1928; and Huang Huiru, *Huang Huiru qinbi riji* Shanghai: Xinwen shuju, 1929, to name but a few.

<sup>2</sup> The two feature films were *Huang Lu zhi ai* (January 1929) and *Xuelei huanghua* (September 1929, both by Mingxing dianying gongsi), and the documentary was *Lin Ruxin fangwen Huang Huiru ji* (Da Zhongguo yingpian gongsi, March 1929).

2003) in the media coverage.<sup>3</sup>

The enormous attention lavished on this story by the media provides us with a lens through which we can closely examine urban culture in Shanghai during the early Republican era (1911-1949). Around the 1920s, demand for newspapers, novels, theaters, and films in the city skyrocketed. The circulation numbers of two major Shanghai dailies (*Xinwen Bao* and *Shenbao*), for example, exceeded one hundred thousand in the early 1920s whereas the numbers had been lower than ten thousand at the turn of the twentieth century; the publishing and printing industry in Shanghai grew by twenty-fold between 1912 and 1932,<sup>4</sup> and three major publishers in Shanghai published two thirds of all Chinese books nationwide;<sup>5</sup> and a film industry sprouted to anticipate a “golden age” of the Chinese motion picture in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

An array of studies has been devoted to the Shanghai-based cultural industry. Scholars address how the urban media attempted to affect their audience by orchestrating campaigns to advance such values and concepts as national identity, reformism, feminism, and

---

<sup>3</sup> Wei Shaochang, *Xinwen luogu*. Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 1997, 313.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Reed, *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937*. Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2004., 132.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in 1927, the three largest Shanghai publishing houses (Commercial Press, Zhonghua Press and World Press) combined published 1,323 titles, while the titles published in all over China were only 2,035. See Wang Yunwu, “Shinian lai de Zhongguo chuban ye,” in Zhongguo Wenhua Jianshe Xiehui eds., *Shinian lai de Zhongguo*. Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1937, 463-80 (especially 466).

<sup>6</sup> Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004, 58-9.

modern experiences.<sup>7</sup> While scholars have convincingly shown how cultural and political elites took advantage of the newfangled cultural industry, the study of their audience is not equally productive.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, researches about women's new subjectivity in modern China tend to focus on discourses and experiences of writers, politicians, and social reformers.<sup>9</sup> Few studies have been conducted to investigate how otherwise silent women received and applied elite discourses of "new womanhood," core family, and social reforms to their real-life struggles.

---

<sup>7</sup> For example, Christopher Reed, *Gutenberg in Shanghai*; Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: 'Shibao' and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.; Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.; David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997; Denise Gimpel, *Lost Voices of Modernity: a Chinese Popular Fiction Magazine in Context* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Wen-hsin Yeh's article-length research into *Shenghuo zhoukan* (the *Life*), a popular Shanghai magazine in the late 1920s and early 1930s, is one of the few pieces that delve into the study of audiences and the interactions between producers and readers. In the case of Yeh's article, the readers were essentially "vocational youth" in Shanghai and other large cities in China. See Wen-hsin Yeh, "Progressive Journalism and Shanghai's Petty Urbanites," in *Shanghai Sojourners*. Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992; Frederic Wakeman, Jr., and Wen-hsin Yeh eds., 186-238. Perry Link also explores the audiences in his book of popular fiction in the early twentieth century China. See Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*; Susan Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915-1953*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003; Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?: Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872-1912*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2004, and Paul Bailey, "'Women Behaving Badly': Crime, Transgressive Behavior and Gender in Early Twentieth Century China," in *Nan Nü*, 8.1, 2006, 156-97.

This paper documents the coverage of the Huang/Lu elopement in an attempt to explore the urban media's role in enabling the audience to employ up-to-date theories regarding new gender roles and familial systems. Disseminated by the fully commercialized media, such theories not only managed to reach the marginalized social groups such as urban laborers (Lu) and women (Huang), but also helped them recognize their personal identities. The discussion of the Huang-Lu affair in the *Life* (*Shenghuo zhoukan*), for example, contributed to the journal's effort to link thousands of Chinese urbanites and create a new reading public.<sup>10</sup>

The value of this case resides in the dual roles of Huang Huiru and Lu Genrong both as both actors in a social drama and consumers of the coverage about them. The case thereby instantiated the interaction between the urban culture and its audience in Republican China. On the one hand, it was the press that defined and hailed Huang as a brave new woman before she realized her role as such. On the other hand, Huang Huiru's identity as a new woman could not be otherwise concretized and rendered meaningful without her performance in public.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars have begun to examine how discussions of sentiment and gender relations in the media drove the audience to a public realm and thus contributed to construct modern subjectivities

---

<sup>10</sup> Wen-hsin Yeh, "Progressive Journalism and Shanghai's Petty Urbanites," 207-8.

<sup>11</sup> In her discussion of gender identity, Judith Butler argues "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body." There is no such thing as an interior kernel that determines individuals' identities. On the contrary, individuals' performances including "acts and gestures" "create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core." *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990, 173.

and individualities.<sup>12</sup> drawing on this scholarship, this essay further shows that such a public realm, diversified by various genres of media and compounded by modern capitalist businesses,<sup>13</sup> became a much contested and polyphonous zone that accommodated both enlightenment intellectuals, conservative traditionalists, and revolutionaries. The audience's accessibility to this public realm did not necessarily translate into their full embrace of it. Conflicting opinions and representations at times confused and discouraged the readers and consumers. Huang Huiru as a consequence suffered mental collapse in a tug-of-war between writers who enshrined her as a brave new woman and critics who dismissed her as a shameless adulterer.

Huang's unsuccessful quest for her new womanhood and universal public sympathy was in stark contrast with Shi Jianqiao's (1905-1979) revenge and trials in the mid 1930s that Eugenia Lean has studied.<sup>14</sup> A comparison of the two cases allows for a re-examination of the limitation of public sympathy to influence the media and decision making during the Nanjing decade (1927-1937).

---

<sup>12</sup> A number of scholarly works have been devoted to the discussion of how the articulation of passions, sentiment, and desires helped create a new, if elite-dominated, public in the media. For example, Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006; Bryna Goodman, "The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic." (*The Journal of Asian Studies*, 64, 1 [February 2005], 67-101) and "Appealing to the Public: Newspaper Presentation and Adjudication of Emotion." (*Twentieth-Century China*, April 2006. 30-64); and Eugenia Lean, *Public Passion: the Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Public Sympathy in Republican China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Glosser has also shown that political, cultural, and entrepreneurial elites collectively made effort to promote the idea of core family. See Susan Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915-1953*.

<sup>14</sup> Lean, *Public Passion*.

---

### Performing New Woman

On 10 August 1928, *Suzhou Mingbao*, the most influential daily in Suzhou, made the earliest report on the elopement. According to the paper, Huang Huiru was twenty-two years old. Her deceased father had headed Beijing Telephone Bureau (*Beijing dianhua ju*) and had thereby accumulated considerable wealth. After her father's death, the whole family moved to Shanghai. Huang Huiru lived with her stubborn and conservative grandmother, affectionate mother, and eldest brother. Huang had received a high school education in Shanghai. In 1927, Huang was made a match for a nephew of the Bei family, the pigment magnate in Shanghai. When the wedding was approaching, Huang's grandmother suddenly voiced her opposition on the ground that Huang Huiru would not gain respect in an overly wealthy and influential family. The engagement ended abruptly in December 1927 or January 1928.<sup>15</sup>

The abortive marriage was a heavy blow for Huang who suffered great depression thereafter. She even attempted a suicide, and no one seemed to be able to appease her and bring her back to normality. The only exception was Lu Genrong, the male servant in the household. Lu came from Wuta, a distant village in the greater Suzhou area. After Huang got over her anguish and desperation, she began a love affair with Lu.<sup>16</sup>

The intimacy between Huang and Lu invited Huang's brother's suspicion, and Lu was dismissed on 28 July 1928. Before heading for his hometown, Lu reportedly bade farewell to Huang and demanded to terminate their relationship. Huang sobbed and insisted on eloping with Lu, but Lu pretended to reject this at first. Being assured that Huang was serious and adamant, Lu then advised Huang

---

<sup>15</sup> "Minmen guinü—bei epu jianguai lai Su," *Suzhou Mingbao* (hereafter SZMB), 10 August 1928.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

to bring money and belongings. On 7/29, the couple fled Huang's house and finally arrived in Suzhou. Unfortunately, they were soon arrested on 9 August 1929 as Huang's family had called police earlier in Shanghai.<sup>17</sup>

Judging from the very first report on 10 August 1928, *Suzhou Mingbao* was not a mere information provider. The reporters clearly expressed their love, pity, and hatred toward the actors of this social drama, Huang Huiru, her family, and Lu Genrong. Lu Genrong was labeled as an evil servant (*epu*) who seduced and kidnapped Huang Huiru out of his desire for sex and wealth. In a follow-up report on 11 August, Lu Genrong, who was called an "evil bondsman" (*enu*), looked like a vicious rascal at the first glance.<sup>18</sup> Huang Huiru was portrayed as a stereotype of higher class girl, well-educated, timid, innocent, but susceptible. The report of three days later seemed to confirm the stereotype as Huang agreed to return home with her elder brother.<sup>19</sup>

As the case dragged on, the stereotype that newsmen had used were rendered irrelevant. Huang Huiru proved herself a resolute and brave woman who took the initiative in deciding her own fate. On 14 August, Huang Huiru proclaimed her willingness to stay with Lu Genrong in jail.<sup>20</sup> Huang Huiru's antagonism with her family escalated six days later. Huang Huiru disappeared on 20 August and left a note stating that she had decided to break with the Huang family.<sup>21</sup> Soon after this rupture, Huang Huiru visited Lu Genrong in

---

<sup>17</sup> "Minmen guinü—bei epu jianguai lai Su," *Suzhou Mingbao* (hereafter SZMB), 10 August 1928.

<sup>18</sup> "Mingyuan bei epu jianguai (xu)," SZMB, 11 August 1928.

<sup>19</sup> "Huang Huiru yiyou age lingzhuan yi," SZMB, 14 August 1928.

<sup>20</sup> "Huang Huiru taoru kanshou suo," *Shibao* (hereafter SiB), 15 August 1928.

<sup>21</sup> "Huang Huiru tuoli muxiong—chuzou wuzong," SZMB, 21 August 1928.

prison reassuring Lu that she would marry him someday.<sup>22</sup> Huang Huiru's unwavering love for Lu Genrong finally won some newspapers' acclaim. *Shibao* (*The Eastern Times*), a Shanghai daily,<sup>23</sup> for example, openly lauded her "sincere love" on 8/22.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the whole process, Shanghai dailies tended to take a more tolerant and open-minded attitude than their counterparts in Suzhou. Huang Huiru's elder brother felt humiliated and outraged, and the Huang family was in despair.<sup>25</sup> The elder brother immediately issued a public announcement in *Suzhou Mingbao* declaring that the Huang family no longer took responsibility for Huang Huiru.<sup>26</sup> The Huang family therefore continued to sue Lu Genrong in Suzhou.

The case reached its first climax in the trial on 8/24 in the Wuxian Regional Court (*Wuxian difang fayuan*) in Suzhou. This very first trial touched upon a number of issues that would be repeated in future trials. First, why did Huang Huiru fall in love with Lu Genrong, a man of much lower social status? Huang Huiru testified that that she took the initiative to seduce Lu. Lu Genrong also admitted that it was Huang Huiru who first seduced him after her proposed marriage was aborted. Because of Lu's effort in pulling Huang out of despair,

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Founded in 1907, *Shibao* (*The Eastern Times*) was reputed as a reformist newspaper that outspokenly criticized the Qing government and promoted reformist and modernization agenda to its readers before 1911. (For more details about *Shibao* in the 1900s, see Joan Judge, *Print and politics*.) In the 1920s, *The Eastern Times* had become a newspaper focusing on social news.

<sup>24</sup> "Huang Huiru nüshi you shizong, liju tuoli jiating guanxi," SiB, 22 August 1928.

<sup>25</sup> "Huang Huiru tuoli muxiong—chuzou wuzong," SZMB, 21 August 1928.

<sup>26</sup> "Huang Chengcang qishi," SZMB, 22 August 1928.



Huang thought Lu to be a man of conscience. Therefore, Huang gave Lu a ring as a token of their love. The verb for both love and seduce that Lu Genrong uttered in court was *pin*, which connoted any extramarital and illegal sexual activities and love affairs.<sup>27</sup> The second issue concerned who took jewelry away from Huang's house when they fled from Shanghai. Both insisted that Huang Huiru personally took them on 29 July 1928.<sup>28</sup>

The verdict of 27 August disappointed and shocked Lu Genrong and Huang Huiru. Charges of seduction and theft stood, and Lu received a two-year sentence in jail. Lu swore to appeal within ten days.<sup>29</sup> Huang Huiru made a gesture to exhibit her unwavering love in public. On 3 September, she paid a visit to Lu in jail and reiterated their decision to appeal,<sup>30</sup> and in the month of September Huang visited Lu five times. *Suzhou Mingbao* detailed Huang's gifts such as clothing and foodstuff to Lu. For example, on 4 September 1928, *Suzhou Mingbao* entertained its readers with a list of winter clothing that Huang bought and personally presented to Lu during her visit.<sup>31</sup> This episode turned out to be the most touching one in dramatic plays about the elopement. Zhao Junyu (1894-1944), the actor playing Huang Huiru in Shanghai for example, composed "Melody of Winter Clothing" (*Hanyi qu*).<sup>32</sup> During his stage performances, many female audience members were in tears when

---

<sup>27</sup> "Huang Huiru an kaishen ji," SZMB, 25 August 1928.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> "Huang Huiru an panjue," SiB, 28 August 1928.

<sup>30</sup> "Huang Huiru bijing duoqing," SZMB, 4 September 1928.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> *Shanghai jingju zhi*. Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 1999, 186.

viewing Huang hand over a cotton padded jacket to her sweetheart.<sup>33</sup>

Huang not only exhibited her unchanging love for Lu to lookers-on in streets and attendants in the court of Suzhou, but also attempted to capture the attention of a larger public. In late August, she wrote a letter to the editor of *Shanghai Minguo Ribao* (*Shanghai Republican Daily*), an organ of the ruling Nationalist Party. As the paper had published a number of essays hailing Huang as a new woman and “a revolutionist in an old family (*jiu jiating zhong shixing geming zhe*),”<sup>34</sup> Huang understandably resorted to it for help. In the letter, she reiterated her willingness to make sacrifice of any sort and called for a thorough reform of the Chinese familial and marriage system.<sup>35</sup> The title of the essay that sang high praise of Huang was, to borrow Louis Althusser’s words, interpellative: “Ms. Huang Huiru is loyal to love, is adamant, is brave, and is revolutionary (*Huang Huiru nüshi shi qingzhuang de, shi jianzhi de, shi yonggan de, shi geming de*).”<sup>36</sup> In a sense, Huang could not have identified herself as a new woman who rejected traditional morality had this Shanghai daily not labeled her as such. As Althusser envisions that ideological interpellation resembles the police hailing, “Hey, you there,”<sup>37</sup> this Shanghai daily hailed Huang “Hey, you revolutionary new woman.”

The adamancy that Huang displayed or even showed off was in marked contrast to the way she had behaved one month before. It

---

<sup>33</sup> “Ji Shanghai wutai kaiyan Huang Huiru ju zhi shengkuang,” *Fuermosi*, 17 December 1928.

<sup>34</sup> “Huang Huiru nüshi,” *Shanghai Minguo Ribao* (hereafter SMRB), 29 August 1928.

<sup>35</sup> “Huang Huiru nüshi,” SMRB, 31 August 1928.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 174.

was later disclosed in a Shanghai magazine that when the couple was caught in Suzhou in early August 1928, Huang Huiru was willing to terminate her relationship with Lu and return to her former role as a daughter of Huang family as long as Lu Genrong was not in legal trouble.<sup>38</sup> Yet, only after Lu Genrong and Huang's brother conflicted with each other and the Huang family insisted on bringing criminal charges against Lu Genrong, did Huang decide to assume the role that the observers would see thereafter.<sup>39</sup>

Huang's role-playing as a "new woman," however, fell short of convincing the court. The couple appealed the case to the Higher Court of Suzhou (*Suzhou Gaodeng fayuan*). The trial on 10/22/1928 attracted a vast audience including news reporters and dramatists from Shanghai, Suzhou, and other places, and politicians such as Shao Lizi (1881-1967), member of the Central Committee of Nationalist Party.<sup>40</sup> The Star Motion Picture Production Company (*Mingxing dianying gongsi*) of Shanghai also had its staff attend the trial. Its owner Zhang Shichuan (1889-1954) and the screenplay writer Hong Shen (1894-1955) were present in the trial.<sup>41</sup> *Suzhou Mingbao's* reporter observed that the audience member numbered two hundred and never before did a trial gather such a crowd.<sup>42</sup> Meantime, Huang was for the first time discovered to be pregnant by the media.<sup>43</sup> Her pregnancy then was widely believed to be the motivation of Huang's

---

<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, "Women lianxi Huang Huiru nüshi (xia)," 37.

<sup>39</sup> Anonymous, "Women lianxi Huang Huiru nüshi (xia)," 37.

<sup>40</sup> "Lu Genrong an shangsu kaiting ji," SiB, 23 October 1928.

<sup>41</sup> Anonymous, "Women lianxi Huang Huiru nüshi," 25; Wei Shaochang; *Xinwen luogu*, 307.

<sup>42</sup> "Huang Huiru an pangting suji," SZMB, 23 October 1928.

<sup>43</sup> "Huang Huiru an pangting suji," SZMB, 23 October 1928.

final decision to elope with Lu. The verdict the Higher Court announced on 27 October, however, was a bolt from the blue to Huang and Lu. Lu was found guilty of both seduction and theft and was sentenced to four years (instead of two) in prison. Lu reportedly appeared extremely upset. Ducking his head, he remained motionless and was observed to be sweating profusely. *Suzhou Mingbao* learned that Huang Huiru wept and wailed out of disappointment and sorrow after returning home.<sup>44</sup>

### **Dissolution of Selfhood**

The debacle did not prevent Lu Genrong from appealing to the Supreme Court. Yet during the waiting period, Huang was facing some practical problems: her pregnancy and shortage of funds. As a result in November 1928, Huang, now about four months pregnant, had to stay in Lu's home in a remote village in southern Jiangsu, where she was overwhelmed by the hardship of rustic life. Huang later complained that such a place was out of the reach of Suzhou residents, let alone visitors from Shanghai.<sup>45</sup> Living in a remote village did not mean that Huang could escape the media's spotlight. In November and December 1928, Huang received at least two groups of newspapermen and filmmakers from Shanghai. The filmmakers interviewed Huang Huiru and would make a documentary to entertain Shanghai filmgoers in early 1929. The newspapermen were from *The Holmes (Fuermos)*. As one of the major tabloids in Shanghai, *The Holmes'* main selling point was to pry into celebrities' privacy and cover sensational or scandalous events.<sup>46</sup> It was thus no surprise that

---

<sup>44</sup> "Huang Huiru tong bu yu sheng," SZMB, 28 October 1928.

<sup>45</sup> Wu Nonghua and Huang Huiru, *Huang Huiru Zishu*.

<sup>46</sup> Liu Huogong, "Tan Shanghai de xiaoxing bao," In *Baoxue*, Vol. 1, No. 6, July 1954, 96. The tabloid was named after Sherlock Holmes, a fictional detective by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Editors of this tabloid thereby showed their commitment to find out hidden information of the society

its editor-in-chief paid a visit to Huang for an interview.

The interview produced a series of articles regarding the illicit affair in general and Huang's life in a rural area in particular in *The Holmes*. Huang Huiru, according to the essayist, told the visitors that her love affair with Lu Genrong stemmed not from love but was conducted on an impulse. She swore to remain unmarried after her baby was born.<sup>47</sup> In this manner, she invalidated all representations the media had endowed her with and the role she had previously played in public. Apparently, Huang had paid close attention to the coverage of the case whenever possible. She told her interviewers that she watched a spoken drama play about the elopement in Suzhou in November, which she felt preposterous and laughable. Huang was particularly dissatisfied with actors and actresses who came from the lower class and thus had no knowledge of upper-class life. They simply distorted facts, in Huang's opinion. For Huang Huiru, what was equally absurd was the emphasis on Huang's sincere love of Lu in all media coverage.<sup>48</sup>

If Huang's elopement with Lu and visits to him in jail were not indicators of her love, why was she staying in such an isolated village? Huang made it clear that it was because of the pricks of conscience. Lu was sentenced to four years in prison for no concrete reasons. Lu's family had contracted a heavy debt as a result of the expenses of the legal procedure. It was she who had cost Lu his freedom and caused the Lu family financial trouble. Therefore, she undertook the moral responsibility to stay with Lu's parents. After she gave birth, Huang planned, she would go back to Shanghai and return to school.<sup>49</sup>

---

like a detective.

<sup>47</sup> Hubo, "Huang Huiru fangwen ji." *Fuermosi*, 26 November 1928.

<sup>48</sup> Hubo, "Huang Huiru fangwen ji." *Fuermosi*, 26 November 1928.

<sup>49</sup> Hubo, "Huang Huiru fangwen ji." *Fuermosi*, 29 November 1928.

*The Holmes'* interview with Huang generated another product, *Huang Huiru Tells Her Own Story* (*Huang Huiru zishu*, published in December 1928), whose title had been personally handwritten by Huang Huiru at the request of *The Holmes'* editors. The editor-in-chief of the tabloid edited the whole book. *Huang Huiru Tells Her Own Story* could be read as an expanded version of the two essays. In the book, Huang told the readers that her curiosity about the relationship between the sexes was aroused after she read novels as a little girl.<sup>50</sup> Yet, she essentially denied that her passion toward Lu was the pure love (*aiqing*) that some writers and audiences had been keen to label it. Meanwhile, Huang was remorseful that her passion had eventually trapped her in such a remote village and had led to Lu's loss of freedom.<sup>51</sup> Here, Huang Huiru did not expect her reunion with Lu even if Lu would be released in the near future.<sup>52</sup> It was clear that her wish to save her sweetheart and challenge the existing moral codes and legal system that she once represented had evaporated.

The unfavorable rural environment made Huang reconsider her option regarding the location of childbirth. At last, she moved into the Zhihua Hospital of Suzhou on 1/6/1929. She had no intention to return to Lu's home village after her childbirth, and not to see Lu Genrong any more even though both of them were in Suzhou at this point.<sup>53</sup> In a conversation with *Suzhou Mingbao's* interviewers, she frankly stated that she had suffered so much that she no longer owed Lu Genrong anything and that the elopement and Lu's eventual imprisonment were due to Lu's seduction at the

---

<sup>50</sup> Wu Nonghua and Huang Huiru, *Huang Huiru zishu*, 3-4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 38

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> "Huang Huiru laicheng daichan," SZMB, 7 January 1929.

outset, something she had squarely denied in prior trials.<sup>54</sup> Huang's inconsistent attitudes offended some readers across the country who might have imagined the love as lofty and unchanging. *Suzhou Mingbao* reporters discovered that dozens of letters had been sent to Huang to blame Huang's licentiousness or "betrayal" of Lu within one week after Huang's move into the Zhihua Hospital.<sup>55</sup> Since almost no letters were signed, Huang was unable to reply. Yet Huang was greatly disturbed by ridicule from unidentified people<sup>56</sup> and felt unsettled and helpless facing mounting criticisms, bashings, and insults.<sup>57</sup>

Besides bashers, there were also goodwill observers of the case who made benign suggestions or showed sympathy with Huang. One high school student in Suzhou mailed Huang three copies of *Life*, a magazine which had published a series of articles commenting on this case. The student wrote to express her understanding of, sympathy with, and admiration of Huang Huiru and hoped to alleviate Huang's bitterness with her letter and *Life's* positive comments on Huang.<sup>58</sup> As Huang was hesitant about whether she would raise her baby, some proposed adopting the child.<sup>59</sup> A certain Mr. Zhou from southern Jiangsu expressed his desire to marry Huang Huiru since his wife had died recently. Mr. Zhou fabricated a name with the surname of Huang shown on the envelope in order to avoid censorship of the hospital.<sup>60</sup> It was clear that the hospital had

---

<sup>54</sup> "Huang Huiru laicheng daichan san," SZMB, 9 January 1929.

<sup>55</sup> "Huang Huiru laicheng daichan si," SZMB, 13 January 1929.

<sup>56</sup> "Huang Huiru laicheng daichan si," SZMB, 13 January 1929.

<sup>57</sup> "Huang Huiru laicheng daichan wu," SZMB, 14 January 1929.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> "Huang Huiru daichanqi zhong," SZMB, 14 January 1929.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

begun to screen out irrelevant letters that might harass Huang Huiru, and Mr. Zhou accordingly intended to disguise the letter as one originating from Huang's family in Shanghai.

While Huang Huiru could ignore offers of various types, she seriously took one job opportunity into consideration. The Shanghai Film Company (*Shanghai yingxi gongsi*, established in 1921) extended an invitation to hire Huang Huiru as an actress after she gave birth to her child. One tabloid reported that when Huang Huiru was staying in hospital in Suzhou, it happened that a sister-in-law of Yin Mingzhu (1904-1989), wife of the founder and owner of the Shanghai Film Company, was also about to give birth in the same hospital. Therefore, both sides clinched a contract of employment. In order to confirm the agreements, the film company sent its staff member, Zheng Yimei (1895-1992), to visit Huang Huiru from time to time before March 1929.<sup>61</sup> With a hefty monthly salary of 150  *yuan* (around sixty dollars),<sup>62</sup> Huang was planning on raising her child by herself since she had severed her relationship with her family.<sup>63</sup> Despite her practical needs for financial means to feed her baby in the coming future, Huang proclaimed that she selected her vocation purely for the sake of art, not money.<sup>64</sup> The Shanghai Film Company confirmed that Huang Huiru would engage in the making of "films of artistry" (*fuyou yishu zhi yingpian*).<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Xiaomao, "Huang Huiru dao Hu yangzi shuo," JB, 15 January 1929

<sup>62</sup> "Huang Huiru suimu guijia," SZMB, 3/20/1929. Between 1927 and 1929, one  *yuan* was equivalent to 0.38-0.45 US dollar. See Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema*, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Yaochang, "Huang Huiru daichan ji," *Xinwen Bao* (hereafter XWB), 19 January 1929.

<sup>64</sup> "Huang Huiru qishi," XWB, 4 February 1929.

<sup>65</sup> "Shanghai yingxi gongsi qishi," XWB, 4 February 1929.



From the remote village to the hospital in Suzhou, Huang Huiru's adamancy in defending Lu Genrong and assuming the role of a new woman seemed to have gradually fallen apart after she experienced the cruel reality in Lu Genrong's rural hometown and faced scathing criticisms in the media<sup>66</sup> or from anonymous letter writers. Besides the conservative press that continued to relegate the affair to the status of a story about adultery, writers who showed sympathy with Huang Huiru were reluctant to voice their approval of the affair. For example, Zou Taofen (1895-1944), the editor of the *Life* which Huang had read in hospital, believed that the affair was about anything but love and Huang had committed mistakes at the outset.<sup>67</sup> *Shanghai Republican Daily's* editor, Yao Sufeng (1906-1974), Huang's earliest supporter as he had published Huang's letter on the paper, voiced his doubt as to Huang's qualification to be a romantic love in a series of articles.<sup>68</sup> She could no longer assure herself that what she was doing was meaningful and worthwhile. It was perhaps the lack of a consistent and justifiable big picture of herself and her lives, including her past (love affair with Lu) and future, that led to a crisis of identity and drove her to the brink of mental collapse. *Suzhou Mingbao* reported in mid January 1929 that Huang was weeping or laughing in dreams and was often awakened by nightmares when she stayed in hospital.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> For example, *Suzhou Mingbao* persistently called Huang woman of "abandoning herself to vice and sully fellow women (*zigan duoluo renga, zhanru nvjie tongbao*)." "Huang Huiru an pangting suji," SZMB, 23 October 1928.

<sup>67</sup> Taofen, "Yihou shuiqu Huang nüshi de bianshi hero," *Shenghuo*, 5, 5, 16 December 1928, 41.

<sup>68</sup> For example, Gengkui, "Cong Lu Genrong ziji kouzhong piping Huang Lu shijian," SMRB, 3 November 1928.

<sup>69</sup> "Huang Huiru laicheng daichan wu," SZMB, 14 January 1929.

### Birth and Death

In early March 1929, reporters of Suzhou, Shanghai, and many other places held their breath to anticipate the birth of a new life. On 7 March 1929, *Suzhou Mingbo* took the lead to report the birth of Huang Huiru's and Lu Genrong's son on the morning of that day.<sup>70</sup> Apparently, *Suzhou Mingbao* had left blank space awaiting the news. The birth of Huang's son made an immense splash. Every piece of information about Huang's and her son's stay in the hospital was placed under media spotlight for their readers' scrutiny. Both *Suzhou Mingbao* and *The Eastern Times* detailed Huang Huiru's body temperature, pulse, and food after delivery, and her son's weight and appearance. Both newspapers also supplied their readers with "Eight Characters" (*bazi*, a way of fortunetelling) of Huang Huiru's son to predict his entire life.<sup>71</sup> The explications of "Eight Characters" were almost opposite to each other. *Suzhou Mingbao's* version foretold that the son would thrive as a military man<sup>72</sup> while *The Eastern Times's* held that the child would languish obscurely in his future life.<sup>73</sup> More fortunetellers participated in predicting Huang's son's fate. *Suzhou Mingbao* published two extra editions of the baby's fate on 11 March<sup>74</sup> and 12 March.<sup>75</sup> Shanghai fortunetellers were outspoken and frank without concealing their intentions of profiting from the case. For

---

<sup>70</sup> "Huang Huiru jinchen linpen," SZMB, 7 March 1929.

<sup>71</sup> "Huang Huiru yiyuan chanzi," SZMB, 8 March 1929; "Huang Huiru Lu Genrong jiejingping chushi," SiB, 8 March 1929.

<sup>72</sup> "Huang Huiru yiyuan chanzi," SZMB, 8 March 1929.

<sup>73</sup> "Huang Huiru Lu Genrong jiejingping chushi," SiB, 8 March 1929.

<sup>74</sup> "Huang Huiru zi zhi gutou," SZMB, 11 March 1929.

<sup>75</sup> "Huang Lu jiejing zhi zaohua," SZMB, 12 March 1929.

example, Turtle Fisher (*Diao'ao ke*), who had visited Huang earlier in 1929, advertised in *Xinwen Bao*, listed prices of his fortunetelling following his comments on the fate of Huang's son, whom he believed would either fall into poverty or die prematurely.<sup>76</sup>

In the midst of boisterous media hype, Huang Huiru's mother quietly came from Shanghai and paid her a visit. After she conversed with her mother in mid March, Huang immediately abandoned her dream of raising the child independently and working in the film company. On 19 March 1929, Huang and her mother suddenly and secretly headed for Shanghai with her baby left behind in hospital. When reporting their departure, *Suzhou Mingbao* was concerned about possible legal issues in the event that Huang Huiru would fail to fulfill her responsibility bonded by the contract with the film company.<sup>77</sup>

What was more dramatic and newsworthy than any legal trouble was death. Huang Huiru died suddenly immediately after she returned to Shanghai. On 21 March 1929, *Suzhou Mingbao*, *The Eastern Times*, *Xinwen Bao*,<sup>78</sup> and many other newspapers simultaneously reported her unanticipated death. *Suzhou Mingbao* deemed the news about Huang's death as an event of great import by juxtaposing it on the front page with the news about civil warfare between Chiang Kai-shek and Feng Yuxiang (1882-1948).<sup>79</sup> According to *The Eastern Times'* report, after Huang and her mother left Suzhou on 19 March they chartered a boat and sailed back to Shanghai. On the evening of 19 March, the boat arrived at the Soochow Creek (Suzhou he) where

---

<sup>76</sup> "Huang Huiru xinshengzi zhi ming," XWB, 9 March 1929.

<sup>77</sup> "Huang Huiru suimu guijia," SZMB, 20 March 1929.

<sup>78</sup> *Xinwen Bao* was founded in 1893 and became the most financially successful newspaper in Shanghai by the 1920s. Its circulation number reached 150,000 in the mid 1920s and was the largest newspaper in China.

<sup>79</sup> "Huang Huiru zaihu shishi," SZMB, 21 March 1929.

Huang bled from the lower part of her body, and she spat blood too. By the time the boat was approaching Shanghai territory, Huang had lost consciousness. At 7:00 PM, they arrived at their house in Shanghai, but Huang was near death. After one night of struggle, Huang Huiru, the heroine of the social drama, bade her final farewell to this world. Her eldest brother was seen to rush to purchase a coffin and other items for a funeral early in the morning of 3/20.<sup>80</sup>

Huang's unexpected death raised journalists' eyebrows. Progressive writers, such as Yao Sufeng of *Shanghai Republican Daily* called attention to the hidden crime of "vicious force in a patriarchal society" behind Huang's decease.<sup>81</sup> Conservative editorialists in Shanghai tabloids celebrated her death by asking why Huang had not died any earlier as a punishment for her sexual promiscuity and unfilialness.<sup>82</sup> It was evident that the media continued to be a contested zone where contending opinions collided with one another over the Huang-Lu affair despite or because of Huang's death.

### Commercial Extravaganza

Huang Huiru's death prompted Shanghai's urban culture and business to redouble their efforts to capitalize on the case and garner profits. Dramatists, for example, capitalized on Huang's death and released new plays as quickly as possible. A spoken drama troupe had its play of Huang's death, *Huang Huiru's Metrorrhagia after Childbirth* (*Huang Huiru chanhou xuebeng* 黃慧如產後血崩), advertised as early as on 3/22, the second day after *The Eastern Times'* report of Huang's sudden death.<sup>83</sup> Several days following Huang's death, the

---

<sup>80</sup> "Huang Huiru turan xinsui ersi," SiB, 21 March 1929.

<sup>81</sup> Sufen, "Huang Huiru zhisi buwu keyi," SMRB, 22 March 1929.

<sup>82</sup> Jigong, "Hubu susi," *Jingangzuan*, 27 March 1929.

<sup>83</sup> "Advertisement," XWB, 22 March 1929.

fortuneteller Turtle Fisher advertised in *Xinwen Bao* once again stating that the accuracy of his fortunetelling would not have been authenticated had Huang not died. He reminded readers of his predictions that Huang's son would either be poor or die prematurely. In this sense, he added, the mother's and the child's fates conflicted with each other, and that was why Huang Huiru died.<sup>84</sup> A photograph studio in Chinese city of Shanghai declared on the first page of *Xinwen Bao* that its promotion in that month included a price drop and a free photo of Huang Huiru in the Suzhou hospital that the studio owner had personally taken months earlier.<sup>85</sup> One medicine dealer advertised his sympathy with Huang Huiru's physical and mental sufferings, something he assumed to be universal among Chinese women. The dealer continued that only his Manna Essence (*Ganlu jing*) could relieve women of pain.<sup>86</sup> The commodity had nothing to do with Huang Huiru by any reckoning. Yet the dealer used the sensationalism of the death and titled the advertisement "Huang Huiru's Recent Situation" (*Huang Huiru zhi jinkuang*).

The highest stake that businessmen played was the "Huang Huiru Brand" cigarettes, which was introduced to market in May 1929. Shanghai Chinese Merchants' Tobacco Company Limited (*Shanghai zhongshang yancao youxian gongsi*), a little known company, splashed cash to fill the first page of *Xinwen Bao* with the advertisement of their new cigarette, the "Huang Huiru Brand," on 5/19/1929. As the advertisers suggested, all packs or tins of cigarettes would contain photos (thirty-six in total and with captions on their back) of Huang's love affair.<sup>87</sup> On 6/1, the tobacco company

---

<sup>84</sup> "Advertisement," XWB, 25 March 1929.

<sup>85</sup> "Fengsong Huang Huiru xiaozhao," XWB, 5 April 1929.

<sup>86</sup> "Huang Huiru zhi jinkuang," XWB, 30 May 1929.

<sup>87</sup> "Qingxi Huang Huiru xiangyan," XWB, 19 May 1929.

purchased the whole first page of *Xinwen Bao* again to promote the “Huang Huiru Brand” cigarettes. Based on the advertisement, it seemed that the company had made a strong push to sell the cigarettes nationwide.

### **One Man’s Fight, One Man’s Autobiography**

Enormous noises had been made in Shanghai as well in many other places since Huang Huiru’s death. In the jail of Suzhou by contrast, Lu Genrong elected to keep silent. Lu’s fight for freedom was always the central theme of his life during this period. Without Huang Huiru’s defense, he had to handle the legal procedure alone. In late May 1929, the Higher Court of Jiangsu Province summoned Huang Huiru and her mother to testify in court on 6 June 1929 in spite of Huang family’s insistence on Huang’s death.<sup>88</sup> The trial resulted in total chaos. Thousands of people strove to squeeze into the courtroom in order to witness Lu Genrong and the trial. Two hundred made it. The audience made such a noise that the judge could hardly hear the testimony. Some audience members were so eager to stand closer to the testifiers and the defendants that they damaged several chairs. Facing uncontrollable disorder, the judge decided to postpone the trial.<sup>89</sup> Under such confusing circumstances, *Suzhou Mingbao*’s staff still had a chance to observe Lu Genrong closely. Lu was reported to carry Huang’s pictures and several letters sent by her in his wallet. *Suzhou Mingbao* concluded that Lu’s love of Huang was profound. Moreover, on his way to the courtroom from the jail, Lu Genrong was seen to be smoking a “Huang Huiru Brand” cigarette.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> “Gaodeng fayuan chu chuanpiao zaishen Lu Genrong,” SiB, 29 May 1929.

<sup>89</sup> “Gengshen Lu Genrong,” SiB, 6/7/1929; “Huang Lu an zuori gengshen weiguo,” SZMB, 7 June 1929.

<sup>90</sup> “Huang Lu an zuori gengshen weiguo,” SZMB, 7 June 1929.

The trial was put off to the next day, June 7 1929, when the audience was admitted only with special permits. Though the courtroom was fully packed again, it was in far better order.<sup>91</sup> The trial resumed on 6/22. No new information or evidence appeared. Lu's lawyer reiterated his points that the charge of seduction was pointless given that both parties were adults and that Lu did not commit theft, based on Huang Huiru's previous testimony. Therefore, the lawyer pleaded not guilty on Lu's behalf.<sup>92</sup> What was new to the judge, the audience, and newspaper readers was Lu Genrong's conclusive statement. Lu remarked, "I would be willing to buy a coffin to bury Miss [Huang] if she was dead; [if not,] I would try my best to feed Miss [Huang] even if I went begging."<sup>93</sup> That was Lu's sentimental public declaration of his love of Huang and his aspiration to live in a core family with Huang.

From the first trial in the court of Suzhou to the latest one, Lu Genrong gradually managed to develop a complete story about himself and his love affair with Huang Huiru. As readers of newspapers would remember, in the first trial of August 1928 Lu was short of proper diction to illustrate his relationship with Huang. The only word he used was *pin*, which, as I have shown, broadly indicates all types of unlawful and immoral sexual relationship. *Pin* defined Lu Genrong's very first edition of his personal story about the past and the ongoing love affair.

As late as in the trial at the Higher Court of Jiangsu in late 1928, Lu still fell short of conjuring up an identity as a champion of free love as had been expected by the media. When Zhang Shichuan, founder of The Star Motion Picture, interviewed him by asking why

---

<sup>91</sup> "Huang Lu an gengshen pangting ji," SZMB, 8 June 1929; "Zuochen jixu tishen Lu Genrong," SiB, 8 June 1929.

<sup>92</sup> "Huang Lu an gengshen pangting ji," SZMB, 23 June 1929.

<sup>93</sup> "Lu Genrong zhi liangxin hua," SiB, 23 June 1929.

he and Huang fell in love with each other, Lu Genrong frankly responded that Huang would never get married to a man of higher class as her proposed marriage with the Bei family failed. Therefore, Lu Genrong concluded that Huang had no choice but to commit adultery with him. When asked if he had confidence in Huang's unchanging love of him, Lu Genrong once again honestly expressed his skepticism.<sup>94</sup> To make matters worse, Lu Genrong showed no appreciation or respect of Huang Huiru. According to the interrogation recorded by *Shanghai Republican Daily*, Lu portrayed Huang as a lazy young woman, a good for nothing.<sup>95</sup> His remarks disappointed and even offended Zhang Shichuan, editors of the *Life in Shanghai*, and many other observers who were following the case.<sup>96</sup> Again at this point, Lu did not meet the expectation as an unwavering Romeo who upheld the lofty ideal of classless love. It was no wonder that denunciations of Lu Genrong were raging in the media.

However, Lu Genrong was not a slow learner. In the time as he was imprisoned, he learned to write and, more importantly, he equipped himself with a new vocabulary and new theories that would help him re-describe and redefine his relationship with Huang. As a Shanghai tabloid reported, Lu had grasped a large amount of “new terms” (*xin mingci*) in jail.<sup>97</sup> In the two trials of June 1929, Lu gave a new expression of his relationship with Huang and he played it out under the gaze of thousands of producers and audiences of the

---

<sup>94</sup> Annoymous, “Women lianxi Huang Huiru nüshi,” 25.

<sup>95</sup> Gengkui, “Cong Lu Genrong ziji kouzhong—piping Huang Lu shijian,” SMRB, 3 November 1928.

<sup>96</sup> Wei Shaochang, *Xiven luogu*, 308; Annoymous, “Women lianxi Huang Huiru nüshi,” 25.

<sup>97</sup> “Lu Genrong,” *Jinggangzuan*, 27 April 1931.



media. His very act of keeping Huang's photo and letters in his wallet, smoking "Huang Huiru Brand" cigarettes and making his final statement convinced *Suzhou Mingbao's* reporters of his steadfast and profound love of Huang. In this fashion, Lu first of all made a sentimental public declaration of his love in a chapter of his "autobiography."<sup>98</sup> His intention to live in a core family<sup>99</sup> with Huang (had she still been alive) constituted another portion of the "autobiography," namely, the future of himself, Huang Huiru, and their baby. As such, Lu Genrong found his position in the past, present, and future and thus completed the story of himself and the affair. He thereby acquired and performed an identity as a responsible husband and a dauntless challenger of traditional family and marriage.

Unfortunately, Lu Genrong's sentimentalism and his performance did not move the jury or the judge. Lu was found guilty of theft and sentenced to two years in prison once again on 6/27/1929.<sup>100</sup> Lu Genrong decided to challenge the verdict and to appeal again.<sup>101</sup> His decision was encouraged by letters from

---

<sup>98</sup> I borrow the idea of (auto)biography in my discussion of personal identities from Anthony Giddens. "[a] person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively and, . . . , communicate to other people." Such biographies enable individuals to "keep a particular narrative going." The biographical narrative gives one a sense of what one is because it informs what one has become and where one is going. See Anthony Giddens, *Moderntiy and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991, 54.

<sup>99</sup> As Susan Glosser argues, Chinese New Culture radicals proposed core family (*xiao jiating*) as a vital part of social reform in the early twentieth century China. (See Susan Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915-1953*.) Lu's aspiration for a core family exemplified non-elites' subscription to such an idea.

<sup>100</sup> "Lu Genrong liangnian tuxing," SiB, 28 June 1929.

<sup>101</sup> "Lu Genrong bufu panjue," SZMB, 6/29/1929.

interested readers. One letter cited a popular song of the day, “Young men [are like] fresh sun rising from the mountain; Young women [are like] lotuses just blossoming” to portray the vigorous love between Huang and Lu. Moved by Lu’s final statement about his attachment to Huang, the writers presumed that Lu Genrong represented the new generation who pursued pure and classless love. Yet the vicious world suffocated such a true love. Therefore the writers encouraged Lu to appeal and fight to the end.<sup>102</sup> Lu’s sentimental declaration surely managed to evoke some public sympathy.<sup>103</sup>

The appeal proved to be time consuming. One year later when all public enthusiasm had faded away, the Higher Court of Jiangsu Provinces made the final verdict of non-guilty and Lu Genrong was released in early July 1930.<sup>104</sup> Even though he was ultimately found innocent, the two-year long legal procedure wore Lu Genrong out and exhausted his wealth. After release, Lu was found to have learned to write and to behave more suavely.<sup>105</sup> At any rate, he was no longer under the spotlight of the urban culture, nor was he the major concern of cultural producers and their audience at this point.

### Conclusion

The Huang-Lu affair stood out among similar sensational news in a time when scandals about women roiled the press in the twentieth

---

<sup>102</sup> “Lu Genrong de tongzhi! Quan Lu Genrong jinxing shangsu,” SZMB, 1 July 1929.

<sup>103</sup> My study of the illicit affair thereby reinforces what Eugenia Lean has explored: the role of public sympathy in law and state-building in the Nanjing decade (1927-1937). See Eugenia Lean, *Politics of Passion*.

<sup>104</sup> “Lu Genrong xuangao wuzui,” *Shenbao*, 1 July 1930.

<sup>105</sup> “Lu Genrong,” *Jingangzuan*, 27 April 1931.

and thirtieth. The value of the Huang-Lu affair lay in its malleability: it provided writers of differing political and ideological standings with a locus to interpretively and prescriptively cover the case. For New Culturalists, the unfulfilled and unrecognized love between Huang and Lu exemplified how China's patriarchal society and old institutions such as family and marriage strangled their true love. For conservatives, Lu's punishment by legal institutions and Huang's eventual loneliness and death evidenced unredeemable sins of unrestrained desires. Romantic love, which was once enshrined by enlightenment writers during the New Culture Movement, was in danger of being suspected and dismissed as a result of controversies in the media in this case. It is thus imperative to situate the discussion of the media coverage of the Huang-Lu elopement in the historical moment of the late twentieth and early thirtieth when romantic love's glamour in the May Fourth Movement waned and criticisms from various social groups delegitimized romantic love's role as the remedy to Chinese society as Haiyan Lee has argued.<sup>106</sup>

To assure herself and save Lu, Huang tried, but not entirely successfully, to play out her love of Lu and thereby to enlist support from the media. Here, we can compare the efforts made by Huang and Shi Jianqiao to evoke public sympathy. Shi Jianqiao managed to paint herself as a female knight-errant who avenged her father's death to uphold the state sponsored idea of filial piety. By contrast, Huang's role-playing as a new woman who defected from an oppressive feudal family failed to convince each and every observer of the case. Debates regarding whether the couple was qualified to be practitioners of new love and marriage were current even among those who sympathized with them, not to speak of the conservatives who had ascribed the elopement to Huang's insuppressible sexual desire and Lu's aspiration for wealth. Huang's failure in comparison with Shi Jianqiao was predestined as her weaponry to battle her

---

<sup>106</sup> Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: a Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, 118-9.

family and legal institutions, romantic love, had begun to be doubted in this period. Haiyan Lee has posited that, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, conservatism that blended “a popularized version of May Fourth liberalism with older and still cherished Confucian values” to questioned free love was gaining currency.<sup>107</sup> The Huang-Lu affair’s subversion of the long-standing class distinctions and gender relations was at odds with rising conservatism in the late 1920s. It was thus no wonder that Huang’s pursuit of new womanhood not only elicited little public sympathy but also invited opposition and resistance in the media. Such an uproar of controversies ultimately undermined Huang’s endeavor to build her own identity as a revolutionary new woman.

More significantly, while Shi Jianqiao’s assassination fit well the state’s agenda in the New Life Movement to preach family values and filial piety, the elopement was not tolerated by political authorities. Apart from judges in Suzhou who consistently determined to punish Lu Genrong, various governments in Jiangsu Province ruled to ban any theatrical performances about the affair on the grounds that these plays would be detrimental to public morals.<sup>108</sup> Hence, a comparison between Shi Jianqiao’s revenge and the Huang-Lu affair reveals the limitation of public sympathy to manipulate the media and affect legal proceedings during the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937): it took effect only when it was framed within socially and culturally acceptable and state-sanctioned behavioral and moral codes.

---

<sup>107</sup> Lee, *Revolution of the Heart*, 140-1.

<sup>108</sup> “Xiju? ‘Huang Huiru yu Lu Genrong,’” SMRB, 1/16/1929; “Wuxian zhengfu jinchang ‘Huang Lu’ xiju,” SZMB, 23 January 1929; “Gongyuan zhong zhi Huang Huiru wenti,” SZMB, 4 March 1929.