Review of Goodman, B. (2021) The suicide of Miss Xi: democracy and disenchantment in the Chinese Republic

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Bryna Goodman. *The Suicide of Miss Xi: Democracy and Disenchantment in the Chinese Republic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 352 pp. US$39.95/£31.95/€36.00. ISBN 9780674248823

As its title indicates, this book is about the suicide of Xi Shangzhen 席上珍 (1898-1922), a twenty-four year old clerk working for the newspaper *Shangbao* 商報 (Journal of commerce). On 8 September 1922, Xi killed herself in the newspaper office. Two years later, the Chinese criminal court implicated her employer Tang Jiezhi 湯節之 (Fred C. Tong; dates unknown) in her death: it found Tang guilty of financially defrauding Xi, which led to her impoverishment and ultimately her suicide. In the mid-1920s, the circumstances of Xi's suicide, her motivations, her financial activities, her relationship with Tang, and the trial proceedings consumed the reading public of Shanghai. But in the late 1920s, this incident disappeared from public view and was later omitted from written histories. This forgotten event, which Bryna Goodman recovered from extensive archival research, provides a prism through which to understand urban society in Republican China during the late 1910s and early 1920s. Urban society in this period, as Goodman's book tells us, underwent rapid transformations in politics, economics, and gender relations. These social transformations, as hinted in the subtitle, were double-edged: they created new spaces for fostering egalitarian relationships, but they also tested the limits of these equal relationships. Each chapter focuses on a new space – the newspaper and public associations, the workplace, the stock exchange, and the courtroom – to elucidate these social transformations.

The first chapter locates the event in the wake of the 1911 Revolution, which delivered an autocratic regime instead of popular representation. Yet, Goodman argues that "in the aftermath of World War I, ideas and practices of democracy emerged in print media and in public associations that went so far as to suggest the notion that – in the absence of a supportive state – popular sovereignty might be achieved outside a state" (p. 28). Tang's biography illustrates Goodman's point. Tang mobilized fellow businessmen to support May Fourth protests. He was also active in reforming civic associations to be more inclusive in their membership and governance. Tang deployed his democratic ideals and associational networks to establish *Shangbao*; he saw it grow to become the third largest commercial newspaper in Shanghai's competitive publication industry. But there is a gendered dimension to this new public. Goodman subtly exposes this gendered facet through a juxtaposition of the primary sources Tang and Xi generated, and the experiences revealed in these sources. While public records provide plentiful details of this episode in Tang's life, Goodman found details of this event in Xi's life in her private writings. Her

short stories written in this period dealt with nationalism and romantic love, largely from the perspective of the individual. Goodman's careful analysis of these stories affirms the rich inner life of a young, educated woman in this period, despite her not having a voice in the new public.

The second chapter discusses the unequal gender dynamics of this period through an exploration of the sexual politics of the workplace. As an educated and economically independent woman, Xi embodied the New Woman that May Fourth feminists idealized. But her wages were not enough to support her family or to keep her from poverty. Her financial difficulties led her to entrust Tang with her savings and borrow money to purchase stocks, which lost their value in the unstable market. When Tang allegedly offered Xi to take her as his concubine in exchange for paying off her debts, members of Xi's family and contemporary commentators seized on this as evidence of an illicit workplace affair. Goodman situates this charged claim in an urban society where capitalism had transformed sexual relations beyond the anticipation of May Fourth feminists. The paradox of this period lay in the proliferation of images of the New Woman and the persistence of concubinage. The concubine was the counter of the New Woman: she relied on meeting the emotional and sexual needs of a man in exchange for financial security, but she received no monetary compensation as a prostitute would, and her relationship with him would not have the legal recognition of the man's wife. Driving this paradox, Goodman argues, were the forces of capitalism that enriched more men than ever before but denied adequate economic security for working women.

The third chapter is about the culture of financial speculation which blossomed in Shanghai at this time. At the heart of Xi's despair over her financial state was her purchase of stocks from Tang that became worthless when the market bottomed out. The sale of stocks was not new in 1920s Shanghai; the first stock exchange opened in 1904, though informal buying and selling of stocks occurred well before then. What was novel in the late 1910s and early 1920s was that anyone was allowed to buy and sell stocks. The stock market was a new way for Chinese businessmen to raise money for their ventures. Tang himself raised capital for his newspaper on one of the twenty-two stock exchanges that mushroomed throughout the city. In fact, Goodman noted that some newspapers including Tang's had a symbiotic relationship with the stock exchanges. Newspapers raised their capital on stock exchanges, from which the stock exchange earned commission fees, and in turn, the stock exchanges bought advertisements in the newspapers. These advertisements reeled in newspaper readers, who like Xi rushed to buy stocks in the hopes of augmenting their meager wages. Some, including Xi, even borrowed money, and sometimes from

the stock exchanges, to buy stocks. It was not until the early 1930s that Chinese regulators figured out how to rein in the stock market.

The fourth chapter turns to the legal norms, practices, and institutions of 1920s Shanghai. This chapter centers on Tang's trial, which occurred only because the Chinese procuratorate's men took advantage of Shanghai's complex extraterritorial jurisdictions to kidnap him. Goodman's analysis of the trial, based on her close reading of the court's minutes, shows the tensions in China's legal reforms. As much as reformers sought to bring the late Qing and early Republican Chinese legal code to Japanese and European standards, they could not eliminate longstanding practices. Legal reforms entailed formalizing what the law said on a variety of topics. But this formalization of law could not overcome certain practices in customary laws. Tang's case illustrated the longstanding customary practice of the magistrate taking public sentiments into consideration in adjudicating trials. The magistrate decided that the negative public sentiments against Tang, expressed in the newspapers, outweighed the lack of evidence of Tang's guilt. This decision in such a high-profile case invited disapproval of the court's failure to follow procedures of modern legal practice. This criticism also brought into view the tension in liberal democracy between justice and popular sovereignty.

The final chapter lays out Goodman's concluding argument about the public. This public, as evinced in the Xi-Tang case, was constituted through changes in political culture, the expansion of print culture, and unbridled capitalism. The 1911 Revolution did not deliver republican democracy but it legitimatized the abolition of old hierarchies and supported the idea of popular sovereignty. The vibrant print culture that brought about the revolution provided an alternative space for entrenching the ideas of egalitarianism and popular representation. Capitalism enabled as much as it thwarted the realization of egalitarianism and popular representation. But Goodman's analysis of this incident also underscores the limitations of popular sovereignty.

Goodman's multi-faceted argument is grounded in an extensive bibliography. Her citation of secondary literature makes the bibliography a handy reading list for a graduate student's oral examination on Republican China. Despite the deep engagement with existing histories and theories, Goodman manages to keep the voices of the protagonists at the center of her compelling narrative. Xi's writings and calligraphy, and Tang's statements during the trial are closely analyzed and creatively read to bring forth the full range of possibilities of their subjectivities.

If I must nitpick with this wonderful book, it will have to be the lack of explanation for translating the Chinese word *ren'ge* 人格 as personhood. The English word "personhood" often evokes legal and sociological attempts to

define a distinct individual. But this rather narrows the wide-ranging valence of *ren'ge*, which also means personality. The instability of translating this word might speak to the flux of self-representations in that period. But isn't it also a mark of a successful book that the reader is prompted to think deeper on the subject?

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