



**PUBLIC PASSIONS**

THE TRIAL OF  
SHI JIANQIAO  
AND THE RISE  
OF POPULAR  
SYMPATHY IN  
REPUBLICAN  
CHINA

EUGENIA LEAN

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University of California Press  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.  
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lean, Eugenia, 1968–.

Public passions : the trial of Shi Jianqiao  
and the rise of popular sympathy in Republican  
China / Eugenia Lean.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-520-24718-5 (cloth : alk.  
paper),

1. Sun, Chuanfang, 1885-1935—Assassination.
  2. Shi, Jianqiao, 1906-1979—Trials, litigation,  
etc. 3. Trials (Assassination)—China. I. Title.
- II. Title: Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the rise of popular  
sympathy in Republican China.

DX777.I5.S92L43 2007

951.0'2—dc22

2006027327

Manufactured in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# The Assassin and Her Revenge

*A Tale of Moral Heroism and Female Self-Fashioning  
in an Age of Mass Communication*

1. I dare not forget the revenge of my father for a single  
moment;  
It breaks my heart to watch my mother's temples turn gray.  
I am loath to let her suffer any longer,  
The opportunity should not be squandered.
  
2. I cannot bear to look back to ten years ago.  
Things have remained the same, only the scenery has  
changed.  
I arrive at the Society not to find the Buddha,  
I seek death, not immortality.

Just after killing Sun Chuanfang, Shi Jianqiao distributed the poem above to witnesses at the crime scene. Composed by the assassin herself, the poem was in the form of seven-character, regulated verse (*qiyán lǚshī*). As such, it was part of the tradition of lyrical poetry (*shī*), a literary genre long regarded as particularly effective both for expressing one's innermost thoughts and sincere feelings, and for arousing the emotions of others.<sup>1</sup> To an audience familiar with this poetic tradition, Shi Jianqiao's poem brimmed with passion and sincerity.<sup>2</sup> Shi's obsessive dedication to avenging her father is evident in the first line, and the mention of her mother's graying temples conveys her filial dedication to her mother as well. In noting how she was deeply troubled because the retribution had remained unfulfilled for ten years, the poem expresses the urgency of the

matter and underscores the intensity of Shi's hunger for revenge. The mention of ten years, moreover, is meant to invoke the popular saying, "For a Gentleman seeking revenge, ten years is not too late," which alerts readers to the virtue of the act and suggests that one should bide one's time and wait for the right opportunity to seek revenge. In the next clause, "only the scenery has changed," is also significant, suggesting that the desire for revenge has remained unabated despite the passage of time. The last line dramatically turns the Buddhist temple, a site usually reserved for peaceful enlightenment, into a place of heroic karmic retribution. The poem presents filial devotion as the motive that drove Shi to such an extreme act of revenge.

This poem was part of a larger set of mimeographed materials that Shi Jianqiao had brought to the crime scene. In addition to the poem, Shi also distributed copies of a single-page statement of intent and a longer testament entitled *Gao guoren shu* (A letter to inform my countrymen [hereafter, *GGRS*]).<sup>3</sup> The succinct statement of intent was a list of four points:

Gentlemen take note:

1. Today, Shi Jianqiao (given name Shi Gulan) has killed Sun Chuanfang in order to avenge the death of her father Shi Congbin.
2. For concrete details of the situation, please refer to *Gao guoren shu*.
3. I have accomplished the great revenge, and am immediately turning myself in to the courts.
4. As for splattering blood onto the walls of the Buddhist hall and shocking everyone, my deepest apologies.

She signed the piece with "Female Avenger, Shi Jianqiao" and imprinted her fingerprint as a sign of authentication. The longer testament described in detail the tragic events that had led up to this final episode, including how ten years earlier Sun Chuanfang had ruthlessly decapitated Shi Congbin, a model military man and Shi's father, at the Bangbu, Anhui, train station. Ten years later, thirty-year-old Shi Jianqiao, a native of Tongcheng, Anhui, had finally come to avenge his death.

These richly suggestive materials showed how thoroughly the female assassin had strategically orchestrated this act of revenge. In an age of mass media, her revenge was available for public consumption from the start. The assassination was not an anonymous murder done on the sly, but rather a planned killing carried out in a lay-Buddhist recitation hall filled with people. With dozens of worshippers as her witnesses, Shi Jianqiao killed her sworn enemy and then distributed her materials, ensur-

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

Figure 1. Mimeographed pamphlet that Shi Jianqiao distributed at the crime scene, authenticated by her fingerprint. Reprinted in newspapers in the days following the assassination.

ing that not only the witnesses at the crime scene but a larger audience would learn the daughter's version of events. Almost immediately, the material was reproduced word for word for urban China's reading public to consume.

Shi Jianqiao's knowledge of public relations was evident throughout the course of the affair. The assassin continued to court the press after the killing. Upon turning herself in to the police, Shi gave a public statement and handed to authorities a preliminary will in which she had arranged for her mother and her children to be taken care of in the case of her demise.<sup>4</sup> Two days later, Shi held another press conference at the local police station and elaborated on the circumstances of the revenge. She began the meeting by saying, "There are discrepancies in each section of today's newspaper [coverage]," and went on to provide what she said was the true account of the event.<sup>5</sup> This meeting with the press was the first of several that she would hold during the lengthy trial.<sup>6</sup> Often right before the courts would announce a verdict, or at other crucial junctures in the legal case, Shi granted an emotional interview from her jail

cell. She also on occasion released heartfelt poetry she wrote in prison.<sup>7</sup> Some of the poems described how she spent her time in jail studying classical poetry or engaging in admirable behavior, including teaching fellow inmates how to read. Others professed her concern and yearning for her mother and family.<sup>8</sup> The poems and jailhouse interviews punctuated the emotional peaks of her pursuit for justice, and were thus reminiscent of traditional opera, in which prose dialogue is often interspersed with poetry that was sung to represent the dramatic high points of the narrative. This tactic proved successful in gaining sympathy, with several observers lauding Shi's poems for powerfully conveying her genuine feelings. It also reveals the lengths to which the female assassin would go to influence media coverage.

In an era of modern communications, Shi Jianqiao managed to tap into the array of cultural and technological resources at her disposal to weave a highly compelling tale of ethical revenge. Every move appeared to be for public consumption. Shi vilified her enemy Sun Chuanfang, glorified her dead father Shi Congbin, and ensured that her self-presentation as a devoted daughter conformed to gendered assumptions about female heroism. Each public statement she made was imbued with great feeling and filled with gripping detail. The result was that much of urban China came to believe that the filial motive behind the revenge was sincerely felt, and public sympathy for her vengeful actions became remarkably widespread.

#### THE MASS MEDIA CONTEXT

Extraordinary cases had gripped the public imagination and elicited collective sympathy through theater and storytelling long before the case of Shi Jianqiao. However, with the appearance of modern forms of mass communication in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, media sensations like the case of Shi Jianqiao became increasingly common and were unprecedented in their reach. Sensational cases were different from any before in their potential spread and the speed with which their impact was felt beyond the immediate communities involved. Local events were quickly transformed into universal tales that stirred the sympathies of urban or near-urban communities throughout China. By the 1930s, the media had expanded in scope and assumed the unprecedented characteristics of sensationalism and sentimentality befitting their mass audience.

The unprecedented impact of media sensations is a direct result of the

tremendous growth witnessed by China's mass media in the early twentieth century. According to Perry Link, Shanghai's media industry expanded roughly sixfold from the beginning of the century to the early 1930s. During the same period, the urban literacy rate at least doubled (Link 1981, 10). Circulation by the third decade of the twentieth century was as high as a hundred and fifty thousand for some popular newspapers.<sup>9</sup> These highly circulated papers carried the news of the Shi affair. Major dailies that covered the event were not limited to those in the Shanghai-Nanjing and Beiping-Tianjin vicinities, but included those in Guangdong, Sichuan, Manchuria, and even Russia.<sup>10</sup> Nor was readership restricted to urban areas. Provincial communities surrounding urban centers also had access to newspapers covering the story.

Circulation figures alone, moreover, do not reflect the true extent of the media's influence. People commonly followed the news by sharing newspapers and reading those hung on public bulletin boards. Lin Monong (1980), a Republican-period journalist who writes about the impact of the Shi Jianqiao media event on his career, describes how as a student in Tianjin he had not been able to afford a regular newspaper subscription and instead read newspapers that were posted daily at important junctions throughout the city. Lin describes in detail how daily papers from both Tianjin and Beiping were made available in the afternoon when people would quickly crowd together, stand, and read. Of course, this group was still relatively limited. As Lin notes, those with the appropriate literacy level and leisure time were still in a substantial minority among Tianjin's overall population. Yet, although the habit of reading the daily newspaper may have been limited to a small group, information and news were available to much of the rest of the urban population. The introduction of the radio, for example, made news readily available beyond the literate audience. Leo Lee and Andrew Nathan report that Shanghai by 1937 had an estimated one hundred thousand radios (Lee and Nathan 1985, 374-75). But the true size of the listening audience, like that of the reading audience, was much larger. As Carleton Benson notes, owning a radio may have been a luxury, but many were able to listen to the radio in the factories where they worked or in neighborhood shops (Benson 1995, 123-27).

The sheer diversity of media had also increased dramatically. In the late nineteenth century, the eight-page *Shenbao* (The Shanghai daily) was one of the few sources of information for Shanghai industrialists and political elites. By the Republican era, all major urban areas had not one but several major dailies, some of which ran well over eight pages. These

papers now contained argument and opinion, chronicled spectacular events, and served as a compendium of information for a targeted reading audience imagined to be far more inclusive than ever before. Urban readers could also choose from a variety of *xiaobao*, papers known in English as “mosquito presses” because of their unpredictable life spans and their reputation for reporting “biting” news. In the late Qing, when the genre first appeared, *xiaobao* provided information on the entertainment industry and courtesan circles to literati (*wenren*) readers. By the 1930s, while remaining short in page-length, *xiaobao* were catering to a much larger audience and reported on a myriad of topics, including ones that big papers omitted because of censorship or commercial reasons.<sup>11</sup> The periodical press had also grown substantially, and served as a forum for lively discussion on the case.<sup>12</sup> Journals ranged from those that were highly academic and specialized, read by a select few, to popular weeklies and magazines for the general urban audience. News and discussion of the Shi case appeared in all forms, from large dailies to mosquito presses, from popular weeklies to specialized journals.

In addition to the boom in journalism, different kinds of entertainment also proliferated, providing yet another forum in which information on the affair was disseminated. In the early twentieth century, China’s urban audience increasingly consumed fiction, film, radio, and theater. After late Qing reformers like Liang Qichao had argued for the inspirational power of fiction, literary magazines of all stripes were founded in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and the popular fiction market greatly expanded. As the rise of commercial publishing houses continued to flood the market with affordable books in the following decades, readers could also simply open their newspapers to peruse literary supplements or read daily installments of serialized novels.<sup>13</sup> For fans of live drama, the theater world expanded in quantity and quality, especially in Shanghai. Audiences could choose from traditional opera, regional operas, reformed Shanghaiese theater, and modern spoken drama.<sup>14</sup> Finally, with the arrival of new technologies, leisure in urban China changed drastically. Radio modernized the “traditional” story-telling arts, while film completely revolutionized urban entertainment.<sup>15</sup> It was in this context of a burgeoning mass media that Shi Jianqiao held court.

#### THE ASSASSIN

Who exactly was this woman? Shi Jianqiao was born in 1906 in Tongcheng, Anhui.<sup>16</sup> In addition to her father, Shi Congbin, her immediate

family included her mother, an elder brother, three younger brothers, and a younger sister. Her ancestral home was a small village near Tongcheng, called Shazigang. Her grandfather was a farmer and bean-curd seller. Her father, the eldest son in the family, and her uncle, the fourth son, Shi Congyun, became decorated soldiers in the early part of the twentieth century, raising the overall social status of the family. Shi Congbin, whose courtesy name, or *zi*, was Shi Hanting, was the deputy commander of Shandong's military affairs and served as a brigade commander to Zhang Zongchang by 1925, the year he was killed by Sun Chuanfang.<sup>17</sup> Shi Congyun, Shi Jianqiao's uncle, had served in a garrison of the Qing dynasty and died a martyr in the anti-Qing Luanzhou Uprising in 1911.<sup>18</sup> Shi Jianqiao had wed a fellow Anhui-native with the same surname, Shi Jinggong, who had been her cousin Zhongcheng's classmate at Baoding Military Academy and, by 1935, had bore him two sons, Jinren and Yuyao.<sup>19</sup>

Accounts of Shi Jianqiao's education differ, but it was very likely that she had a combination of both a classical and modern education, something quite common for privileged women at the time. According to a Shanghai *Shibao* (The eastern times) report printed in the days following the assassination, Shi had been educated at home, learning the proper womanly arts, including lyrical poetry.<sup>20</sup> The Beijing *Shibao* (Truth post) claimed that Shi Jianqiao had received an education in the classics and national literature at a private family school.<sup>21</sup> A retrospective account describes rather admiringly how she had been tutored at home along with her male cousin Zhongcheng in the Confucian classics, and how she had excelled as a pupil (Chen Jin 1991). Other reports note that she had graduated from Tianjin's Girl's Normal School (e.g., Wu 1990). The divergent accounts notwithstanding, it is clear that her upbringing and education were certainly marked by privilege and provided her with the cultural resources that she would later use in justifying her revenge. Her literary skill was needed to prepare the written materials she distributed at the crime scene and to write classical poetry while in jail. By displaying her knowledge of classical poetry and literature, Shi succeeded in implicitly likening herself to the classic figure of the *caimü*, or "talented woman" of the inner chambers of the late imperial period, a figure whose moral fortitude she no doubt would have wanted to claim.<sup>22</sup>

Given the complexity of the tasks at hand (both the assassination itself and the campaign to win public sympathy for her actions), one would think that Shi Jianqiao had backers in her quest. Yet the extent to which she received outside help to plot and engineer the revenge killing is still unclear. Contemporary observers of the case pondered over this precise

issue. Some commentators wondered how she gained access to a mimeograph machine to prepare the printed material that she distributed.<sup>23</sup> The legal investigation inquired into how she acquired her Browning gun, the weapon with which she killed Sun.<sup>24</sup> Others speculated that Feng Yuxiang, a retired militarist turned Nationalist statesman, not only helped Shi secure an official pardon, but also had a hand in helping her engineer the whole affair.<sup>25</sup> Not until thirty years after the event did the avenging daughter openly address some of these questions. While she made no mention of Feng's role in planning the killing, she did acknowledge that she had conspired with her brothers and sisters (Shi 1987, 514). She also claimed that she had purposely left many of these issues ambiguous during the trial, since she had not wanted to implicate others in any wrongdoing.

#### THE RAPACIOUS WARLORD

Regardless of whether she worked alone or with backers, Shi Jianqiao won tremendous media attention and public support in part because Sun Chuanfang was the man she killed. In the atmosphere of growing distrust for warlords by the 1930s, her murder of Sun Chuanfang became significant beyond the death of Sun as an individual. As a retired militarist, Sun had the potential to serve as a symbol of China's national weakness. It was this potential that Shi Jianqiao sought to exploit.

After the 1911 Revolution, the promise of a new republic faded quickly. Sun Yat-sen, with no military power of his own, yielded political power to militarist Yuan Shikai. In his quest to establish his own dynasty, Yuan had failed to erect any lasting government system, and after his death in 1916 China effectively lacked a central government. A decade of warfare ensued, with regional militarists scrambling for power and seizing territory in the newly created power vacuum. Their internecine struggles ravaged much of China until the Nationalist Party launched its Northern Expedition in 1926, and nominally unified the country by 1928. Nationalist unification was, however, far from complete. Even as China's ongoing national weakness was being blamed on a prior decade of warlordism, militarists continued to hold sway over parts of China. The anti-Communist campaigns of 1934–35 sharply reduced the autonomy of many provincial militarists, but not until 1936 was the central state able to incorporate entire provinces of China that had been under regional militarist rule and consolidate political control over the greater portion of the nation. Even then, seven out of eighteen provinces in China proper

continued to be essentially autonomous (Eastman 1991). Not surprisingly, social and political anxiety about both active and retired militarists persisted throughout the Nanjing decade.

Warlordism plagued the regime not only in reality, but also in symbolic terms. Edward McCord (1996) discusses the politics of anti-warlordism in early twentieth-century China and identifies the May Fourth movement, the 1919 patriotic mass movement, as seminal in coalescing public sentiment against warlords. During this period the term *warlord* (*junfa*) came to acquire unprecedented negative association with new forms of violence and imperialism (Waldron 1991). By the Nanjing decade, the Nationalist regime sought to capitalize on anti-warlord sentiment, but found this strategy to be fraught with political difficulty. On the one hand, smearing warlordism as a system that brought about China's internal disunity allowed the regime to justify centralization. By blaming remaining warlords for China's ongoing weakness, Nanjing could also absolve itself from failing to strengthen the country. On the other hand, a smear campaign could also result in a symbolic backlash. The demonized warlord became a trenchant sign of the central regime's inability to unify the nation. Furthermore, when attributing national disunity to remaining militarists, Jiang Jieshi had to distance himself from his own militarist past and establish that he had been fated from the beginning to assume Sun Yat-sen's mantle to rule.<sup>26</sup>

To resolve the dilemma of possibly implicating China's current leader as a "warlord," the public campaign against warlords shifted to target the specific group of militarists who lived in North China under de facto Japanese militarist rule (Waldron 1991, 1096). In the latter half of the 1930s, it was becoming increasingly evident that Japan was pursuing autonomous status for five northern provinces of China proper. To do so, the Japanese aggressively sought help from retired Chinese warlords and other local politicians. Rumors that "collaborationist" politicians and ex-Beiyang militarists were plotting their return and conspiring with the Japanese in North China quickly followed. It was in this Republican-era context that Sun Chuanfang's ascent and demise occurred.

A native of Licheng, Shandong, Sun Chuanfang (1885–1935), whose *zi* was Sun Xinyuan, was a major participant in the internecine warfare and alliance brokering among regional strongmen of the 1920s. His military education began under the Qing. He graduated from Beiyang military school around 1904 and was sent by the government to Japan for further training. Upon his return, he joined the Beiyang army and became part of the Zhili clique, one of the major groups vying for national

control during the second decade of the twentieth century. Sun climbed the ranks quickly.

In 1924, Zhang Zuolin, the leader of the Fengtian forces, sent Zhang Zongchang southward to wrest control of the Yangzi provinces from the Zhili clique. In October 1925, Sun Chuanfang successfully launched a surprise counterattack against the advancing Fengtian troops, and on the fourth day of that month Sun captured Shi Jianqiao's father, Shi Congbin, and beheaded him (Boorman and Howard 1967-71, 3:160-62). Sun Chuanfang's successful campaign to rout the Fengtian forces resulted in the military leaders of Anhui, Hubei, and Jiangxi rallying to his support, and by December of that year, Sun proclaimed himself the commander-in-chief of the armies of the Five Allied Southeastern Provinces (Anhui, Jiangxi, Fujian, Jiangsu, Zhejiang). While still showing nominal deference to Wu Peifu, Sun had, in effect, become the strongest military leader of the Zhili group. By 1926 he had established the so-called Greater Shanghai Municipality and integrated the various Shanghai jurisdictions under his control. Sun continued to control the southeast until 1927, when Jiang Jieshi's forces swept northward from Guangdong to unify China. After being driven out of Shanghai, Sun returned to North China and allied with Zhang Zuolin and Zhang Zongchang in a last-ditch effort to oppose the Nationalists. When the military success of Jiang Jieshi proved inevitable, Sun retired from political life in 1928, took up Buddhism, and, together with ex-militarist Jin Yunpeng, established a lay-Buddhist society (*jushilin*) in Tianjin, where he was later killed by daughter Shi.<sup>27</sup>

At the point of his death, Sun's legacy was ambiguous. Some thought he clearly deserved to die because of his violent suppression of labor strikes in Shanghai, where he had been the military ruler from late 1925 to 1927. In a short piece entitled "Sun Chuanfang Should Die," writer Jun Zuo argued that, given his maltreatment of striking workers and citizens in Shanghai, Sun Chuanfang deserved his violent ending.<sup>28</sup> Yet his legacy in Shanghai was not entirely negative. The foreign community in Shanghai credited him for stabilizing the area. The English-language paper, the *North China Herald*, stated that "[Sun] stood out predominant in the administration of Shanghai . . . [and] his efforts at reorganizing the somewhat confused civic administration of Shanghai . . . are noteworthy."<sup>29</sup> Commenting on Sun's death in 1935, a Chinese commentator stated in a *Dagongbao* editorial that Sun's rule over Jiangsu and Zhejiang had been good and wondered why anyone would want to assassinate him.<sup>30</sup>

In North China, Sun's reputation and death were tainted specifically

by rumors about his actions during the twilight years of his life. Despite his retirement into a life of Buddhism and his professed disavowal of all things political, accounts about his ambitions to reenter politics in Beijing circulated just months before his assassination. Specific rumors charged that Sun Chuanfang was scheming with Japanese collaborators, if not with the Japanese. Pamphlets circulated stories that Sun and Cao Rulin would share leadership of the North China movement for independence.<sup>31</sup> One editorial accused Sun of selling opium, a sure sign of his rapacity and evil nature.<sup>32</sup> Fictionalized accounts also helped generate the impression that Sun was participating in collaborationist politics. “Xiejian fotang” (A bloodbath in the Buddhist hall), a radio play based on the assassination, identifies Sun as a collaborator who had been betraying the country. Sun Chuanfang publicly denounced such reports as blatantly false and suggested that the Japanese were spreading gossip to generate social and political instability.<sup>33</sup>

Such rumors were fueled by Sun’s association before his death with important North China players, many of whom were suspected collaborationists. Several attended Sun’s funeral. He Yingqin was the Nationalists’ minister of war who had negotiated the unpopular 1935 Ho-Umeza agreement. Cao Rulin was popularly perceived as a pro-Japanese official and, as a result of negotiating the disastrous “war loans” from Japan in 1917, had been the target of May Fourth protests in 1919; Wang Yitang had been among the first of the Beiyang politicians to cooperate with Japan and was a member in 1935 of the Hebei-Chahar political council that served as a buffer between the Nanjing government and the Japanese militarists in North China.

Given her own desire to portray Sun Chuanfang in as unflattering a light as possible, Shi Jianqiao built on the negative rumors about the retired militarist. To win popular support for her actions, Shi Jianqiao portrayed Sun Chuanfang as a potent symbol for the regional militarism of the 1920s and the lurking threat of warlord collaboration in the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> Shi Jianqiao did not hesitate to depict Sun Chuanfang as a depraved warlord. In her *GGRS*, Shi accused Sun of having “the heart of a demon” and being “lupine and rapacious in character.” She smeared his reputation by contending that Sun’s willingness to attack and decimate greatly outnumbered troops was evidence of his cruelty. She wrote that, “[Sun Chuanfang] deserves to die for his many crimes. . . . He calls himself ‘commander-in-chief,’ but he is really no different from a mere bandit (*dafei*)!” To emphasize Sun’s cruelty, the dutiful daughter pointed to the ruthless decapitation of her father, which she argued was in violation of

the fundamental principle of modern international warfare that the enemy's commander was never to be harmed. As a result, her father's beheading did not go unnoticed in the press. *Jingbao* editorialist Miao Wei followed Shi Jianqiao's cue and similarly found Sun Chuanfang's choice to decapitate Shi Congbin to be gruesome and his impaling of Shi's head on a stick at the Bangbu, Anhui, train station, unnecessarily humiliating.<sup>35</sup>

Blaming Sun for the social strife of the preceding decade was something of a risk. Shi Jianqiao's father had been part of the military imbroglios of the preceding decade as well, commanding highly unpopular mercenary troops. While this was gingerly acknowledged, Shi emphasized that her father's participation was under the orders of Zhang Zongchang and the northern government at the time. In contrast, Sun Chuanfang, she claimed in her *GGRS*, had been single-handedly keeping China weak and divided by unilaterally declaring himself the head of the Five Allied Southeastern Provinces in 1926 just when the northern powers had begun to erect a legitimate national government. Her father had dutifully served the internationally recognized Chinese government; her nemesis, however, was a member of a group of renegade militarists.<sup>36</sup>

#### LOYAL SOLDIER AND WRONGED FATHER

In contrast to the smear campaign she launched against Sun Chuanfang, Shi Jianqiao spent a considerable amount of energy depicting her father, Shi Congbin, in glowing terms. For many, Shi Congbin may have been less powerful than Sun, but he was still a Beiyang militarist. As the deputy commander of Shandong's military affairs and a brigade commander for Zhang Zongchang during the Second Fengtian-Zhili war, Shi Congbin was captured and killed by Sun in battle. Yet, in Shi Jianqiao's accounts, Shi Congbin was neither a mere casualty of war nor a minor warlord. Rather, he had been unequivocally wronged. By manipulating highly effective, if formulaic, characterizations of the moral uprightness of her father and fusing them with strategic personal detail, Shi Jianqiao told a powerful story of injustice against her father and thereby legitimated her choice to seek revenge.

For example, in her *GGRS*, Shi Jianqiao affirmed that Shi Congbin was an excellent father. She did so by reciting the exact words with which he had instructed her and her siblings: "You all have resolve in your heart . . . not to be idle or wanton, do not wallow in luxury. Curb your self and benefit the group. Do not abandon the people and you will benefit yourself. Be industrious and thrifty and you will lead a life of moral ex-

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

Figure 2. Photos of Sun Chuanfang (top) and Shi Congbin (bottom) in the news coverage of the assassination, from the major Tianjin paper *Yishibao*, 14 November 1935.

cellence.” These words invoked time-honored Confucian standards of how to be an exemplary human being. By attributing these words to her father, Shi implied that as a patriarch who was traditionally expected to serve as an exemplar for his children, Shi Congbin himself had embodied those virtues and fulfilled his duties. She also portrayed Shi as an exemplary leader. In the *GGRS*, she mentions his rule as a garrison commander in Caizhou: “The local people were strong and fierce, but many of the unemployed had become roaming bandits. My late father came up with a multi-level plan to establish a straw-hat factory. He absorbed the unemployed, taught them industrial arts, and let them become self-sufficient, saving innumerable lives. The trend of banditry was stopped and even until today, the business of the factory has not declined.” Finally, she hailed him as loyal and brave, telling how in 1925 Shi Congbin had decided to stay in uniform upon the request of the Fengtian command. As she described at a press conference, “[By staying on, my late father] restored hope to the citizens and the state could rely on his council. It was not easy to let him go.”<sup>37</sup> Since it was the courageous decision to stay on that proved fatal, the injustice against Shi Congbin was made even more evident.

Shi Jianqiao's account of her father's death was particularly compelling. On October 3, 1925, while leading the Superior Iron Brigade (*Tiejia jun*), a brigade of mercenary troops, in an attempt to capture Guzhen, Shandong, Shi Congbin was surrounded by Sun Chuanfang's troops with no support in sight. Shi's four thousand soldiers were slaughtered, while Shi himself was taken prisoner and beheaded the next day upon Sun's personal order. Shi Jianqiao related in heart-wrenching detail how her family would not have learned the truth except for the bravery and loyalty of one of Shi Congbin's personal servants. "Only a single servant was able to flee home. When we asked him about news from the front line, he threw himself to the ground in tears. We knew the news was not good."<sup>38</sup> The servant had been too grief-stricken to speak. Only after the Shi family had gone to Tianjin did they learn all the facts behind Shi Congbin's death.

The supporting cast in Shi's tale of revenge included the grieving widow and the suffering family her father had left behind. Even though there is little indication that the Shi family underwent any real financial strain, Shi Jianqiao nonetheless insisted that Shi Congbin's death meant that a poor widow and six children, four of whom were still young, were left to fend for themselves. Sun Chuanfang was directly to blame for her family's plight. The way in which Shi portrayed her mother was particularly important. Traditionally, dutiful daughters and chaste wives were expected to commit suicide if their fathers or husbands were killed unjustly. Such an extreme gesture was meant as an ultimate expression of loyalty and of protest against injustice. But in this twentieth-century tale, Shi Jianqiao did not commit suicide and, moreover, justified her decision to live in terms of her filial piety to her mother. She portrayed her mother as particularly grief-stricken by the affair and argued that she needed to right the wrong committed against her father on behalf of her mother. In her *GGRS*, Shi declared, "Although all I wanted to do was die, my elderly mother's illness gave me the will to live."<sup>39</sup> In her will, she stated, with similar effect, "To my dear mother . . . what I have been hiding from you for years, I can no longer hide. Our enemy has not yet been retaliated [against]. Father's death can no longer be obscured. . . . A sacrifice should be made for father's revenge. In the future, five children will still be able to wait on you. They are all dutiful."<sup>40</sup> Shi Jianqiao's act of revenge would be the ultimate gesture of filial piety, while her remaining siblings would be able to wait on her elderly mother in more mundane ways throughout the rest of her mother's life.

The decision to provide her will at the police station was a smart one.

As a document, the will was purportedly private, available to family members only, yet hers was widely circulated in the press. Thus, it revealed to the general public what ostensibly were her most sincere feelings, while at the same time addressing the mass audience in terms that made them feel as if they were privileged members of the Shi family. By showing how she had arranged to take care of her family in the event of her death, the document established her responsibility as an elder sister in the family. In the will, Shi directly addressed her siblings, along with her husband and mother, to explain her actions. She instructed her younger siblings to take care of their mother and to work hard at school. In specific comments to Zefan, one of her younger brothers, she explains why she decided to act alone, and couched her explanation not in terms of selfishness but in terms of selflessness. She argued that she acted alone for the sake of the whole family's well-being. "While father [belonged to all of us], and we intended to go on together, I did not want to sacrifice your future. Because you need to maintain a strong state and home, you have large burdens. . . . You should forgive your older sister in her reluctance to require others to undertake this task [of revenge]." She then lists a set of commands for him to follow in the case of her death, including taking care of their father's remains, writing a headstone for her, and telling him of the 3,000 *yuan* inheritance she has for her sons. She ends with "if we cannot meet again brother, follow father's teaching by diligently working towards the future. Make a big name for yourself in history. Do not lead an empty life."

#### THE REVENGE: RIGHTEOUS AND HEROIC

The portrayal of the revenge killing itself was crucial to the success of Shi Jianqiao's story. Specifically, it was important for her to cast Sun Chuanfang's murder not as a mere political assassination, but as a highly justified act of righteous revenge. By mobilizing a range of powerful cultural motifs that proved to have great emotional appeal, Shi did this with great effect. She deployed time-honored ideas about Confucian retribution, Buddhist karma, and popular ideas about female heroism and knight-errantry to establish the righteousness of the revenge. Furthermore, even while marshalling long-standing cultural beliefs, Shi demonstrated a tremendous capacity for updating them and making them relevant for the contemporary age.

Cosmological concepts of retribution had a long history in China. Cultural beliefs in reciprocity (*bao*) were rooted philosophically in Confu-

cian classics, including the *Book of Rites* and the *Analects*, and had been central to the ordering of social relations in China since antiquity (Yang 1957). In China's literary tradition as well, retribution (*bao* or *baoying*) had long served as both a fundamental way of ordering social and moral relations in imperial literature and a central literary device that propelled literary narratives (Kao 1989).<sup>41</sup> From the start, Shi drew from these discourses. Her triumphant declaration at the crime scene, "I have sought revenge [to repay] my father" (*wei fu baochou*), immediately established the classical Confucian grounds of her actions. So too did her voluntary surrender at the crime scene.<sup>42</sup> By facing the legal consequences instead of running away, Shi demonstrated not only how sincere she was in seeking vengeance but also that she was willing to sacrifice her own freedom and potentially her life to do so. Confucian moralists had long viewed proper self-sacrifice (e.g., sacrifice for one's parent, husband, or virtuous ruler) favorably as an extreme expression of repaying one's moral obligations.

The Buddhist society as the site of the crime scene was also freighted with meaning. By killing her mortal enemy in the sacred shrine of a lay-Buddhist society, Shi unambiguously erected a religious framework in which she could become an instrument of karma and successfully establish that Sun's death was the inevitable result of his past sins (i.e., killing Shi Congbin in particular and killing innumerable others in general). She tapped into distinctly Buddhist notions of fated retribution (*baoying*) and the idea that one's past dictates one's fate (*houguo qianyin*). Not surprisingly, observers were quick to frame the event in Buddhist terms, and several explicitly used the idea *houguo qianyin* to explain Sun's death and justify Shi's actions. In an article entitled, "Bloodbath in a Buddhist Shrine," one writer noted that whereas Shi Jianqiao's actions were illegal according to the law, they were permissible according to Buddhist notions of karma. He concluded that no matter how much sutra-chanting Sun Chuanfang did, he could not avoid the fated reprisal for the evils he had once committed.<sup>43</sup> In Shi's narrative, the Buddhist site also worked nicely in tension with her classically Confucian act of filial revenge. In the increasingly tense atmosphere of the 1930s, Buddhist temples were often thought to harbor "retiring" warlords. In such a context, Shi Jianqiao's filial actions could easily be interpreted as blowing away the Buddhist cover of colluding warlords. Shi herself seemed to suggest as much in the poem she distributed at the crime scene, in which she stated that she "arrive[d] at the Society not to find the Buddha," but to seek Sun's death through filial revenge. Her Confucian act thus exposed the lie of Sun's Buddhist faith.

If cultural beliefs about Confucian ideas of virtuous retribution and Buddhist notions of karma helped Shi's case, what was perhaps most salient was the long-standing and vibrant tradition of knight-errantry (*xia*). Dissatisfied with the official legal system that had failed to punish Sun Chuanfang, the *xia* ethos celebrating a righteous heroism that could transcend even the rule of law was perfect for Shi. Found in political, literary, and historiographic discourses since as early as the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the classic, solitary assassin-retainer (*xiake*), characterized by skill in swordsmanship and heroic selflessness in righting wrongs, was an ambiguous hero.<sup>44</sup> His acts of righteous assassination and revenge were often at cross-purposes with the agenda of the imperial state. His tendency to wander (*youxia*), roam in bands, and fight for justice outside of the traditional family structure in the marshes (*jianghu*) threatened orthodox Confucian rule and signified the outlaw status of knights-errant.<sup>45</sup> His subversive, rogue identity was further underscored by a self-appointed sense of duty (*xiaoyi*) to protect the weak against the strong and claims to represent true justice where the official legal system failed to do so.<sup>46</sup>

The knight-errantry tradition thus not only legitimated Shi Jianqiao's decision to engage in extralegal actions to seek reprisal on her own, but also imbued them with a heroic flair. Not surprisingly, she consciously presented herself as a knight-errant. Her self-appellation directly conjures a sense of action and heroism associated with the *xia* personality. Whereas her given name was Shi Gulan, she chose "Jianqiao" as her sobriquet. The ideographs of *jian*, which has the primary meaning of sword or dagger, and *qiao*, which means either to raise or to be outstanding, made the *xia* connotation readily apparent.<sup>47</sup> Shi also included explicit allusions to the knight-errantry tradition in the material she distributed at the crime scene. She signed her single-page statement of intent with the flamboyant signature of "the avenging woman" (*chounü*). The first line of the poem that she had prepared was taken directly from the famous tale of the eponymous *xia* heroine, Yu Jiang, of the *Liaozhai tuyong*, a Republican-era pictorial version of Pu Songling's classic, seventeenth-century collection of the strange, the *Liaozhai zhiyi* (The strange tales from the Liaozhai studio). Observers were quick to make note of this.<sup>48</sup>

Shi Jianqiao was also no doubt attracted to the *xia* tradition because of the tremendous moral and political possibilities it offered women. Classical female heroines were at once subversive in their public lifestyles and orthodox in their embodiment of female virtue. While the male knight-

errant might occasionally define his heroic virtue through filial duty, other principles of justice, including engaging in struggles against the oppression of the weak, personal revenge, or upholding loyalty among friends, often took precedent. In contrast, female knights-errant almost always took up arms and entered the marshes on behalf of male relatives.<sup>49</sup> Although technically not a knight-errant, Hua Mulan, the classical woman warrior (*jinguo yingxiong*), serves as an illuminating example of how female heroism turned on exemplary virtue. Upon learning that her aging father is being recruited by the state for battle, Mulan cross-dresses and takes his place, displaying remarkable filial piety.<sup>50</sup> During her years of war, she never reveals her true gender identity and becomes a war hero. Upon her return, Mulan rejects marriage to stay home and serve her parents faithfully to the end of their lives. This exemplary filial piety is crucial to the story. It validates her decision to cross-dress, cross boundaries, and engage in acts otherwise permissible only for men.

Within the Confucian cosmological order premised on the separation of gendered space, *xia* heroines who cross the boundary not only from normal society to the marshes, but also from inner chambers to outer society, have long generated deep social anxiety about the power of female sexuality and its potentially subversive threat to the larger cosmological order.<sup>51</sup> In her study of Pu Songling's classic, the *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Judith Zeitlin (1993) discusses *xia* women in particular, and argues that sword-wielding women have traditionally been moral paragons precisely because they needed to counteract any perceived threat posed by their sexuality.<sup>52</sup> Female gallantry in these stories, she argues, was predicated on the extreme lengths to which the female hero goes to live up to masculine standards of heroism and virtue. Pu's female protagonists, including Shang Sanguan, an avenger whom Shi Jianqiao explicitly cites as a source of inspiration, are heroic precisely in their gender dislocation and in their ability to be *like men* in their "high-minded spirit" and pursuit of justice. As a result, the female knight-errant has long been able to wander in the world at large and right a wrong without fundamentally disrupting the sexual economy underlying China's cosmological order.

Shi Jianqiao's self-portrayal as a *xianü* (female knight-errant) suggests that the standards of virtuous gender dislocation demanded of Shi's imperial predecessors remained remarkably relevant in the twentieth century. It was telling, for example, that Shi cited as her primary source of inspiration Shang Sanguan, a female knight-errant whose eponymous story was immortalized in Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*.<sup>53</sup> In Pu's tale,

Shang Sanguan is both heroically dutiful and virtuously chaste. A young woman of sixteen, she rejects marriage and leaves home in order to avenge her father's murder. Her brothers have failed to achieve legal retribution, so she carefully plots for six months and then enters the home of the murderer during a party as a young male performer. At the close of the party, when all other guests take leave, she stays on, beheads the bully, and then dramatically hangs herself from the rafters as a clear sign of the selfless, sacrificial nature of her act. Shang upholds her chastity in a most miraculous manner. While hanging dead from the rafters after her revenge, her corpse dramatically repels a sexual assault, and Shang defends her chastity posthumously.

While she did not commit suicide, demonstrate any supernatural abilities, or even cross-dress like Shang Sanguan, Shi Jianqiao's moral character was still portrayed as unmistakably impressive. Like her classical counterparts, the modern-day avenging daughter took care to establish an impeccable reputation of sexual honor. Immediately after the slaying, details of her past reputation appeared in the press. The reading public learned, for example, how Shi had once been betrothed into a family whose patriarch was on trial for raping another daughter-in-law. Dubbed the Case of the Tongue because the daughter-in-law had used the part of the patriarch's tongue she had bitten off in self-defense as evidence in the trial, the case had caused a scandal. Rather than compromise her reputation and, by extension, tarnish that of her natal family, Shi Jianqiao immediately took the initiative and annulled the arranged betrothal. The press praised her for her deft handling of the affair and treated her extreme action to protect her honor as undeniable evidence of her *xia* heroism. One reporter wrote admiringly that while the Case of the Tongue had caused a stir in nine cities and would no doubt have brought shame to the Shi family if the betrothal had been upheld, Shi's swift and decisive action to annul the engagement had averted familial dishonor.<sup>54</sup>

The reputation of "chastity" established in the Case of the Tongue was evident again in Shi's description of her marriage, which showed the depths of Shi's devotion to her father and established the unquestionable sincerity of her motive. In traditional China, female chastity was very straightforward. Female paragons were either virgins or chaste widows who refused remarriage. Some protected their bodies from even the slightest hint of physical impropriety and were willing to kill themselves to do so. This sexual purity was a metaphor for their passionate devotion to their fathers or husbands and, by extension, to the patriarchy writ

[To view this image, refer to  
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Figure 3. The story of filial daughter Shang Sanguan in the illustrated songbook of Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 1914. (Lü Zhan'en 1914)

large, the emperor. Whereas, by the time of this twentieth-century case, the goal of demonstrating utmost loyalty remained the same, the proof of chastity had changed somewhat. Shi Jianqiao established a chaste reputation not by refusing marriage, but *as a result* of her marriage. The avenging daughter depicted her marriage to fellow Anhui-native Shi Jinggong as loveless and intended to aid her noble cause of revenge. She explained that she had agreed to marry not out of love but on the condition that her husband-to-be would help in her quest.<sup>55</sup>

Portraying her marriage as merely instrumental made her commitment to her father appear, in contrast, to be genuine and real, and her devotion to avenging her father's murder as all-consuming. Her portrayal was so successful that when news leaked that her husband was seeking a divorce while she was still in jail, commentators found his actions hypocritical. One *Ling Lung* writer stated that the husband clearly knew from the start she intended to seek revenge and not merely to serve as a "Good wife, Wise Mother" (*xianqi liangmu*). The commentator implored,

“How can Shi Jingong not only claim that Shi Jianqiao’s will to seek revenge does not adhere to the Womanly Way (*fudao*), but also use it as grounds for divorce? Clearly, Shi Jingong is shallow and heartless.”<sup>56</sup> In the end, her loyalty to her father was of the utmost importance, and not any loyalty to her husband. Shi Jingong’s failure to appreciate her filial piety only made him seem heartless in seeking a divorce.

It is interesting to note that Shi Jianqiao avoided citing more explicitly political female assassins as precedents. She was careful, for example, not to compare herself to any of the late Qing female assassins. A likely precedent was Qiu Jin, a highly flamboyant woman who was known for her cross-dressing and self-fashioning as a *xianü*, and who had gone to Japan in the twilight years of Manchu rule, where she fell in with anti-Qing anarchists and radical feminists. Also popular among late Qing radical circles were Western female assassins, including Sophia Perovskaia and Mme. Roland. Yet, Shi failed to mention any anarchist-feminist heroine, domestic or foreign. Whereas late Qing female heroism was explicitly political, Shi Jianqiao wanted to present her Republican-era heroism as something that was intensely personal and the result of a nonpolitical, private enmity. In doing so, she could more successfully capture the essence of classical martyrdom.

Although Shi Jianqiao sought to mobilize classical traditions, she hardly wanted to appear anachronistic. She thus added a strong dose of the modern to her actions. Leo Lee (1999) has described how the modernity of early twentieth-century urban culture in Shanghai was embedded in material objects like the telephone, Browning guns, Citroen cars, and even the Cheongsam (*qipao*) dresses seen on alluring calendar girls. Many of these same objects strategically appeared in Shi’s tale of revenge and functioned, accordingly, to signal the “modernity” of the event. For example, Shi Jianqiao was a “modern” knight-errant in her choice of weapon and mode of transportation. As she made clear to the press, she had taken a cab from the temple to retrieve from her home her weapon of choice, which was not the traditional sword or dagger, but a Browning pistol.<sup>57</sup> Shi’s appearance furthermore was imbued with an up-to-date cosmopolitan aura. It was that of a modest, but modern woman. In a photograph that was widely distributed after the assassination, her hair was styled in a bob cut, which in the first quarter of the century represented the radicalism of protesting female university students, although by the 1930s, it had become a proper style, conservative, yet contemporary. The gray-blue Cheongsam dress that Shi wore was also coded appropriately. Unlike the flower-patterned and shape-hugging cuts of the more sexual-

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Figure 4. Undated portrait of Shi Jianqiao before the assassination of Sun Chuanfang.

ized calendar girls, Shi Jianqiao's outfit was modest both in color and in cut, establishing the virtuous ideal that conformed to both New Life ideology and female *xia* standard.<sup>58</sup> Her image was thus that of a modest, but clearly modern woman.

#### SENTIMENT, PREMEDITATION, AND THE TELLING OF A TALE

Beyond making sure that the content of her story conformed to familiar narratives, Shi Jianqiao also paid careful attention to the style of the telling. With the intent of maximizing an emotional response, the avenging daughter employed two seemingly paradoxical tactics in conveying her story. She delivered her sentimental narrative in a highly emotional manner while revealing in great detail exactly how she plotted her revenge. Such an approach differs radically from how female perpetrators of crimes of passion told their stories in modern French courts and so-

ciety. In modern French courts, where the ideal standard of behavior was male rationality, such women often won judicial exemption precisely by stressing how their typically feminine characters, marred by irrationality and weak will, had led them to commit crimes of passion. In a study of the celebrated, turn-of-the-century, Parisian case of Mme. Caillaux, Edward Berenson (1992) illustrates how Mme. Caillaux formulated a successful defense that crucially turned on convincing the jury and the public that women's passions easily overwhelm their rational faculties. Mme. Caillaux and her lawyers carefully avoided revealing any evidence of calculation and planning in order to establish that it was her typically feminine passions of jealousy and rage that had caused her to lose her sanity temporarily and commit the crime. The end result was that she was absolved of wrongdoing and responsibility.

In Shi Jianqiao's case, however, emotion and premeditation were not at all mutually exclusive. This key difference from the French case stems from diverging ways of understanding sentiment. Whereas sentiment had implications for individual subjectivity and the larger cosmological order in both turn-of-the-century Paris and early twentieth-century urban China, the exact significance attributed to sentiment and the exact way in which the individual, society, and their inter-relationship were imagined differed considerably. In the Parisian trial, Mme. Caillaux's motive was clearly a motive of "passion" in the sense that it helped articulate rationality, the core of modern Western subjectivity, by serving as its counterpoint. Because Mme. Caillaux's feminine rage served as the deviant contrast that helped define the masculine norm of rational legal subjectivity, it was deemed the basis of judicial exemption. In contrast, in the Chinese case, while Shi Jianqiao's filial devotion was passionately expressed through an extreme act of violence, the crux of the controversy did not hinge upon the lack of rationality in her actions per se. Instead, attention was lavished on the question to what degree Shi Jianqiao's sentiment of filial piety continued to be *ethically* relevant in the shaping of gender, modern subjectivity, and early twentieth-century China's socio-political landscape. *Both* emotional urgency and rational premeditation underscored the sincerity of her virtuous sentiment.

In the telling of her tale, Shi Jianqiao first saturated her narrative with emotion. She also made sure that her public appearances were characterized by the expression of great feeling. For example, in the press conference held at the public security bureau just after the killing, Shi was overcome with emotion.<sup>59</sup> The *Yishibao* (The social welfare daily) headline the next day read, "Shi Jianqiao Tells Her Story with Tears."<sup>60</sup> At

the opening sessions of both the first and second trials, the assassin wept uncontrollably in the courtroom. Each tearful display won full coverage in the press the next day.<sup>61</sup> During the first trial, Shi interrupted the prosecuting attorney who was conducting her cross-examination and demanded to know why the courts had failed to make public the personal statement she had distributed at the crime scene.<sup>62</sup> While the charged outburst drew media attention, so too did the heart-wrenching statement. When it was finally made available to the press a month later, the Shanghai *Shibao* referred to the testimonial as “Shi Jianqiao’s ‘Letter to My Countrymen;’ Each Word, a Tear, Some One Thousand Words.”

Though emphasizing emotion, Shi Jianqiao also explicitly raised the issue of premeditation and rational plotting. She emphasized exacting premeditation to demonstrate her sustained filial devotion and the sincerity of her actions. Not unlike her careful planning of the telling of the events, her preparations for revenge were presented as meticulous. Shi’s accounts purposefully highlighted her preparation of materials for distribution at the crime scene. In her press conference just after the murder, she informed reporters, “Because I thought Sun’s coming and going would involve bodyguards and that it was not in the cards for me to survive, my small pamphlets would make known my heart’s intent, even if I were to die.”<sup>63</sup> These pamphlets, along with ensuing press conferences and court appearances, detailed her preparations.

Entailing ten years of planning and a final year spent stalking Sun Chuanfang, the efforts that went into the plotting were impressive. Shi had first considered having her older brother, Zhongliang, undertake the assassination, but quickly realized that since he was not a soldier, he lacked the proper disposition to execute revenge. She then turned to a male cousin, Zhongcheng, whom Shi Congbin had raised like a son, but he too failed to take action. As mentioned earlier, in 1928, Shi Jianqiao married Shi Jinggong on the condition that he would fulfill the family’s wishes for retaliation. But he was almost immediately dispatched to remote Shaanxi and shelved the task. By 1935, ten years had passed since her father’s death, and all men of the household remained somehow indisposed.<sup>64</sup> Shi argued that the family had no one else to rely on but her, and stated, “I felt that [rather than] ask others I might as well ask myself.”<sup>65</sup> These details about her male relatives failing in the task of revenge were particularly crucial. Only when all other alternatives were exhausted could the daughter justify entering the public arena to commit the revenge killing herself.

The twists and turns leading up to Sun’s murder helped build narra-

tive suspense. As Shi Jianqiao told it, she began in January 1935 by enrolling one of her sons in Tianjin's Peicai elementary school, which Sun Chuanfang's daughter, Sun Jiamei, was attending.<sup>66</sup> She accompanied her son to school each day until she eventually learned that Sun lived in Tianjin's French Concession. Buoyed by this information, Shi stiffened her resolve and sought to obtain a gun in her home province. She then returned to Tianjin in July only to find that Sun Jiamei had transferred to the Glorious China School in the British Concession. She used the enrollment of her brother's daughter in the Glorious China School as a pretext to investigate further and discovered Sun Chuanfang's license plate number. She sighted his car and then her target shortly thereafter, one evening outside of Tianjin's Guangming movie theater.

Not until September 17, 1935, did Shi Jianqiao obtain what turned out to be the fateful piece of information for her plans. Those following the affair learned that while attending the memorial services for her late father, Shi heard from the monk presiding over the services that Sun regularly assisted in leading sutra recitation at Tianjin's lay-Buddhist society. Armed with this piece of information, she then made visits to the lay-Buddhist society and discovered that Sun Chuanfang was indeed a leading member. She befriended a female member of the society, adopted the Buddhist name Dong Hui, and expressed interest in joining. Under the pretext that she wanted to observe the congregation in order to decide whether to become a member, she made several preliminary visits and, finally, went there on the fateful day of November 13, 1935. That afternoon she killed Sun. As she stated in her initial confession, "Today, just past 2 P.M., I saw only a few chanters present, and that Sun was not yet there. Just as I was talking with some other members, Sun's car arrived and he entered. I realized my opportunity to seek revenge had arrived. I had not brought my handgun, so I quickly took a taxi cab home, retrieved my gun and returned [to the hall]. . . . Immediately, I went to shoot Sun. I killed him with three bullets remaining in the gun. I could see in the distance that the police were about to arrive. I immediately turned myself over to the authorities and surrendered."<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

There ended the avenging daughter's account. By exhaustively plotting all details of her performance, the heroine displayed an uncanny ability to manage the details of her visibility in the glare of the media's limelight. She moreover strategically inflected the story behind the revenge

with seemingly genuine emotion, which proved essential to her ability to win public support. To be sure, Shi Jianqiao was not alone in using the media to court public opinion. Sun Chuanfang's family and supporters did as well.<sup>68</sup> Angered by Shi's claims of righteousness as well as her accusations of Sun Chuanfang, some of Sun's supporters made a public counterattack, defending Sun and discrediting Shi. In the days following the assassination, Jin Yunpeng, the fellow ex-militarist who had established the lay-Buddhist society with Sun in 1931, attested to the sincerity of Sun's Buddhist faith and his lack of interest in politics at the time of his death.<sup>69</sup> Beiyang militarist Zhang Xueliang also showed support for the Sun family with a telegram from Nanjing.<sup>70</sup> The well-attended memorial service for Sun organized by the Tianjin Shandong Native-place Association was yet another indication of support from powerful Shandong political figures.<sup>71</sup> Lu Xiangting, an old military colleague, was perhaps most vocal. Holding a press conference after the killing in the British Concession of Tianjin, Lu stated that he wanted to clear the air of rumors and correct the public record. He told reporters that while in battle during the Su-Lu war, he had learned from those who saw Shi Congbin die firsthand that Shi's death was merely another casualty in a period of intense chaos and nothing more. He further stated that for a military family to lose a father to war is hardly out of the ordinary, and thus there were no grounds for Shi's enmity (*chou*), much less for retribution (*bao*). He concluded by reminding the public that Shi Congbin was, in effect, just like Sun Chuanfang in having killed many innocent people during war.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, efforts by the Sun family and its allies did not have the same success that Shi enjoyed. Shi Jianqiao's success was all the more remarkable if we consider that women's appearance in the public arena in the Nanjing Decade generally remained a tricky proposition. Calls for moral restrictions and constraints on excessively public women had become stronger by the second quarter of the twentieth century, drowning out earlier calls for liberation.<sup>73</sup> Not surprisingly, several commentators noted Shi Jianqiao's ability to manage the press. A sympathetic writer compared a line of Shi Jianqiao's poetry with a dramatic performance by Tan Xinpei, one of Republican China's greatest Beijing opera performers. Alluding to Shi's superior skills of performance, the commentator wrote, "If one looks away for even a second, it would seem as if in front of you is the great work of a renowned actress" (Lingxiaohangezhu 1935a). Less sympathetic views were also expressed. One writer argued that Shi was

a cynical operator exceptionally skilled in recognizing and appropriating customary ways to manipulate popular sympathy.<sup>74</sup>

In the end, however, the avenging daughter gave what proved to be a virtuoso performance. She proved capable of performing the delicate balancing act of taking full advantage of the media's power and reach, while at the same time never appearing to be doing so. Exhibiting impressive aplomb, she grasped the persuasive power of sentiment and brilliantly orchestrated her actions to weave a powerful and moving tale of sincere moral heroism that identified an unambiguous moral universe in which her crime of revenge was deemed genuine and virtuous. One writer thus noted, "All one has to do is look at the general media coverage, which includes a lot of laudatory phrases like 'unflinching composure' and 'ardent heroism,' to see just how widespread sympathy (*tongqing xin*) is" (Lingxiaohangezhu 1935a).

Shi Jianqiao's decision to assume the persona of the female knight-errant, in particular, paid off.<sup>75</sup> Sober and sensational journalism made reference to this persona by applauding the female assassin's virtue as sincere, heroic, and above all, like that of a man. One observer noted that even though she was in fact a fragile woman, her virtues of loyalty, wisdom, bravery, and righteousness were just like that of honorable men.<sup>76</sup> Another stated that since Shi Jianqiao showed steadiness in fulfilling her wish and, as a person, was ardent, straightforward, steadfast and brave; in short, she was manly in spirit.<sup>77</sup> Shi's masculine virtue also won her comparisons with previous *xia* women. One article cited as precedents both the heroine from Pu Songling's tale *Xianü* (1986b, 210–16) and the historical personage, Lu Siniang, or Fourth Sister Lu, of the Qing, a female knight-errant who was said to have assassinated Emperor Yongzheng.<sup>78</sup> Another noted that Shi's heroic virtue was simply uncanny (*qi*), a marvel that allowed her to qualify as a remarkable woman.<sup>79</sup> Like the classic female knight-errant, Shi Jianqiao's extreme filial piety, contained sexuality, and sublimated passion allowed her to transgress boundaries, engage in virtuous dislocation, and literally get away with murder.

Finally, while Shi Jianqiao undeniably displayed an astonishing knack for what we might today call public relations savvy, to conclude that she was *merely* a smooth operator underestimates the power and moral validity of her reasons for action. It is highly probable that even though Shi was a savvy player in a new era of mass communications, she also sincerely believed that she had the absolute moral right to kill Sun Chuan-

fang. It is easy to imagine how she was deeply frustrated. The chaos caused by years of warlordism had barred the way to any legal retribution. Adding insult to injury, Sun went on to enjoy a significant, albeit short, period in power as the leader of the Five Allied Southeastern Provinces and director-general of Shanghai after the battle in which Shi's father was killed. When he finally fell from political grace, Sun retired to a Buddhist temple where, from Shi's perspective, he continued to escape formal justice. The daughter most likely felt she had to rely on herself to achieve justice. With themes of filial piety, chivalric heroism, and fated retribution common to the social imagination of urban China at that time, she had a ready supply of resources with which to imagine an alternative way to seek reprisal. These themes most likely constituted the bedrock of Shi's own value system and provided her with the conviction needed to commit an act of murder.