

In Life and Death: Behind the Movement of the Modern Chinese Woman

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WMST 554

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2 May 2015

On May 4, 1919, following the fall of dynasties and the rise of political instability between emerging powers against domineering global influence, a revolution began in Beijing, China that changed the course of Chinese history and development. Rallying against China's submission to Japan, Britain, and the United States, over 3000 protestors gathered and emphasized the need for patriotism and modernization. China existed under Confucianism and traditionalism, but the 20th century signaled a downfall in Chinese customs that left the country floundering in an identity crisis. Thus, the May Fourth Movement commenced as intellectualism and enlightenment flourished. Issues of class, religion, politics, and gender entered the public forum and were discussed openly; the term "society" became part of Chinese vernacular as the state and the citizen were made distinct and debated on their autonomy. Overall, there was a demand for change in order to reestablish China's sovereignty, transforming into a cultural phenomenon that touched on both the country and the individual.

Yet, the attention that the May Fourth Movement inspired also resulted in controversy, seen particularly with the development of the Modern Chinese Woman in the 1920s. These women were feminists who supported female liberation and rejected Confucian family ethics. By denying traditionalism, they fought for acknowledgement, recognizing their own independence as citizens of China.¹ Women played a critical role in the revolution's power, but even for the radicals of the May Fourth Movement, the Modern Chinese Woman was too much to accept. Over time, the Modern Chinese Woman became negatively synonymous with the New Woman; because the New Woman was associated with Western ideals, Chinese intellectuals looked down upon their progression, accusing the Modern Chinese Woman of being antipatriotic, for being

¹ Dong, Madeline Y. "Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?" in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. Tani E. Barlow et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 194.

too American.² As the reputation of the Modern Chinese Woman plummeted, the movement broke off and a collection known as the New Woman martyrs called for desperate action, through which suicide became a political statement.³ Ultimately, the May Fourth Movement harkened a new era for China and its people, but although it worked to recognize the significance of women as valued members of China, it simultaneously rejected the individuality of the very women that the revolution was fighting for.

CONFUCIANISM AND FAMILY REFORM

In *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, Susan L. Glosser looks at the events that built up to the May Fourth Movement, specifically studying when China began to transition away from Confucianism. The May Fourth Movement gained attention when it blurred into the ongoing New Culture Movement, in major part to the fact that young "radicals" saw China caught in an ultimatum: "China found itself at the mercy of invading forces after centuries of political and cultural preeminence and . . . it starkly illuminated China's alternatives—evolve or perish."⁴ With the rise of global modernization, China was forced to recognize that Sinocentrism no longer empowered the country, left behind in development by others like the burgeoning Japan and United States; as a result, China began picking and choosing which elements of influence to integrate into Chinese modernity while still clinging to traditional principles. According to Glosser, this only weakened China further, where "some wondered whether Chinese culture was intrinsically ill-suited for modernity" as its internal battles for identity merely left the country

² Goodman, Bryna, "The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 1 (2005), 67.

³ Fong, Vanessa L. and Hua R. Lan, "The New Women Martyrs: Editors' Introduction," in *Women in Republican China: A Sourcebook* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 75.

⁴ Glosser, Susan L, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915-1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

vulnerable to attack.⁵ The conflict of whether to rebel against or follow the modernization of other international powers can be pinpointed to the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, ending the age of imperialism in China and bringing forth a tumultuous democracy where Chinese Confucianism and traditionalism had little opportunity to survive unless it evolved.⁶

Thus, as Glosser explores, the ideologies that would eventually become the May Fourth Movement began as a need for family reform. In China, the structure of family was inextricable from the structure of the nation, because a traditional family guaranteed the survival of the state: "The principle of *bie*—separate spheres—is invoked to stress that wives and mothers inside the home embody the moral autonomy and authority on which husbands and sons must rely to succeed outside. All are part of a family system that constitutes a seamless, unitary social order centered on the home and bounded by the outer reaches on the imperium."⁷ The fact that China as a whole was failing indicated to up-and-coming intellectuals that China's familial roles were similarly failing. Confucianism no longer supported but suppressed China's youth, "sacrificing [them] on the altar of filial obligation, teaching them dependency, slavishness, and insularity, and robbing them of their creative energy."⁸ Men therefore looked to the prime outlets of Confucianism, the figures most established by its traditions: women.

By confronting Confucianism, men and women began to see just how much it defined women in and outside the home. Because "traditional feminine ideals demanded that women remain secluded from the outside world and devote their energies and attention to the home," budding revolutionists "believed that by crippling women's bodies and intellect, these customs

⁵ Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 4.

⁸ Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 3.

weakened China."⁹ Women served as the mothers and wives who would help cultivate the next generations, resulting in family reform narrowing into a woman's role in the family needing reform, carrying the first notes of female liberation into discussion. For the first time, women were acknowledged for their invaluable contributions to China, where the sphere of the home was determined by women and, thus, directly connected to the prosperity of the state. However, even in these starting stages, women were viewed as a means to an end.

As Glosser points out, although "the transfiguration of women's prescribed roles and the shift in the definition of nation occurred in tandem," it was borne from a younger generation of men who still viewed women not as actual individuals, but as tools to be used for the betterment of the country¹⁰—specifically, to support *men* for the betterment of the country. While the term "society" had not quite yet been introduced, the phrase "the 'civilization' (*wenming*) of women" did become a theme of pre-May Fourth Movement reform and how women—as though suddenly rediscovered—could be improved upon in order to strengthen a man's role in China: "The improvement . . . was not an independent goal in itself but rather an adjunct to the desire to create a viable male citizenry. Reformers believed that men would never be able to make full use of their talents and abilities if they were burdened with unhealthy and uneducated women. . . . most women's rights advocates wanted to improve women's lives for the sake of a stronger China."¹¹ Men resolved to give women an inch in order for women to give men a mile.

Despite reformers rejecting Confucianism's limitations upon women, the foundations that the May Fourth Movement were built upon continued to adhere to a patriarchal system. It was more important that women received attention in order to validate a man's position of power, that

⁹ Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 6-7.

"women became *objects* of reform," then acknowledging a woman's independent existence whatsoever: "New Culture family reformers focused on restructured women's roles in the family with an eye toward their own individual fulfillment and happiness. If men were to live the lives they wanted, if they were to redefine themselves and their nation, then they had first to redefine their families."¹² Although the end of the dynastic era called for an end to Confucianism, it was a male-specified end: the ulterior motive of the rising male intellectuals promised women power only as a means to assert their own, desiring to reject Confucianism in order to overthrow their elders in favor of younger male voices, wanting to be recognized rather than silenced by traditional customs. Ultimately, men repurposed the movement for women's rights to fit male needs in China's ever-changing state.

During this transitional period into the 1900s, women were also working to bring about reform but with little success. As the May Fourth Movement was just starting to conceptualize, Glosser identifies two women amidst the myriad of men making waves, the first representations of feminists that would eventually grow into the Modern Chinese Woman: Qiu Jin and Tang Junying. For example, as Glosser writes, "Qiu Jin . . . electrified audiences when she appeared dressed in men's clothing and called for the equality of men and women" while "Tang Junying [was] a prominent leader of the women's suffrage movement," arguing against the traditional patriarchal systems supported by China in addition to contrasting against the male-centric ideas of revolution that only further used women rather than liberating them.¹³ Yet, unlike the initiatives taken by male reformers, Qiu and Tang's actions resulted in failure: Qiu Jin, "an avowed patriot" prior to end of the dynastic period, "was executed in 1907 for attempting to lead

¹² Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 11.

¹³ Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 7.

an uprising against the Qing government" and, with the "establishment of the Republican government," Tang Junying "led a small group of women in lobbying the National Council to include women's right to vote and the principle of gender equality in the new constitution" but was "ignored and . . . forcibly removed," where ultimately "[none] of the women's proposals were included" in the new political state.¹⁴ The inclusion of these women provide a historical context in the events leading up to the May Fourth Movement and how, regardless of China's transformation in government and ideologies, the rejection of traditionalism did not necessarily generate the support needed for feminist Chinese women to reach for individuality.

Additionally, by exploring Qiu and Tang's stories, the distinct differences between the Chinese feminist movement and the Western feminist movement commencing across the globe in the same time period is put into perspective, a necessary acknowledgement in order to fully recognize the enormity of the interconnectedness between family and state in China that is culturally opposite in the United States. Like the term "society," the idea of individualism was a foreign concept in Chinese vernacular; in comparison to the West, where independence was and still is the crux of living as an American, China's need to survive as a whole entity has continued to surpass the needs of its citizens, regarded simply as figures of the nation, the pillars to support China's sovereignty, rather than focusing on individuation. Glosser states it perfectly:

We must . . . recognize the limitations inherent within a discourse that insists that the good of the nation supersedes all. In the West, for example, where philosophical and ethical systems recognized the absolute value of the individual and individual rights, feminists fought for their rights by arguing that women, like

¹⁴ Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 7-8.

men, were human and individuals, and therefore, deserved absolute equality. In China, however, because the nationalist cause overrode the rights of both male and female individuals, no such avenue existed for advancing the interests of any group independent of state or societal demands. . . . China's women have repeatedly found their interests subordinated to those of the state.¹⁵

Thus, history shows that the women of China not only had to fight against patriarchal dominance but also against societal dominance, leaving women and any opportunity for women to grow at the very bottom of concern. Although the beginnings of the May Fourth Movement signaled a transition into modernization and, as a result, the development of the Modern Chinese Woman, when taking into account all the challenges Chinese feminists faced, it begs the question of whether the pursuit of female liberation as represented by the Modern Chinese Woman was doomed from the start.

MODERNIZATION AND MEDIA

In *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism*, Lisa Rofel addresses the power that modernity—or, at the very least, the *idea* of modernity—had on China when entering the 20th century. To Rofel, "modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge, forged within uneven dialogues about the place of those who move in and out of categories of otherness," where it was simply the opportunity to modernize that reinvigorated the Chinese state, even if individuals defined modernity differently.¹⁶ Thus, "by opening out the imaginary space of modernity," studies "pay attention to its gaps, fissures, and instabilities," particularly "those moments when

¹⁵ Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 20.

¹⁶ Rofel, Lisa, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3.

'others' unsettle forms of domination enacted in the name of modernity."¹⁷ Case in point, following the protest on May 4, 1919, and the official start to the May Fourth Movement, the Modern Chinese Woman finally came into the spotlight. As revolutionary fervor spread throughout China, reflected primarily in the urban cities, the Modern Chinese Woman peaked as ideal representation of the feminist woman who transcended beyond traditionalism and embraced the enlightenment of a new flourishing China. However, this opinion of the Modern Chinese Woman did not last long; again, the Modern Chinese Woman had trace beginnings in the reform arguments prior to the May Fourth Movement, only supported in theory by leading male intellectuals, so when the depiction started to tangibly take form, serving as a model for female revolutionaries to aspire to, the change was suddenly too much: the Modern Chinese Woman became the "other" that did not fit the demands of modernity.¹⁸ Between the 1920s to the 1940s, China started to adapt to the penetrating ideologies of modernity, yet the patriarchal systems present in Confucianism remained strong and adamant against anything that did not empower men. The fact that male reformers saw women mimicking and developing their own ideas of autonomy—something men had only been initiating—, the Modern Chinese Woman quickly became suspect as an enemy of male progression in China's newly-formed society.

In *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, Madeline Y. Dong explores in "Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?" the conceptualization of the Modern Chinese Woman and the immediate impact the women had on the Chinese public. For example, in the 1935 novel *Shanghai Express* by Zhang Henshui, "the young protagonist Xuchun . . . at first appears to be an ideal modern woman. Her tasteful dress, charming smile, graceful gestures, skillful handling of complicated situations, her eloquence, her

¹⁷ Rofel, Lisa, *Other Modernities*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

independence, and her ability to read English, quickly catch . . . attention."¹⁹ Yet, simultaneously, the novel shows men still determined to view women's newfound modernism as something to be used, where "an older, married businessman . . . is attracted to Xuchun's modern appearance" and desires for her "to become a concubinelike [*sic*] secret lover and submit her life" to him; when "he wakes up only to find that she has disappeared with all his money and stocks," he views "every modern-looking woman" as traitorous to his fantasies and "cries out warnings to all men."²⁰ A little over fifteen years after the commencement of the May Fourth Movement, the Modern Chinese Woman was already becoming a "cautionary tale," primarily a warning guide for Chinese men to follow: "Its crux, the anxiety caused by a combination of attraction to and fear of the unknowable Modern Girl, was shared widely by her representations in news reports, literature, and visual culture."²¹ Before the Modern Chinese Woman could gain any traction, the symbol was warped, losing its power before Chinese women could even begin to positively identify as one.

Yet, this dramatic transformation of the Modern Chinese Woman did not happen without prompting. Even though the male public perpetuated the fear, it was the introduction of media in China that capitalized on abhorrently portraying the Modern Chinese Woman. Independent media sources finally had an opportunity to flourish with modernity, especially able to contribute to the rise of open discussion and debate due to the Chinese Nationalistic government still unable to gain strength over the nation; editorials, creative pieces, exposés, and opinions could freely but briefly be expressed without consequence and, without censor, the Modern Chinese Woman became the hottest controversial topic to publish. In "Advertising, Consumerism, and Nostalgia

¹⁹ Dong, "Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?", 194.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

for the New Woman in Contemporary China," Megan M. Ferry writes, "It is now well accepted that media play a major role in economic development and in promoting consumption, and that media help to shape social constructions that reinforce conceptualizations of femininity and ethnicity. . . . complicit in repackaging the female body within the rubric of consumption and citizenship."²² The media's influence on women is seen as "most evident in . . . the 1930s New Woman," or the Modern Chinese Woman, "at that time an icon of progressive modernity" and "a significant symbolic capital in China's burgeoning economy."²³ Although the May Fourth Movement helped bring modernism to China, media rapidly turned into a powerful tool of experiencing the new waves of that modernity—for good and bad, and often against Chinese women.

Overall, the rise of media began to introduce the political concepts that would bring forth Chinese Communism, drawing attention to the disparity between the classes and the harsh realities of materialism. In this vein, modernism in China started to reflect its Western influence, using women as symbols of advertisement; the Modern Chinese Woman no longer existed as a feminist woman who demanded independence, but instead as a wealthy woman who displayed all the latest fashions and trends. Again, this was good and bad: through sensationalism, Chinese women learned of sexual empowerment, gaining autonomy over their bodily appearance, but also through sensationalism, Chinese women were exploited, where the physical woman was preferred over anything else. This is explored in Sarah E. Stevens' article "Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China," documenting the distinction between the Modern Chinese Woman and its subversion by the Western New Woman, made

²² Ferry, Megan M, "Advertising, Consumerism, and Nostalgia for the New Woman in Contemporary China," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 17 (2003), 277.

²³ *Ibid.*, 277.

complicated by media's portrayal: "The Modern Girl manifests in two distinct ways: as a self-absorbed woman searching for subjectivity and as a dangerous *femme fatale* who devours the urban male. Both of these manifestations reveal deep anxieties over the alienation and loss that accompany modernity," in contrast to wanting the "New Woman [to represent] a positive view of linear modernity and hopes for a strong future China."²⁴ Arguably, in order for China to embrace modernism, Western influences had to be recognized; seen specifically in major cities like Shanghai, modernity showcased "young people [congregating] around Western-style cinemas, dance halls, and coffee shops," where "pictorial magazines such as *Liagyou (The Young Companion)* . . . sold a modern lifestyle that consisted of the latest fashions, make-up, Western brand-name products, Hollywood and Chinese movie stars, and all things urban."²⁵ Yet, simultaneously, the Modern Chinese Girl was too synonymous with the New Woman, too American and, thus, anti-Chinese. With modernism supporting Chinese patriotism, the Modern Chinese Woman all but evaporated into an evil against the new age.

COMMUNISM AND SUICIDE

In "Figuring Modernity," Stevens examines Ding Ling, a major female figure of Chinese feminism who was part of the political transition from Nationalism to Communism between the 1930s and 1950s. As "one of the only canonical women writers in modern Chinese literature," Stevens marks Ling as a conflicting posit of the Modern Chinese Woman plus the Western touches of the New Woman: "Ding Ling's career followed a distinct path, leading from early stories exploring female subjectivity and sexuality to later works emphasizing Communist beliefs about class and revolutionary struggle. Her early stories . . . met with great critical

²⁴ Stevens, Sarah E., "Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China," *NWSA Journal* 15, no. 3 (2003), 82.

²⁵ Stevens, "Figuring Modernity," 84.

acclaim within the parameters of the May Fourth tradition. . . . after Ding Ling joined the Communist Party, her writing underwent a radical change and became unabashedly political (and non-gendered in the process)."²⁶ Thus, Ling is a perfect example of how the ideas of the Modern Chinese Woman were forced to change, trying to repair its image, as the political pulse of China transitioned into the working-class beats of Communism. As Stevens notes, Ling began with writing the Modern Chinese Woman as a woman focused on developing personal independence, but as that representation became contrary to Communism beliefs and more women abandoned the symbol of favor of Communism, Ling altered her works: "Ding Ling followed Mao Zedong's dictum to emphasize politics, peasants, and the Party. Her earlier works were then criticized by the Party as examples of bourgeois . . . Throughout the rest of her career, Ding Ling rose and fell in political favor. Much of the criticism she received was directed at her personal life, her sexuality, her relationships, and her identity as a woman."²⁷ Ling's literary transformation—and consequent disagreeing treatment of her character—was indicative of the nation's overall opinion toward women, seen as unpatriotic toward China's strengthening Communist Party.

Thus, come the 1949's establishment of the People's Republic of China, the May Fourth Movement's original idea of the Modern Chinese Woman was completely rejected. In its place, the New Women Martyrs gained attention, or women who no longer had any other means of earning notice—and, as a result, committed suicide as one final protest against the oppression of women in China. This new image of womanhood was arguably long in the making, even prior to the formation of Communism, identified in texts as early as the 1920s, when the Modern Chinese Woman should have been at its peak. As noted in *Women in Republican China: A Sourcebook*, "Chinese history and literature are replete with instances of suicide as the last and often only

²⁶ Stevens, "Figuring Modernity," 88.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

resort of women in unbearable circumstances. . . . For many women, suicide was not only a means of escape but also a means to take revenge on their oppressors by bringing them social disgrace and supernatural misfortune."²⁸ The New Women Martyr's earned such attention that even Mao Zedong, known as the leading voice of Communism, contributed to the controversial discussions, like in his articles "The Question of Miss Zhao's Personality" and "Concerning the Incident of Miss Zhao's Suicide." Herein, Mao focuses on the suicide of Zhao Wuzhen who, like so many other women, "died on the path of the 'New Woman,'"²⁹ or as Mao writes, "The cause of Miss Zhao's death was entirely determined by her circumstances, that is, by the society in which she lived."³⁰

Although the public appeared to acknowledge that the rise in female suicides were directly linked to the treatment of women, the presence of a male-dominated media still determined to exploit the New Women Martyrs. Deaths were sensationalized as a means to promote other interests, as seen with Mao's romanticization of Zhao's suicide: "Alas, alas, death is preferable to the absence of freedom. The snow-white knife was stained with fresh red blood. The dirt road of Orange Garden Street, splashed with blood, was transformed into a solemn highway to heaven. And with this, Miss Zhao's personality also gushed forth suddenly, shining bright and luminous."³¹ Mao draws attention to Zhao's suicide in order to discredit lingering traditionalism and put forth the intellectual ideas that would blossom into Communism, a moral gray action where one cannot tell if Mao or Zhao is benefited: "Today we need not express more pity for the deceased, but rather we should look for a method that will thoroughly correct this

²⁸ Fong and Lan, "The New Women Martyrs," 76.

²⁹ Fong and Lan, "The New Women Martyrs," 75.

³⁰ Zedong, Mao, "The Question of Miss Zhao's Personality," in *Women in Republican China: A Sourcebook* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 79.

³¹ Zedong, "The Question of Miss Zhao's Personality," 80.

problem," referring to the "perverse customs based on the [Confucian] rites [that] have prevailed in China."³² Like Mao, a myriad of writers, predominantly men, took it upon themselves to illustrate the deaths of the New Women Martyrs, leaving a considerable gap when researching what exactly happened to the Modern Chinese Woman from the May Fourth Movement: where did the women who were being revolutionized go when it was only men speaking for them, in life and in death? Fong and Lan echo this sentiment:

Despite the differences in the circumstances of their deaths, the new women martyrs were portrayed with certain common themes. Those who eulogized them emphasized that they represented far larger numbers of women in a similar plight, that a terribly flawed social system was at fault for their deaths, and that the correction of these flaws was necessary to prevent further such deaths. The new women martyrs were particularly useful as symbols because they could no longer speak for themselves or their motives, and public knowledge about the facts of each case was limited to a few sensational details, leaving the rest for the activist to construe in accordance with his or her particular agenda. The essays [on female suicides] . . . provide an important glimpse at the link between the ideas advocated by these activists and the harsh realities that inspired them. . . . They serve now, as they served then, as dramatic illustrations of the daily obstacles faced by women who sought emancipation in the May Fourth era."³³

Ultimately, the path of the Modern Chinese Woman tapers off in history, transforming from the hypocritical Western New Woman to the desperate New Woman Martyrs, and finally

³² Zedong, Mao, "Concerning the Incident of Miss Zhao's Suicide," in *Women in Republican China: A Sourcebook* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 81.

³³ Fong and Lan, "The New Women Martyrs," 76-7.

into the high number of female suicides seen in China today, where the moral implications of the deaths are as up for debate as the women in question themselves. In "The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic," Bryna Goodman states, "Suicide was the most powerful accusation that a woman could make. . . . The social and legal response to suicide was not so much 'Why?' (a question of individual psychology) but, rather, 'Who drove her to this?' (a question of social responsibility)."³⁴ Thus, in death, just like in life, Chinese women are inextricable from the state; a woman's actions are made for the betterment of her country, not for the betterment of her self, and even when a woman committed suicide through autonomous action, the Chinese public asked what had failed between her and her society, rarely taking a glance at women individually. Today, according to studies performed in 2008, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports that "suicide in China accounts for about a quarter of all suicides worldwide. In contrast to Western populations, in China more women than men kill themselves."³⁵ Dr. Su Zhonghua studies the steady rates of female suicide in China, documented in rural and urban areas, and notes that it is not surprising for women to be so impacted: "Su recalls a traditional Chinese saying that there are three solutions to women's problems: 'one – to cry; two – to scream; and three – to hang herself.'"³⁶ Overall, further research will continue to be conducted as China as a whole continues to develop and progress forward. The search will persist for the Modern Chinese Woman and how her death seems to be constantly present in modern-day China, leaving one to ask: are the tragedies of these women lessened by who announces them or does the very loss of the Modern Chinese Woman, in whatever form she exists in today, only emphasize the need for women's liberation all the more?

³⁴ Goodman, Bryna, "The New Woman Commits Suicide," 68.

³⁵ Zhonghua, Su, "Women and Suicide in Rural China," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 87, no. 12 (2009).

³⁶ Ibid.

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