

FATE-BOUND MANDARIN DUCKS: NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE “FASHION” FOR SUICIDE IN 1931 SUZHOU

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On 4 August 1931, the lead headline of the *Suzhou mingbao* (蘇州明報 Suzhou clarity journal) daily newspaper thundered, “How Disgusting! Keeping Up With Social Fashions Has Gone From Bad To Worse: At the Central Hotel (中央飯店 Zhongyang fandian) Yet Another ‘Couple Achieves Solace’ [from the worries of life].”¹ In the accompanying article and a subsequent report the following day, the paper regaled its readers with the emerging details of the city’s third incident of double-suicide in four months—and the second in less than a week. A twenty-five *sui* retired prostitute named Mao Fengying (毛鳳英 d. 1931) and her longtime lover Duan Zhiliang (段志良 d. 1931) a twenty-six *sui* machinist, had tried unsuccessfully to imitate the scandalous early April deaths of Wang Wenjuan (王文娟 d. 1931), an upper-class Wuxi widow, and Feng Yifu (馮一甫 d. 1931), a former Guomindang official.² According to the newspaper, Wang and Feng’s deaths and the media attention they had garnered had been imprinted upon the public consciousness to the extent that other couples had been encouraged to transcend societal constraints against their marriage by seeking death. The paper further claimed that the overall routine of Wang and Feng’s final days—from their visits to Jiangnan tourist sites and lodging at fine hotels, to their fatal ingestion of opium and barbiturates in a Suzhou luxury hotel room while entwined in a mutual embrace—had quickly become a pattern favored by copycat suicides. As such, Mao and Duan had not merely followed Wang and Feng’s toxic prescription for death. Like their predecessors the week before, Mao and Duan had reenacted Wang and Feng’s itinerary from the last days before their suicide, their simulation seeming to have been motivated by a self-annihilating desire to appropriate the earlier couple’s posthumous fame throughout Jiangsu and Zhejiang as “fate-bound mandarin ducks (同命鴛鴦 *tongming yuanyang*, i.e., paragons of romantic devotion and fidelity).”³

¹ “Rouma! Xue shimao meikuang yuxia” (How Disgusting! Keeping Up With Social Fashions Has Gone From Bad To Worse), *Suzhou mingbao* [hereafter *SMB*], 4 August 1931, 2.

² Ages are given in the traditional Chinese rendering “*sui*,” according to which a person is one *sui* at birth, and the number of *sui* increases by one at each lunar New Year, not the anniversary of one’s birth. The word *sui* is now often used to denote one’s age according to the Western convention “years of age.” This latter practice spread during the Republican period, so it is possible that the ages given in news reports are figured in “years of age.” One’s age in *sui* is one to two years more than the corresponding “years of age” figure. E.g., a child born in early January, before the lunar New Year, would be two *sui* after the New Year, while still just a month old. Given the lack of clarity in the sources, the ages are listed as *sui*.

³ The term derived from the traditional but erroneous belief that mandarin ducks mate for life and that their attachment was so complete that they shared the same fate: together they practiced constant fidelity, but separated they would die of loneliness. The ducks are actually serially monogamous: they mate with one partner per breeding season. The same pair may mate for another season. <http://www.centralpark.com/pages/central-park-zoo/mandarin-duck.html> (accessed 23 February 2006).

Circumstance and the *Suzhou mingbao* conspired to thwart both ambitions. In what the newspaper portrayed as the current local suicide ritual, Mao and Duan had disported for several days in Shanghai and Wuxi before arriving in Suzhou, where they took a room in the outer Chang Gate (閶門外 Changmen wai) district at one of the city's opulent Western-style hotels on 2 August. Realizing that their limited funds were already running low, they had visited a photography studio while still in Wuxi and posed for four photos, which they then had inscribed with the signature "Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks." Such foresight attested to their determination, yet this advance preparation of suicide mementos was not the first step they had taken toward their suicide attempt. More than a week earlier, on 23 July, Duan had penned a letter to the hotel management and staff absolving them of responsibility for their deaths. In the interim, he had methodically written out five more suicide notes to family, friends, and associates on both Mao's and his own behalf. At some point in their travels, the couple also made sure to procure a six-yuan bag of opium and a box of sleeping pills. Their arrangements complete, Mao and Duan were now ready to conclude their mimicry of Wang and Feng by committing suicide while lying together on their hotel bed. The two had decided to take their lethal doses of narcotics during the late night of 2 August. Around 10 pm, however, Mao and Duan began to argue loudly in their hotel room, causing the manager to call the police, who brought the couple into the local precinct. Consequent examination of the room by the authorities and the hotel staff uncovered the suicide notes, sleeping pills, and opium. Saved from killing themselves, the duo was detained for possession of contraband and remanded to police headquarters, where Duan posted bail, and Mao, unable to raise sufficient funds, remained in custody. Summing up the ignominy of their arrest, the lurid revelations regarding their death pact, and their imminent prosecution, *Suzhou mingbao* pronounced the episode a fittingly "vile conclusion to today's fascination" with suicide *à la* Wang and Feng.⁴

This derisive characterization was unlikely to have been intended as a prognostication. Nonetheless, with this editorial remark, the newspaper announced what would be the final denouement of that year's "current fashion (時髦 *shimao*)."

As portrayed in the *Suzhou mingbao*, during the spring and summer of 1931, double suicide, like the *qipao* (旗袍) and high-heeled shoes, had indeed become a dominant fashion in Suzhou. The main difference was that unlike the latest-styled *qipao*, funerary "Long Life" vestments (長壽服 *changshou fu*), once put on, could not be changed for more attractive, lively raiment. The newspaper (and, perhaps, its readership) quickly identified key similarities between the suicide incidents to posit a causative link between media publicity and the advent of a novel, local mode of suicide. The alacrity and earnestness with which this analysis was expounded bespoke a store of societal anxieties and prurience regarding the prevalence of suicide in Suzhou, the liminality of hotels as social sites, the integrity of corpses, and the function of the press in the reporting and propagation of contemporary social problems.

⁴ "Rouma! Xue shimao," *SMB*, 4 August 1931, 2; and, "Rouma dang youqu zhi jieju" (The result of licentiousness), *SMB* 5 August 1931, 2.

These concerns resonated with the broader discussion in Republican society regarding the capacity of the media and, more pointedly, its primary attribute, publicity, to redress or exacerbate the incidence of suicide. In assaying this debate, I will examine contemporary comment on the role that the *Suzhou mingbao* and the press, more generally, played in the production of knowledge regarding suicide and other social problems. According to some journalists, social scientists, and other commentators, the salutary effect of newspaper reporting could serve as an essential adjunct to the state's limited capacity to assess and redress urban suicide. Yet, this positive assessment was counterbalanced by suspicions that press coverage fostered a lethal increase in suicide.

I will then analyze the Wang/Feng and the subsequent two copycat incidents that *Suzhou mingbao* presented as proof of a suicide mania taking hold in Suzhou. The *Mingbao's* reporting on the 1931 rash of double-suicides highlighted the significance of journalistic conventions and the particular editorial decisions of an individual newspaper in shaping the broader public discourse regarding the etiology and prevalence of self-murder⁵ in urban society. The paper's reporters and editors professed their determination to publish the details of these suicides to promote public understanding and thus prevent other incidents. At the same time, however, these same journalists proclaimed that coverage of the Wang/Feng incident had spawned a "fashion" for hotel suicide. Whether or not one accepts that newspaper reports themselves had caused the two latter couples to take their lives in a prescribed fashion, the actions of the three ill-fated couples testify to the significance of the media-generated public realm as a factor in their suicides. All three pairs of "Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks" chose suicide in an attempt to wield the capricious power of publicity and public sentiment to affirm their lives. The moral panic surrounding hotel double-suicide in 1931 Suzhou and the contemporary enthusiasm for journalism as a means of investigating and preventing suicide both underscore the formative effects of newspapers as professional practice, social phenomenon, and intellectual paradigm. For Republican denizens of Suzhou and other cities, newspapers and the sensational, sentimentalized publicity that they generated constituted a disarming novel social field fraught with menace and opportunity.

SUICIDE IN THE PRESS

During the 1920s and 1930s, the *Suzhou mingbao*, like many other urban Chinese newspapers, was replete with reports of suicide. Many of these items were small, almost incidental, laconically titled notices, such as "Guangdong man kills self" or "Traveler commits suicide." Others screamed out to the reader with large heavy print, interpolated sub-headlines, and, occasionally, exclamation points or other punctuation: "Four Suicides Yesterday: A Teacher's Beloved Wife—Oppressed by her Mother-in-Law!—Rashly Throws Self into a Canal..."⁶ The motivations for suicide, if known, were varied and complex, yet headlines attested to

⁵ "Self-murder" is the literal translation of *zisha*, the most common modern Chinese term for suicide.

⁶ "Guangdong ren zisha" (Guangdong Man Kills Self), *SMB*, 8 May 1931, 2; "Lüke zisha" (Traveler commits suicide), *SMB*, 19 September 1934, 2; and, "Zuori fasheng sijian zisha'an" (Yesterday there were four suicides), *SMB*, 19 December 1929, 3.

the fact that suicides were often linked to the intimate realm of romantic and conjugal miseries as well as a plethora of economic oppressions and social pressures: “Youth Commits Suicide by Drinking Sleeping Medicine: Unmarried Man Addicted to Brothels, Yesterday Poisons Self Due to Debts,” “Losing a Suit Against Her Husband, A Woman Hangs Herself at a Meeting of the Women’s Association.”⁷ The proliferation of reports chronicling the ripening of quotidian social conflict into desperation and suicide demonstrated that Suzhou manifested a common national social pathology that sociologist Deng Rongling (鄧榮齡) memorably characterized as a “wave of suicide running through our nation’s society [that] has gradually shifted from a placid stage to a billowing surge!... in any large city there is on average news of some four or five suicides which take place right before our eyes each day!”⁸ Significantly, Deng established the scope of the burgeoning suicide epidemic by invoking the reports (and discussions) of urban newspapers. Published in the newspaper, accounts of individual suicides became elements in a national pathology, not just the sad facts of modern urban life.

The connection between Republican-era newspapers and death is particularly resonant because the newspapers themselves, in this case *Suzhou mingbao*, attest to the social and physical aspects of transience and decay. The paper’s publisher, Zhang Shuliang (張叔良 1892-1960), had invested in an earlier city newspaper and worked as a political reporter and editor before assuming ownership and reconstituting it in 1925 as the *Suzhou mingbao*. His broadsheet quickly became one of the city’s major five dailies, yet it outlasted its rivals by publishing up through 1949 (during the same period, the city also supported several dozen tabloids of varying longevity). Unlike more staid rivals, the paper attempted to achieve a cosmopolitan scope by printing selected national and international news from a mixture of newswire stories and the previous day’s Shanghai evening press. Nonetheless, the newspaper’s four pages (the first of which was fully given over to advertisements) were almost exclusively dedicated to local stories readily within the public realm, such as political and commercial events, along with police blotter items and other “social news (社會新聞 *shehui xinwen*).”⁹ The newspaper rarely published investigative pieces.

Like the large Shanghai urban dailies, the form and structure of which Zhang emulated, *Suzhou mingbao* attempted to forge an identity as an authoritative local voice and often featured stories on the particular customs and foibles of Suzhou life. The paper’s supplement, *Mingjing* (明晶), served as a platform for renowned local writers such as Fan Yanqiao (范煙橋 1894-1967) and Chen Qubing (陳去病 1874-1933), among others. Zhang’s metropolitan ambitions aside, the paper remained a parochial journal focusing on local events. The paper continued to publish after the city fell to Japanese forces in late 1937, yet Zhang feared that the occupiers might

⁷ “Qingnian fu anshenyaoshui zisha” (Youth kills self with sleeping medicine), *SMB*, 10 November 1928, 3; and “Furen zai funuhui zisha” (Woman kills self at women’s association), *SMB*, 14 March 1930.

⁸ Deng Rongling, “Woguo zisha wenti de yanzhongxing ji qi jiejiu tujing” (The seriousness of our country’s suicide problem and how to redress it), *Xueshu shijie* (Scholarship world) 1, no. 6 (1935): 49-55.

⁹ During the early mid-1930s, the paper added a second four-page section.

seek to delegitimize opposition to their rule by censoring the past. He therefore took the extraordinary step of burying a complete thirteen-year run of the paper in a wooden coffin.¹⁰ The buried cache survived, unlike the archives of other local papers, which now exist as only a few, scattered issues. As such, its pages command more authority and influence now as an historical source than they did during the Republic as a contemporary chronicle. Indeed, for this article, the *Suzhou mingbao* supplants the originally much broader world of Republican-era Suzhou media.

Discussions of suicide in Suzhou newspapers differed significantly from those in Shanghai in terms of gender discourse. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Shanghai press often highlighted particular cases of female suicide, such as that of the movie star Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉 1910-1935) or theretofore unheralded figures like Ma Zhenhua (馬振華 1898-1928) and Xi Shangzhen (席上珍 d. 1922), as emblematic of shifting gender mores and other characteristics of modern urban life, including the power of the press, sexual harassment in the workplace, etc. This fascination with the self-murder of the “New Woman (新女性 *xin nǚxing*, or 新婦女 *xin fùnǚ*)” was strikingly absent from the pages of the *Mingbao*; the deaths or even the local existence of New Women was not a major concern of the *Suzhou mingbao* or other local papers.¹¹ Both Suzhou and outside writers were quick to note that the city maintained a more conservative social atmosphere than Shanghai. Whereas the larger metropolis was the epitome of modernity and demonstrated everything that China would become, in the estimation of many locals and outsiders, Suzhou remained a city characterized by (or, more negatively, enmired in) traditional mores and architecture, elite literati culture, and “feudal” class relations. These verities not only reflected the fact that life in Suzhou was distinct from that of Shanghai and other major cities, but that Suzhou both occupied and played a rather different role in contemporary culture.¹² Indeed, as we shall explore below, the same was true of the

¹⁰ Suzhoushi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui (Suzhou city gazetteer compilation committee), eds., *Suzhoushi zhi* (Suzhou city gazetteer) (Suzhou: Suzhoushi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, 1994), 1:840, 3:770-777. The newspaper’s wartime interment marred the historical record: many issues became stained with water or mold, and some pages, including several related to the suicides discussed here, rotted partially away. The extant artifact, a sheaf of darkly yellowed, brittle pages marred by jagged, black decomposed edges, is now itself a *memento mori*, a quality that underscores the ephemeral nature of the “new(s)” events (death and suicide among them) recorded in its pages. (The *Suzhou mingbao*’s obsolescence was later furthered by the cavalier actions of the Jiangsu Provincial Library, which took possession of the papers from the Suzhou Municipal Library and returned them after having sliced the broadsheets in two in order to more easily take standard-sized microfilm images.) This sympathetic resonance between the documents’ aesthetic and evidentiary dimensions constitutes one of the prime, if ineffable, pleasures of using newspapers for historical research. Such visceral sensations (available even to microfilm readers, as the paper’s decay is readily apparent) augment the intellectual satisfactions of evidential research, historicity, and historiographic significance to make newspapers a singularly bewitching primary source.

¹¹ See Bryna Goodman, “The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 1 (2005): 67-102; and her article in this issue of *Twentieth-Century China*.

¹² For the image of Suzhou in contemporary journalism, see Peter Carroll, *Between Heaven and Modernity: Reconstructing Suzhou, 1895-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006 forthcoming), 135-37; Xiayin, “Suzhou wenhua zhi qingbao” (Report on Suzhou culture), *Wenyi*

press as well. The material and social particularities of place underscore the necessity of moving beyond Shanghai and Beijing to examine the unique contours and effects of newspapers in Suzhou and other cities as well. Only then will it be possible to cobble together a somewhat representative argument regarding the power and function of the early twentieth-century press on Chinese society.

NEWSPAPERS, SOCIAL QUESTIONS, AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

During the Republican period, newspapers and vital statistics engaged in a dialectical production of knowledge regarding suicide. As Joan Judge and Barbara Mittler have discussed, by serving as a common medium for the exchange of contemporary information and opinion, newspapers were a prime instrument in the constitution of the Chinese national and particular local mass publics.¹³ Individual news items, as a result of their appearance in the newspaper, then entered into the store of public knowledge. This flow of information generally determined the nature of discussions within civil society. In terms of suicide as a social phenomenon, the plethora of individual cases and the odd celebrated instance of suicide in a locality helped stimulate greater awareness regarding the dimensions of suicide in a particular community. At the same time, the press, by virtue of its commentary and by the mere fact of providing publicity to acts that previously had remained obscure, promoted the notion that suicide was a recent and growing contemporary problem in both particular cities and the nation as a whole.

This awareness of self-murder as a particularly modern social problem was also promoted by an increasing emphasis on “social news” in Republican journalism. Previously disparaged by many editors as trifles better consigned to the mosquito press or formulaic miscellaneous items filed by correspondents, suicide, romance, and other social stories became prime components of Republican-era dailies. Furthermore, as one 1928 journalism survey approvingly noted, “these items are [now] described in a novelistic fashion, detailing the many twists, so that there is almost no difference from a detective story or romance novel,” a development welcomed by many common readers.¹⁴ Yet news stories may have done more than excite publicity. Citing the work of Ruth Cavan, who, along with her more celebrated male colleagues Louis Wirth and William Park, was a pioneer of the Chicago School, Chinese sociologists posited that newspaper coverage of suicide, by increasing public awareness of individual suicides, contributed to an increase in suicide itself. For

xinwen, 3 August 1931, 2; and *Luyou zazhi* (Travel magazine) and the “Ziyoutan” (Free talk) section of *Shenbao*, which frequently had short pieces by “Suzhou writers” (i.e., mandarins of the Shanghai literary world who were from Suzhou and still maintained a residence and close ties there), such as Bao Tianxiao and Zheng Yimei.

¹³ Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: ‘Shibao’ and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); and, Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?: Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai’s News Media, 1872-1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004). Also see works by Bryna Goodman and Timothy Weston, including their essays in this issue.

¹⁴ Zhang Jinglu, *Zhongguo de xinwen jizhe yu xinwenzhi* (China’s news reporters and newspapers) (Shanghai: Xiandai shuju, 1930; orig. 1928), 61-62, in *Min’guo congshu 3 bian* (Republican omnibus, third series) v. 41 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1991).

instance, one study baldly stated that lacking specialized institutes or books from which to study proven methods for killing themselves, “suicides generally glean their knowledge of self-murder from discussions of suicide in newspapers,” which had effectively become self-annihilation manuals. The ubiquity of daily and semi-weekly papers magnified the carnage to the extent that suicide had developed into an endemic urban plague.¹⁵

For many sociologists, the purported dangers of newspapers and magazines were counterbalanced by an appreciation of journalism’s putative scientific rigor. The format and conventions of contemporary print journalism for researching and reporting information had greatly shaped the conceptualization of social science research itself, while the *modus operandi* of a reporter was upheld as a benchmark for social scientists. As the University of Chicago-trained sociologist Chen Yifu (陳一甫) explained in his widely used textbook *Shehui diaocha yu tongjixue* (社會調查與統計學 Social investigation and statistics), to the reporter, considerations of weather or personal hardship were immaterial in the context of an opportunity to gather information or conduct an interview. “In pursuit of a news story, a reporter does not mind how long it takes, the time of day, or running into successive difficulties ... he must gather his information and only then will leave. In order to be effective, social surveyors should emulate this method.” Yet modern-day reporting provided more than just a model for research professionalism and methodology.¹⁶

Chen’s textbook recommended that journalism itself could serve as primary material for social science research and thereby help alleviate the shortcomings of contemporary vital statistics. The creation and improvement of social statistics and other forms of knowledge about society remained an imperative for researchers and policy-makers throughout the Republic. Sociologists and politicians optimistically viewed the production of detailed information regarding social problems as but the first step toward redressing individual and systemic ills.¹⁷ However, the compilation of methodologically sound and accurate social statistics, whether at the national,

¹⁵ Ruth Shonle Cavan, *Suicide* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1928), 262-266; Wu Jingchao, *Dushi shehuixue* (Urban sociology) (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1929), 60-67; and Shi Hanze, *Zisha wenti* (The suicide problem) (Shanghai: Huatong shuju, 1930), 130-131. One of Cavan’s students at the University of Chicago, Wu applied her insights into the role of urban social dislocation on the etiology of suicide in the USA and Europe to urban China. Wu stated that newspapers did encourage suicide, an argument that slightly misrepresented Cavan’s position. Cavan argued that newspapers likely only influenced those already susceptible to suicide and therefore effected little overall increase in self-killing. She therefore refuted an ostensible 1927 suicide epidemic among American college students as a case of media-generated social hysteria. She may have similarly criticized some of the many popular and academic arguments (including those that cited her work) regarding the putative power of the press to affect increases in suicide in China.

¹⁶ Chen Yifu, *Shehui diaocha yu tongjixue* (Social investigation and statistics) (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), 28.

¹⁷ Chen’s apotheosis resonated with journalism professionals’ charge that a reporter should be a transcendent observer/researcher in the public service striving to reflect and form public opinion, transmit knowledge, and raise morality. For the ideal role and methods of contemporary journalists see Zhang Jinglu, *Zhongguo de xinwen jizhe*, 10-39, 47-53; Xu Baohuang, *Xinwen xue gangyao* (Outline of journalism) (Shanghai: Lianhe shudian, 1930), 6-12.

provincial, or local level, proved elusive. During the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937), the Nationalist Party government, with financial and technical support from the Russell Sage Foundation and other international donors, carried out scientific censuses of individual *xian* (縣 counties) or adumbrated counts of particular provinces as preparation for undertaking a full national census, a quest that remained unfulfilled when war with Japan broke out in 1937.

Despite limitations in terms of survey size, representative sample, and methodology, the initial reams of official data transformed academic, state, and popular understandings of contemporary social problems. In terms of suicide, the advent of vital statistics in the late 1920s substantiated the notion of a suicide epidemic and fixed the reality of its annual (if not daily) growth in the public mind. Since the 1900s, a growing cohort of journalists and opinion-makers had been citing the accumulated weight of anecdotal evidence (often individual press reports) to proclaim that China's cities were embroiled in an unprecedented, spiraling epidemic of suicide. This discussion, although ardent, had lacked authoritative proof. It was only in the late 1920s that social commentators were able to utilize social statistics to demonstrate authoritatively that urban suicide was both widespread and increasing year by year. The compilation of suicide statistics had begun with Shanghai in 1928; this initial data-set led to the astonishing discovery that some 2,327 persons, or one person every three to four hours, had committed suicide from mid-1928 to mid-1929. Contrary to all known foreign examples, this survey demonstrated that more women than men had succeeded in killing themselves. These baleful statistics were parsed minutely in the press, academic journals, and books; in fact, the shock they provoked was so great that journalists and other social commentators used these findings to conclude that urban China was being engulfed by a burgeoning plague.¹⁸

This discovery of widespread urban pathology generated an impetus for the production of social statistics regarding other communities, yet by the 1930s, only some twenty-five large cities had compiled social statistics regarding suicide and other social problems. The vast majority of urban communities, let alone towns, villages, and rural districts, had yet to compile any vital statistics. Others, such as Suzhou, appear to have kept them for only very brief periods of time. In those large cities where suicide statistics were being compiled, the collection of data was often irregular or marred by bureaucratic tangles or procedural anomalies in the field. As such, official state social science studies were themselves inadequate. Indeed, contemporary research suggested that it might be difficult, if not impossible, to conjure the exact number of suicides. Liang Zhenxian (梁振賢), a statistician at Zhongshan University, argued that since the end result of suicide was no different from death by any other cause, unless it were possible to attest to the psychological outlook of each decedent, there was no way to be certain that most deaths had not in

¹⁸ Shi, *Zisha wenti*, 30-31. The first few years of statistics for Guangzhou were similar to those for Shanghai. Later statistics from Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other cities were generally much lower; subsequent gender ratios for Shanghai or for other cities often differed as well: men were sometimes found to commit suicide with greater frequency. Nonetheless, the verities of the initial sets of suicide statistics remained fixed in the popular (and sometimes scholarly) literature, even in the face of contrary evidence.

fact been suicides. Therefore, the actual number of suicides was surely far greater than that depicted by official figures. At the same time, Liang concluded, there was an inchoate but undoubtedly large population of people suffering from dire social oppression similar to that which had moved others to self-annihilation. Unlike suicides, this cohort lacked the will to commit suicide outright, and alternately chose dissipation, danger, or violence as a means of killing themselves slowly. Perhaps these other social victims needed to be included in official suicide tallies. Who then could claim that suicide was not a fearsome plague striking publicly while also metastasizing in secret? Thus, even the most scrupulously prepared scientific data was criticized as inevitably under-representing the seriousness of the suicide epidemic. Through investigative journalism, newspapers could bring unknown cases to light and serve as an essential addendum to officially prepared data. Social scientists such as Chen Yifu therefore suggested that researchers and officials turn to the media. In particular, newspaper and magazine accounts contained numerous accounts of prominent social events and questions, especially more unsavory matters such as suicide, robbery, family conflict, etc., which often eluded scientific measurement.¹⁹

In Suzhou, media discussion and coverage of suicide essentially acted as a substitute for any government response. In August 1929, while the city was enjoying the enlarged police and social services afforded by the presence of a provincially supported municipal administration, Mayor Lu Quan (陸權 1891-1978) ordered local hospitals to begin compiling suicide statistics in conjunction with the police. Citing a seeming increase in the incidence of suicide in previous months, Mayor Lu argued that such a statistical overview would help the authorities assess the situation and investigate present cases while also preventing future outbreaks. The reported tally of fifteen suicides for May and June 1929, duly reported by the *Suzhou mingbao*, confirmed that the numbers were indeed woefully high, yet Lu's initiative met resistance. Compliance was spotty and he reissued his order.²⁰

It remains unclear how long the statistics were compiled. Nonetheless, Suzhou suicide data is glaringly absent from local, provincial, and national official journals and yearbooks. This absence suggests that the municipal government was unable to compel the production of statistics for very long. Furthermore, unlike Shanghai and Guangzhou, where the local press diligently parsed suicide data, analogous discussions did not appear in the *Mingbao* after the 1929 summer figures.

¹⁹ Liang Zhenxian, "Zisha tongji zhi yanjiu" (Suicide statistic research), *Tongji yuebao* (Statistics Monthly) 1, no. 9 (1929), 20; and Chen, *Shehui diaocha*, 18.

²⁰ "Liangge yue zhong zishazhe" (Two months' suicides), *SMB*, 21 August 1929, 2; and "Zisha anjian cengjian sangchu" (Unprecedented increase in suicides cases), *SMB*, 7 August 1929, 2. The Nanjing-Decade municipal government was endowed with many more regulatory and developmental powers and agencies serving the city than the county government that had governed the urban and surrounding rural areas since the early Republic. The Jiangsu provincial government established a municipal administration with the aim of turning the city into a showcase for modern urban economic and social development. A "preparatory" municipal government was established 1 July 1927; the formal period of "full" municipal government lasted 29 October 1928 to 16 May 1930, when it was terminated due to its excessive cost. The city then reverted to a county administration.

Given the frequency of press complaints regarding self-killing, the absence of official vital statistics and other state responses testified to the seeming incapacity of the local government to assess, let alone remedy, suicide as a social problem in Suzhou. The relative impotence of the Suzhou state administration underscored the extent to which the media and, to a lesser extent, social science reports dominated civil society discussions regarding suicide.²¹

Echoing Emile Durkheim, Ruth Cavan, and other foreign sociologists, Chinese social scientists, journalists, and other commentators argued that self-murder was neither a random occurrence nor an isolated individual phenomenon. Whether in effect or cause, individual suicide was a pathology afflicting all of society. Without the requisite social environment, there could be no suicide. Though impossible to eliminate, it might be possible to lessen its prevalence by changing society.²² Ways of effecting the necessary reforms were less than clear. Although moralists often declaimed that emulating traditionalist values would dissolve modern pathologies such as suicide, many others were less sure how to redress the crisis. State authorities, for their part, were often aware of their limited institutional capacities. In 1930, Guangzhou and Shanghai boasted the most developed city social service administrations and were the earliest cities to produce vital statistics, yet their response to suicide was to plaster the city with slogans denouncing it, a method that even the policy's proponents ruefully admitted had doubtful efficacy.²³ It was clear that newspapers had a significant role to play in increasing public knowledge about the toll of suicide on contemporary society, though whether the net effect would be malignant or benign remained moot. Both aspects of newspapers' ambiguous potential were prominent in the *Suzhou mingbao* coverage of the suicide of the initial pair of ill-fated lovers, Wang Wenjuan and Feng Yifu.

MR. SHUANG DEWEI: THE SUICIDE OF THE COUPLE ACHIEVES SOLACE

On the morning of 8 April 1931, the *Suzhou mingbao* was initially irrelevant to the dissemination of news regarding a shocking pair of suicides. Reporting the events to the broader community the following day, the paper noted that once word of a male-female double-suicide at the Great Eastern Hotel (大東旅社 Dadong lüshe)

²¹ Guangzhou tebieshi zhengfu tongjigu, *Jin liangnian lai Guangzhoushi zhi zisha tongji* (Guangzhou city suicide statistics for the past two years) (Guangzhou: Guangzhou tebieshi zhengfu tongjigu, 1930), 10.

²² Liang, "Zisha tongji zhi yanjiu," 38. Émile Durkheim's *Suicide, A Study in Sociology* was not fully translated into Chinese until 1988, yet it was often discussed by sociologists and other commentators in academic and popular publications. Most social scientists (Chinese and foreign) presumably read the book in French, as it was not translated for several decades: Spanish (1928), English (1951), Japanese (1968), German (1983), Russian (1994), and Korean (1995). Émile Durkheim, *Le suicide; étude de sociologie* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1897). Other parts of Durkheim's oeuvre, such as *Rules of Sociological Method* [*Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1895)] which appeared in Chinese translation in 1925, prompted many to reconceptualize suicide, seemingly the most anomic and haphazard of social acts, as a systematic phenomenon that occurred according to observable patterns.

²³ Guangzhou tebieshi zhengfu tongjigu, *Jin liangnian lai*, 10.

in the outer Chang Gate district had leaked out in the morning, the news spread quickly among people living in the immediate quarter. In fact, the novelty of this suicide by lovers in their hotel room piqued such interest that within hours area denizens completely blocked the street in front of the hotel. The crowd also came to occupy the lobby and stairways inside the hotel itself and dispersed only at noon with the arrival of the police, who had been belatedly dispatched to restore public order and gather evidence.

The newspaper headline, “Young Man and Woman Take Poison: Shared-Fate Mandarin Ducks Die in Mutual Embrace in Hotel,” summarized the few incontrovertible facts relating to the case. Hotel staff maintained that the couple had had characteristic Yangzhou accents, but their identities were otherwise unclear. The man had registered as “Shuang Dewei (雙得尉), aged thirty, academic,” and had claimed to teach in Hangzhou. Although clearly a pseudonym, the name, which could be interpreted as “Couple Achieves Solace,” could in retrospect offer an explanation as to their motivations for killing themselves. The woman was anonymous but seemed to have been a young student in her early twenties. The pair had arrived from Hangzhou three days earlier with much luggage and had spent the previous days sightseeing.

In light of the mystery and significant public interest, in his initial dispatches, the anonymous reporter took pains to provide careful descriptions of the physical evidence. Readers were provided a listing of the victims’ belongings that included the hallmarks of the woman’s jewelry, details that, the report noted, might provide a clue as to the couple’s identity. The same principle was applied to the bodies, which had been found lying together on the bed facing south, as one might orient a corpse for burial. In describing the deceased’s attire, the reporter noted that the woman had a modish hair cut; her body had turned purplish, and blood and saliva had issued from her nose and mouth, soiling her clothing. These marks and subsequent forensic examination demonstrated that the couple had died from ingesting opium and sleeping pills. The police took photos of the two bodies together where they originally lay, and then placed each on the floor, propping their torsos up against the wall in order to make images of each corpse singly. The police then sent out reports to all the Suzhou and Shanghai newspapers in the hope that the deceased’s family would recognize the victims from the written description and come to Suzhou to identify the bodies, which were encoffined and placed in a polder field pending retrieval by kin.²⁴

That expectation was soon disappointed. As the days passed, the identification of the “Shuang Dewei/Couple Achieves Solace” suicides, as the *Mingbao* began to call them, became a compelling goal for the police and the public alike. The police had been unable to identify the corpses as local people and followed up on their initial press release by distributing forensic photos of the dead to police, newspapers, and magazines throughout Jiangsu and Zhejiang, requesting that they

²⁴ “[Qing]nian nannü shuang fudu: tongming yuanyang lushe jiaojing er si” (Young man and woman take poison: fate-bound mandarin ducks die in mutual embrace in hotel) *SMB*, 9 April 1931, 2; and “Qingnian nannü shuang fudu: tongming yuanyang lushe jiaojing ersi (2)” (Young man and woman take poison: fate-bound mandarin ducks die in mutual embrace in hotel [2]) *SMB*, 10 April 1931, 2.

publicize the photos in order to aid the investigation. (It is unclear if the photos were distributed to the *Mingbao* or not. In any event, the paper did not publish them.) The on-going police investigation seems to have heightened public interest. The *Mingbao* reported that rumors immediately began to circulate to the effect that the photographs had already proven effective and that bereaved family members had already arrived in Suzhou in order to identify the bodies. A number of curiosity-seekers began to stake out the field where the remains were stored so as not to miss the relatives identifying the bodies. Others inundated the Great Eastern Hotel with persistent phone calls asking for the latest details. The barrage tried the staff's patience by severely interfering with the hotel's operations.²⁵

As the victims' identities remained unknown, *Suzhou mingbao* began to dedicate ever more resources to its own investigation—a rarity for the paper—and dispatched reporters throughout the area to follow up leads. The answer to the pair's identity came unexpectedly in a one o'clock am telegram on the morning of 18 April from the *Xin Wuxibao* (新無錫報 New Wuxi journal). Like several other area papers, it had published the photographs of the deceased that had been distributed by the Suzhou police. Earlier that evening a reader had recognized the male victim as a former colleague from the county administration office in Taixian (泰縣) in central Jiangsu. This "close friend" had then visited *Xin Wuxibao*'s press office and identified the suicides. The Wuxi paper, in turn, had telegraphed the information to *Suzhou mingbao*. In announcing the scoop, the *Mingbao* engaged in a bit of braggadocio: the paper promoted itself as the main actor in the investigation by claiming that its prowess had eclipsed that of the police and other government authorities.²⁶ This characterization was only partly true, for the press could not be but an adjunct to the police. Manpower and financial strictures limited the police's investigative capacities. Furthermore, in light of the fact that the networks of social publicity were largely controlled by a combination of private and state media, the police had no option but to view the press as an adjutant to official bureaucratic and police efforts. At the same time, this symbiosis proved quite beneficial for the paper, as police and state administrative matters constituted a substantial core of the *Mingbao*'s contents.

The telegram identified the male victim as Feng Yifu, a thirty-some *sui* tubercular invalid and former Guomindang county official. Feng had enjoyed a high reputation and been viewed as a rising star in the political realm until illness had forced him into retirement. His passing was therefore a prominent political event. Nonetheless, the growing scandal and crux of popular and press interest focused on his female lover and co-suicide. She was revealed to be Wang Wenjuan, a twenty-five-*sui* widow of the Li family, a wealthy Taixian merchant clan, and mother of an eight-*sui* son. Wang had married the youngest scion of the Li family via an arranged marriage when she was seventeen. Reportedly, she and her husband had established a mutual sympathy and deep attraction for one another. Within a year, Wang gave birth to her son, but within the next she had become a widow. Her tragedy was

²⁵ "Tongming yuanyang qingsi'an" (Case of the fate-bound mandarin ducks' love suicide), *SMB*, 18 April 1931, 2; and "Suzhou: Ludi shuang fudu'an zhenxiang" (Suzhou: the truth in the couple hotel poison case), *Shenbao*, 20 April 1931, 7.

²⁶ "Tongming yuanyang qingsi'an," *SMB*, 18 April 1931, 2.

exacerbated by the Li family's conservative mores, which prohibited her from remarrying. Wang and Feng had met and embarked on a secretive affair when he had been a guest of the Li family while serving as the head of the local *xian* administration. Li family politics had complicated matters: as the sole male heir in his generation, Wang's son was due to inherit a substantial legacy. Wang therefore worried that the discovery of her affair with Feng could serve as a pretext for depriving her son of his inheritance. Feng's health, in the meantime, had grown increasingly precarious, and he did not expect to live long. Despairing due to their inability to acknowledge their union, the couple had gone sightseeing in Hangzhou before traveling to Suzhou for the purpose of ending their lives.²⁷

Although resonating with the larger regional and national obsession with suicide as a modern societal epidemic, the "Shuang Dewei" suicides had theretofore remained a local news item. With the revelation of Wang and Feng's identities, however, the story became a newsworthy scandal for the mainline Shanghai press. On 20 April, almost two weeks after the suicides, *Shenbao* published a brisk but thorough account of Wang and Feng's deaths and the gathering scandal in Suzhou. *Suzhou mingbao* would continue to "shake all Suzhou (轟動全蘇 *hongdong quan Su*)" with tantalizing details relating to the affair over the next two months, yet *Shenbao* did not pursue them.²⁸ This reticence bespeaks the segmentation of the Republican media-scape into local news markets, as well as the selective but largely unacknowledged parochial nature of "national" Shanghai papers like *Shenbao*.

The parochialism of news coverage was underscored by another contemporary comment from the Shanghai press. Writing for the Shanghai metropolitan tabloid *Jingbao* (晶報 *The Crystal*), a reporter remarked that the current "suicide craze," like so many other things new, had originated in Shanghai and then spread to secondary cities like Suzhou and Wuxi. As evidence, he pointed to the scandals surrounding the Wang/Feng double suicide in Suzhou and a concurrent case in Wuxi, the simultaneity of which demonstrated that a theretofore metropolitan taste for suicide had spread to the provinces. According to the social geographic vision underlying this report, Suzhou and other area communities were stagnant burghs in need of the revitalizing novel trends emanating from Shanghai—even the lethal ones. While such cosmopolite parochialism characterized much Republican-era Shanghai media commentary, Suzhou reporters and other writers often failed to endorse it.²⁹ Suzhou journalists, like their Shanghai counterparts, reported primarily on local news for area readers and tended to analyze events from a localist

²⁷ "Tongming yuanyang qingsi'an," *SMB*, 18 April 1931, 2; "Tongming yuanyang qingsi'an zhenxiang xuji" (Truth in the fate-bound mandarin ducks love suicide case, continued) *SMB*, 19 April 1931, 2; and "Benbao tepai jizhe fu Taixian diaocha" (This paper dispatches special correspondent to Tai County to investigate) *SMB*, 22 April 1931, 2.

²⁸ "*Hongdong quan Su*" alternately means "shake all Jiangsu," which is how the *SMB* represented both the scandal's popularity and the effects of its coverage. The story did have legs, but the dearth of coverage in the Shanghai establishment press undercuts the claim that it "shook all Jiangsu." Or rather, while the story may have convulsed all Jiangsu, the tremor was stronger and of longer duration in Suzhou. "Suzhou: Lüdi shuang fudu'an zhenxiang," *Shenbao*, 20 April 1931, 7.

²⁹ Rong Yangsheng, "Liangxi yi lüke fudu ji" (A Liangxi traveler poisons self); *Jingbao* (Shanghai), 27 April 1931, 3.

perspective. Although the Shanghai reporter may have been ignorant, *Suzhou mingbao* reporters and readers would have been aware of a plethora of earlier infamous suicides, all of which belied the notion that self-murder was a novel trend originating from Shanghai. That is not to say that they did not point to an intersection of Suzhou events and greater area or national social patterns, but that societal trends were perceived through their local implications.³⁰

In Suzhou, the developing scandal surrounding the suicide of Wang and Feng moved the paper to ratchet up its investigation and send reporters to interview the Li and Wang families and friends of Feng. These conversations produced a new round of revelations and materials, including individual snapshots of the two victims. The photos allowed the paper to deliver on the stated aim of its written reportage, revealing the “true face” of the suicide case.³¹ Rather than rush the photographs into publication, *Mingbao* attempted to create a buildup of public interest by announcing on 22 April in a large bold-print headline that “Snapshots of the Deceased Taken Before Their Deaths Will be Published in Tomorrow’s Paper.”³²

The publication of the two photos was somewhat remarkable in itself (see Figures 1 and 2).³³ Unlike Shanghai papers, whether tabloids such as *Jingbao* or major dailies such as *Shenbao*, which contained numerous photographs on a daily basis, with the exception of an occasional image of a national political figure or meeting, the suicides’ portraits were two of the few photographs to appear in the *Suzhou mingbao* during the spring and summer of 1931. This dearth was not an epiphenomenon. The paper’s news pages were dominated by written reports and advertisements and generally bereft of news photographs or illustrations, likely due to considerations of space and the cost of offset lithography.³⁴ During the late 1920s and early ‘30s, the few local news photos that ran in the paper were more than likely related to urban development (such as a 1928 road-opening ceremony or a 1931 architectural model for the new Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall), unusually prominent events (such as the 1934 rededication of the city’s nationally renowned former Suzhou Prefectural Confucian Temple), the execution of bandits, or suicide.³⁵ The appearance of the photographs of suicides therefore testified to the editors’ recognition of suicide as a news story of great social interest—and, one presumes, increased newspaper sales.

³⁰ Similarly, *SMB* did not report on significant Shanghai suicides of national interest such as that by Ma Zhenhua (discussed by Bryna Goodman in this issue) or even that of the film actress Ruan Lingyu.

³¹ “Tongming yuanyang qingsi’an zhenxiang xuji,” *SMB*, 19 April 1931, 2.

³² “Benbao tepai jizhe fu Taixian diaocha,” *SMB*, 22 April 1931, 2.

³³ “Dadong lüshe tongming yuanyang qingsi’an” (Great Eastern hotel fate-bound mandarin ducks suicide case), *SMB*, 23 Apr 1931, 2.

³⁴ Advertisements, by contrast, often included photos and drawings.

³⁵ “Huqiulu zuori juxing potuli zhi qingxing” (Yesterday’s Tiger Hill road groundbreaking ceremony), *SMB*, 22 August 1928, 2; “Jianzaozhong zhi Xuanmiaoguan shangchang moxing” (Model of Xuanmiaoguan market under construction), *SMB*, 31 July 1931; “Zuori qiangjue zuifan shiwu ming” (Yesterday fifteen bandits were executed), *SMB*, 9 May 1930, n.p.; and, “Kongzi danchen jinian shenghui” (Lavish assembly commemorates Confucius’s birthday), *SMB*, 28 August 1934, n.p.



Figures 1 and 2. *Suzhou mingbao* obtained these individual snapshots of the “Shared-Fate Manderine Ducks” Wang Wenjuan and Feng Yifu from the victims’ friends and relatives. The photographs publication was heralded as a news event in itself. Source: “Dadong lusher tongming yuanyang qingsi’an,” *SMB* 23 April 1931, 2.

As noted above, in places such as Suzhou where the state was not able or willing to compile social statistics regarding suicide, newspapers became the main, if not the sole, instrument of measuring and comprehending suicide. They performed social relief (and in this case, investigative) services that in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other larger cities were performed by the police. The publication of the Wang and Feng photographs (the portraits in the *Mingbao* and the inquest photos elsewhere) was thus particularly apt: long before photographs began to appear regularly in the newspaper, photography had been used by Chinese state authorities as a tool for establishing people’s identity, solving crimes, and reinforcing public order.³⁶ The role of the photograph here was quite similar: to establish the identity of the suicides in order to understand their act and thus redress the threat of suicide, while also appealing to popular interest and stimulating newspaper sales.

³⁶ Ge Tao, “Zhaoxiang yu Qingmo Minchu Shanghai shehui shenghuo” (Photography and social life in Late Qing and Republican Shanghai), *Shilin* (Historical review), no. 4 (2003), [1-12], http://historyshanghai.com/sl_read.asp?Articleid=243 (accessed 23 February 2006).

In assessing the narrative strategies and emphases deployed in newspaper coverage of suicide, it is important to remember that the media was quite eager to capitalize on public curiosity. The goal was not merely to sell more newspapers. Newspaper publishers and individual reporters also attempted to augment their profits by quickly turning out short current-interest books on the more notorious incidents. The transformation of news reports into a different medium did not end here. Newspaper items also provided raw material for contemporary fiction. On occasion, newspaper reports and later books of reportage were also turned into operas, plays, or films. For instance, only four days after the publication of Wang and Feng's snapshots in the *Suzhou mingbao*, the paper's reporters published a history of the scandal (complete with the paper's much hyped photographs). The book, entitled *Tongming yuanyang lu* (同命鴛鴦錄 Record of fate-bound mandarin ducks), immediately formed the basis for two competing Shanghai opera (滬劇 *huju*) treatments of the Wang/Feng affair by the New Stage Theater (新舞臺 *Xin wutai*) and the Central Opera Theater (中央大戲院 *Zhongyang daxiyuan*). Both opera productions were named "Feng and Wang Lose their Footing" (by making a misstep in life) (馮王失足記 *Feng Wang shizu ji*), which tied the operas to the still-evolving suicide scandal in a more explicit manner than the poetically evocative title *Record of Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks*. The operas, which the *Mingbao* touted as "intended to warn society's love-obsessed men and women (意在警覺社會一般癡情男女 *yi zai jingjue shehui yiban chiqing nannü*)," were cleared by the city censorship board. The Central Opera Theater gave the initial performance on 11 May 1931. The two productions played head-to-head for a week and were then presented occasionally by both companies through 10 June. The opera performances immediately became a significant component of the scandal's still developing public mythology, such that the recently published history was advertised as offering the true background to the opera, and the book was sold at opera performances.³⁷ This interaction between different media highlighted the multivalent nature of Republican public culture. At the same time, the fecundity and plasticity of news reports underscored the formative influence that newspapers exerted on lived and imagined experiences during the Republican era.

³⁷ Later advertisements in *SMB* also identified the book by the alternate names *Tongming yuanyang* and *Tongming yuanyang ji*. It is unclear how the two productions differed. News reports indicate that both companies created their own versions on the basis of the book, although it is possible that they presented different productions of the same work. The *SMB* description refers to the New Stage Theater version. "Tongming yuanyang lu" advertisement, *SMB*, 27 April 1931, 3; "Lüshe shuangqingsi" (Hotel love double suicide), *SMB*, 28 April 1931; "Zhongyang daxiyuan kaiyan shishixi" (Central Opera Theater begins performance of event-based opera), *SMB*, 11 May 1931, 2; and, "Tongming yuanyang" advertisements, *SMB*, 12 May and 10 June 1931. Other books of reportage by newspaper journalists include works on notorious Shanghai suicides, including those of Xi Shangzhen and Ma Zhenhua, whose deaths became the basis for feature films. At least one *Huju* production and a spoken-word play on the actress Ruan Lingyu's suicide were performed shortly after her death in March 1934. Some of these books were published by the newspaper at which these journalists worked. In some cases, such as *Record of Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks*, which was published by a local bookshop, the books were produced by another firm.

In addition to constituting a tragedy, a suicide's anonymous death in a hotel away from kith and kin created practical dilemmas regarding the retrieval of the corpse. Travelers, sojourning merchants, and itinerant workers had long faced the tragic prospect of dying far afield. During the late imperial and early Republican periods, guilds, native place societies, and urban charitable institutions had stepped into the breach by encoffining remains, providing short- or long-term storage facilities, and occasionally shipping corpses to their home place. By the Nanjing Decade, however, traditional burial societies were on the wane in many areas as philanthropic enterprises adopted the social science methodologies and social service mandates common to European and North American relief societies. Rapid urban development also challenged the sanctity of existing burial society grounds, requiring them to move outside the city or purchase increasingly expensive urban real estate.³⁸ The Guomindang state simultaneously endeavored to supply social relief and reform burial customs (i.e., encourage thrift by simplifying funerary practices) by creating public cemeteries. As in many other instances, the ambition propelling these reforms in Suzhou and other places outstripped the state's capacity to realize them.

Given the legal and moral difficulties raised by the suicides of two anonymous guests, Suzhou's Great Eastern Hotel charitably assumed responsibility for the decedents' remains. The manager had expected to be relieved of this duty shortly after Wang and Feng's identities had been established. However, as the press reported over the next several months, disapprobation regarding the circumstances of their deaths prevented the bodies from being claimed. In life, Feng had been a well-respected public figure, yet in death, he became anathema. No one inquired after his body in the first three and a half months following his suicide.³⁹ On the whole, however, reporters ignored the limbo into which Feng's corpse had fallen. Instead, they emphasized the family drama surrounding the disposition of Wang's body. On the one hand, given that Wang had died *in flagrante delicto*, her father-in-law, Li Shian (李實庵), refused to acknowledge her corpse as that of his daughter-in-law lest the family's honor be besmirched. Wang's natal family, on the other hand, was eager to take possession of her body but reluctant to provoke conflict with the Li clan by superseding the primacy of their claim to her remains. Li remained steadfast in his non-recognition despite appeals from the Great Eastern Hotel management and the local court that the family claim her body and provide it a proper burial. At the end of June, repeated pleadings by friends and family moved Li to a change of heart, if only out of respect for Wang's distinction as a woman who had carried on the family line by giving birth to a son. He dispatched a nephew and family retainer to claim Wang's remains and put her soul to rest with a permanent burial. Unfortunately, her now badly decayed corpse had been provisionally interred in a cheap, non-airtight coffin, making transport difficult. The Li-family representatives therefore decided to move her coffin from the field where the Great Eastern Hotel had placed it to a temple,

³⁸ Kohama Masako, *Jindai Shanghai de gonggongxing yu guojia* (Publicness and the nation in modern Shanghai), Ge Tao, trans. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), 50-129; and, for Suzhou, see Carroll, *Between Heaven and Modernity*, 211-224.

³⁹ It seems likely that it was never claimed. "Nannü shuang fudu" (Male-female couple take poison), *SMB*, 26 July 1931, 2.

where it could rest until her bones were clean of any remnant flesh; her remains could then be transferred to the Li-family burial ground in Zhenjiang.

In the end, then, the Li family overcame their conservative moral scruples and reclaimed the unchaste widow as their own. Nonetheless, the memory of her presence in the family lineage was erased. In closing what would be its final report regarding the drama over Wang's corpse, *Mingbao* noted that her young schoolboy son had expressed no longing or grief for his mother. More than any other fact, this poignant detail underscored the paper's cautionary message regarding the compound harms of suicide. For Wang and Feng, their suicides in the course of their extramarital affair resulted in social annihilation; they were both excised from the ongoing affective and ritual community of family.⁴⁰ At the same time, the pathos of their predicament—the love of a youthful, tubercular cadre and a vivacious, young upper-class widow denied by antiquated family norms—won them a large store of public sympathy and notoriety through which they achieved an afterlife in the public media. This discrepancy between as-yet commonplace Confucian morality and public sentiment highlighted the potential for media-generated affect to challenge social and political structures—a development that was already transforming mass politics throughout China. Yet the ideological characteristics of the public realm were heterogeneous. Wang and Feng's renown highlighted criticism of patriarchal mores as anachronistic and cruel, yet it also drew from conservative ideals regarding the propriety of male-female sexual relations. The media fixation on their privileged background similarly demonstrated that public sympathy was partly rooted in their class status, not merely the romance of their thwarted passion. Their suicides imparted a measure of elite status and privilege to the social identity “Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks.”

Although Wang and Feng may have been the first couple to have recently killed themselves in a local hotel, *Suzhou mingbao* had reported on numerous solitary suicides by single hotel guests over the years. Nonetheless, the “Couple Achieves Solace” case instigated pointed efforts to prevent later hotel suicides. Hoping to avoid a recurrence of the severe business disruption caused by the Wang/Feng episode, the Great Eastern Hotel hired extra maids to monitor guests' activities and posted notices in each room that requested guests to report all suspicious activities to the hall porter.⁴¹ The city hotel association similarly worried that the ready availability of sleeping pills in area pharmacies might promote suicide which, in turn, could cause commercial difficulties for its other members. The group successfully lobbied the local medical guild to instruct druggists not to dispense barbiturates without a physician's written consent.⁴² Given that the eventuality of further incidents was coming to be seen as quite high, Suzhou hotel proprietors were quick

⁴⁰ “Lüshe shuangqing si,” *SMB*, 28 April 1931; and “Wang Wenjuan jiang you jiaren zhaohun guiqu” (Wang Wenjuan's spirit to be called home by family), *SMB*, 30 June 1931, 2. Following the mention of Wang's son, the report ended by underscoring Li Shian's commitment to preserving the family honor by noting that he had fired the female servant who had acted as a go-between for Wang and Feng.

⁴¹ “Dadong fang houhuan” (Great Eastern prevents further incidents), *SMB*, 23 April 1931, 2.

⁴² “Feng Li qingsi'an” (Feng Li lovers suicide case) *SMB*, 11 May 1931, 2; and “Qudi zhuangshi yaoye zhi langman funü” (Area pharmacies' romantic woman), *SMB*, 4 June 1931, 2.

to attempt to protect themselves from the financial losses resulting from on-site suicides. During the month of May, two single men seemingly had followed Wang and Feng's example by traveling to Suzhou for the express purpose of killing themselves in a hotel room (one took a room at the Great Eastern Hotel, demonstrating the questionable effectiveness of the establishment's suicide prevention measures). Given that so many of the city's suicide cases involved visitors from elsewhere, the incidence of suicide did not necessarily reflect peculiar local pathologies; the proliferation of traveler suicides did, however, seem to implicate something about the nature of the place. Whether due to the celebrated gardens and canals, the city's cultural renown, or some other factor, a disquieting number of outsiders chose to end their lives in Suzhou. Alarmed that the city was in the midst of becoming a favored destination for out-of-town suicides, a *Suzhou mingbao* headline asked, "Why Are so Many Travelers Taking Poison [to commit suicide in their hotel rooms]?"⁴³

A clear answer proved elusive. Nonetheless, throughout the spring and summer, journalists and readers alike weighed in, dissecting the particular oppressions suffered by each victim, in an attempt to discern whether general environmental, psychological, or other miscellaneous factors may have contributed to their decisions to commit suicide. In one opinion piece, a city resident argued that Wang and Feng's decision to kill themselves was likely not made freely: the late evening and early morning were generally treacherous as people were likely to act more rashly. At the same time, their melancholy may have been exacerbated by the beauty of the city itself. The couple had reveled in the scenery of famous literati gardens and other spots, aesthetic beauty that may have provoked heightened pathos. Further, the calendar itself may have helped implant morbid thoughts, for they had killed themselves on the Qingming festival, the traditional day for sweeping the graves of deceased relatives. Drunk on wine and heightened emotions, the lovers had been unable to bear their inevitable separation and had followed the course induced by their very surroundings.⁴⁴ On a related note, their choice of Suzhou as the site for their deaths seems linked to the particularly public nature of its famous gardens, elite hotels, and other scenic spots. In addition to their aesthetic appeal, all of these sites provided Wang and Feng an opportunity to publicize, that is, briefly reveal and perform, their clandestine relationship before surrendering to its ultimate impossibility.

Concerns regarding environmental factors as contributing to suicide were especially pointed in the case of hotels, which the paper and the hoteliers' guild alike deemed singularly attractive as sites for self-murder. These local speculations resonated with contemporary studies on suicide, one of which argued that it had recently become a verity that "hotels are a spot for male and female frolic, but they are also a site for the greatest tragedy of human existence – an execution field for self-murder." The popularity of particular location types or individual spots, such as the Great Eastern Hotel, for suicides (often enacted in similar fashions) was further

⁴³ "Guangdong ren zisha," *SMB*, 8 May 1931, 2; and "Lüke fudu heqi duoye" (Why are so many travelers taking poison?), *SMB*, 16 May 1931, 2.

⁴⁴ Yan Xihuang, "Ai Dadong lüshe qinglü shuangsi" (Mourning the Great Eastern Hotel lover double suicides), *SMB*, 28 April 1931.

seen as evidence of a common causation. Previously many had argued that patterns of similitude among suicides were due to poltergeists or other supernatural forces compelling victims to kill themselves in the same spot by similar means. “However, in this modern age in which science has executed ghosts and spirits (可是在這個鬼神已被了科學槍斃了的現代 *keshi zai zhege guishen yi beile kexue qiangbile de xiandai*),” a more prosaic cause had been identified: newspaper reports, which encouraged suicide by providing all the necessary details regarding preferred methods and locations. In the words of one commentator, daily newspapers had effectively become self-annihilation manuals. The proof of this transformation was ostensibly borne out by the eerie similarities between the locations and methods employed by different suicide victims. Given that people could be assumed to be generally ignorant of the preferred means and locations for killing themselves, how else might one explain the popularity of particular sites and means, if not human susceptibility to press reports and corollary gossip about overdosing on barbiturates in a hotel room?⁴⁵ The naïveté of this analysis regarding human nihilistic tendencies and the propagation of social knowledge might make it analytically suspect, yet the argument testifies to the depth of contemporary belief in the fatal power of newspaper stories. For its part, *Suzhou mingbao* professed that reportage – its own and that by its area peers – could effect lethal consequences. The paper soon reported that the publicity surrounding Wang and Feng had inspired another desperate couple to follow their example.

“A PAIR OF PATHETIC INSECTS (一對可憐蟲 *yidui kelian chong*)”⁴⁶

On 24 July 1931, readers of the *Suzhou mingbao* opened their paper to a second story illustrating the boundless love and regret of male-female romance: the night before, another couple had committed suicide by ingesting opium while lying together on the bed of their city hotel room. It had been only a few weeks since the media brouhaha over the Wang/Feng affair had dissipated (a fifth printing of *Record of Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks* had appeared in mid-July, although the event’s declining currency as news was reflected in the book’s reduced price of one *jiao*, i.e. half the original cost), and the *Mingbao* immediately referenced the earlier suicide as a touchstone for the current one.⁴⁷ With the headline “New Cast Reenacts ‘Feng and Wang Lose their Footing,’” the paper indicated that the latest incident could be viewed as a repeat performance of the earlier tragedy and the opera it had spawned. Indeed, the report argued that the new case bore more than a superficial resemblance to Wang and Feng’s deaths: “from start to finish it mirrors the ‘Couple Achieves Solace’ incident and does not differ from it one iota.” According to the paper, the recently deceased “pair of pathetic insects,” twenty-*sui* Xu Yinhuang (徐銀凰 d. 1931) and twenty-four *sui* Gao Xixiong (高錫熊 d. 1931), had gone so far as to suggest their identification with Wang and Feng by signing the back of a joint photograph with the moniker, “Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks,” while inscribing on

⁴⁵ Shi, *Zisha wenti*, 130-131.

⁴⁶ “Huayuan fandan nannü fudu” (Man and woman poison themselves at Garden Hotel), *SMB*, 25 July 1931, 2.

⁴⁷ “Tongming yuanyang ji” (Record of fate-bound mandarin ducks”) advertisement, *SMB*, 12 and 19 July 1931, 2.

the front, "This photo shall be preserved in order to remember me. Do not destroy it. Written by Gao Xixiong." The image had been left on their pillows, next to three suicide notes that recounted the depth of their affection and frustration at being unable to marry. Their main note explained, "Since we are restricted by our environment and unable to be free, we are resolved to die and have taken poison." In an echo of their photograph inscription, they signed themselves, "Lovers bound by fate, Gao Xixiong and Xu Yinhuang, written before dying, 23rd day [of July]." ⁴⁸

Though they may have invited comparisons with Wang and Feng, Xu and Gao's travails were quite distinct from those of their models, as was their social status. Whereas Wang and Feng had killed themselves after a furtive affair in the shadow of Wang's forced consignment to virtuous widowhood, Xu and Gao's deaths terminated three years of companionship. Gao Xixiong had originally worked in an Wuxi toothbrush factory; restless, he took off from Wuxi and trekked around Jiangnan. In due course, he arrived in Suzhou, where he had met the then-seventeen-*sui* Xu Yinhuang, a silk factory worker of "good morals and fashionable, neat dress." The mutual attraction between the two was reportedly immediate and strong. Unfortunately for them both, Gao already had an estranged wife and a three-*sui* son. Nonetheless, Xu and Gao established an occasional domesticity and were together for three years. Their domestic bliss was limited by the fact that Gao had been unable to free himself from his previous wife. However, according to newspaper accounts, the most significant impediment to Xu and Gao marrying was the fact that their families were never introduced. Yet parental opposition was not complete. Gao's father, seeing that his son in love with Xu, was sympathetic, but he was unable to convince his wife to accept the situation. He gave his son 300 *yuan* to allow the lovers to stay together in Shanghai. Once that gift had run out, they had returned to Suzhou but continued to experience money troubles. Gao had hoped to solve their financial woes by embezzling a loan taken out in his father's name. When that scheme failed, he had stolen money from his parents and used the loot to underwrite another Shanghai sojourn. When their funds were depleted, the pair once again returned to Suzhou. Despairing of their poverty as well as their inability to marry, they decided to kill themselves in an atmosphere of luxury. As Xu wrote in a letter to her parents, "Since I have no recourse for future happiness, it seems best to die early." The pair therefore took a room at the luxurious Garden Hotel (花園飯店 *Huayuan fandian*) in the outer Chang Gate district, where they enjoyed themselves for several days before consuming poison. They were later discovered by a chamber maid and taken to the hospital, where they died next to one another. ⁴⁹

The newspaper bolstered the details of its written report and, in a departure from its reporting of the Wang/Feng affair, immediately published two startling images of Xu and Gao before and after their suicide (see Figures 3 and 4 below). For unknown reasons, the *Suzhou mingbao* editors had elected not to publish the investigative photos of Wang and Feng's corpses in their hotel room taken by the police. As discussed above, on the face of it, that decision seems unremarkable, for the paper rarely published news photos. Nonetheless, other area journals did find the

⁴⁸ "Feng Wang shizu shi zhi jiqi" (New cast reenacts "Feng and Wang lose their footing"), *SMB*, 26 July 1931, 2; and "Huayuan fandian nannü fudu," *SMB*, 25 July 1931, 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

images sufficiently newsworthy and ran them. Their publication may have been judged gratuitous in Suzhou; the photos had been distributed to aid in the identification of the deceased, who had not been Suzhou locals. Images of corpses, sometimes quite gruesome, were not unknown in the often-times sensationalistic Republican media, yet it is also possible that the images were deemed too unseemly for the *Mingbao*. Whatever the reasoning, in the wake of the Wang/Feng affair it did not hold again. The two photographs of Xu and Gao attested to the truth of the accompanying report's melodramatic secondary headline, "Not Wanting to Live Another Day, They Preferred to Die the Same Day (不願同日生但願同日死 *buyuan tongri sheng, dan yuan tongri si*)." ⁵⁰

The first image was a studio portrait of the couple as they wished to be remembered: young, attractive, and modestly stylish and easy in their visible affection, as Gao's cheek rests upon Xu's hair, his hand upon her shoulder (see Figure 3). Xu and Gao had attempted further to define the significance of the photograph and shape their memory by designating themselves "Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks" on the obverse. Although the term had acquired a recent local identification with Wang and Feng, it was also a common expression for star-crossed lovers, especially those who jointly committed suicide or otherwise died together. Neither the inscribed photo nor the suicide letters directly mentioned Wang and Feng. Nonetheless, the *Mingbao* inferred that the inscription demonstrated a clear connection between the two suicides; shaken, like the rest of Jiangnan, by the publicity surrounding Wang and Feng's suicide, Xu and Gao had gone so far as to model their deaths upon that of the earlier pair of mandarin ducks.

Whether or not Wang and Feng were their models, Xu and Gao did demonstrate keen attention to the performative aspect of their suicide. From Gao's inscription, it seems that he, at least, had hoped the autographed publicity/suicide photo would fix their reputation—although whether their intended audience was their relatives and acquaintances or the greater public was moot. As chance would have it, that image may well have been eclipsed in readers' minds by the arresting second image of the lovers' corpses in the hospital after their deaths (see Figure 4). Although taken by a press photographer, the latter photo resembles official police or coroner photos; in fact, it may have been quite similar to the forensic photos of Wang and Feng distributed by the police and published elsewhere. As with the earlier suicide, newspaper reports detailed the physical state, appearance, and disposal of the lover's bodies. In addition to providing compellingly prurient reading, the textual and photographic focus on the suicides' bodies seem related to the newspaper's social diagnostic function; it allowed the public truly to understand and thus perhaps avoid the present danger of suicidal impulses. The two photos underscored the ostensible links between the two suicides and supported the notion that these two events (and, perhaps, recent suicides by individual travelers as well) were components of a discrete social trend.

In another continuity with their coverage of Wang and Feng, *Mingbao* reporters betrayed as much interest in the state and disposal of Xu and Gao's corpses as in the circumstances of their deaths. Readers therefore received full descriptions of

⁵⁰ "Huayuan fandan nannü fudu," *SMB*, 25 July 1931, 2.



Figure 3. Gao Xixiong inscribed this studio portrait of him and Xu Yinhuang with the admonishment, “This photo shall be preserved in order to remember me. Do not destroy it....,” along with the signature “Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks.” The couple had posed for the photo in Wuxi before their arrival in Suzhou, purportedly out of concern that their funds might be insufficient if they waited any longer. According to *Suzhou mingbao*, the inscription and the single-mindedness with the couple ensured that they would leave a photo that presented them as a pair of “Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks” demonstrated their desire to appropriate Wang and Feng’s fame. Source: “Buyuan tongri sheng dan yuan tongri si,” *SMB* 25 July 1931, 2.



Figure 4. A *Suzhou mingbao* photographer took this image of Xu Yinhuang and Gao Xixiong's corpses after they had succumbed to opium and barbiturate poisoning at Suyong Hospital (肅雍醫院 *Suyong yiyuan*). Source: "Buyuan tongri sheng dan yuan tongri si," *SMB* 25 July 1931, 2.

Xu and Gao's funeral garb. Miss Xu was dressed in a plain ensemble of a cotton shirt and pants, embroidered silk shoes and an outer gown. Before this point, however, Xu, who as a Shanghai native had no relatives immediately claim her corpse, had been subjected to an autopsy. The details were duly reported: her body was bluish purple with a liquid discharge emanating from her anus and vagina, both classic effects of death by poisoning.

Xu's lover Gao was dressed in a white patterned-silk short shirt and trousers, a green cotton jacket and pants, silken shoes, white socks, black outer jacket, green satin scholar's gown, and a grey outer vest. His body was encoffined and stored overnight at a local temple, where he was publicly mourned by his estranged wife and the rest of his family before being buried.⁵¹ Circumstances (i.e., his family's local residence and arrival at the hospital shortly after his death) had allowed Gao's body to be exempt from both an autopsy and the subsequent indignity of having the state of his corpse discussed in the press with such exacting detail.⁵² The detailed

⁵¹ Xu's corpse then became a temporary neighbor to Feng Yifu's still-unclaimed remains.

⁵² *SMB* editors betrayed no scruple in publishing lurid, revealing images of male corpses.

Nonetheless, the exposure of suicides' bodies, whether through photography or narrative, does

coverage regarding the disposal of Xu and Gao's corpses underscored social anxieties surrounding the integrity of the corpse and the primacy of timely obsequies to put a soul to rest. As the autopsy on Miss Xu demonstrated, dying away from one's relatives could leave one's body open to the prying eye of the modern medical establishment, the state, the press, and the newspaper-reading public. The pathos was compounded, *Mingbao* commented, for double-suicides like Xu and Gao: "In life they shared the same quilt" and died together to preserve their union, "yet in death it would be difficult for them to share the same tomb." Indeed, their joint burial was becoming all the more unlikely as Miss Xu's family was considering suing Gao's relatives for his having beguiled her into killing herself.⁵³

These cautionary messages did not dissuade Mao Fengying and Duan Zhiliang, the couple introduced at the beginning of this essay, from attempting in August 1931 to become the third pair of "Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks" to meet their end in a Suzhou hotel. As with Xu and Gao, the similarities between their actions and the Wang/Feng episode were counterbalanced by striking differences of social class and motivation. If anything, the latest couple was of an even more humble background than Xu and Gao, raising the question as to whether the performance of suicide *à la* Wang and Feng had become imbued with social class aspirations. *Suzhou mingbao* nonetheless presented their suicide attempt as another iteration of that season's social fashion. The coverage, however, differed starkly in tone. The lurid sympathy lavished on the previous pairs of star-crossed lovers was markedly withheld from the couple who, alive, were neither the lamented elite victims of familial cruelty nor a hapless "pair of pathetic insects" unable to marry. Rather, they chose death as a means of escaping the indignities of poverty. In light of Mao and Duan's failure in courting death, their pending arraignment for possession of narcotics, their inferior social position, and, perhaps, the lack of societal barriers to their union, their suicide attempt was reported with scorn. Public sympathy, which had been flowed in sentimental support of illicit romance despite Wang's obligatory chastity and Gao's existing marriage was denied to Mao and Duan's bid to overcome penury. Instead of achieving media fame as "Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks," they disappeared into obscure notoriety and, perhaps, prison.

seem strikingly gendered. My evidence is impressionistic, but having examined many Republican newspapers, books, and magazines related to suicide, I recall *far* more published images of female suicides than male ones. Whether the coroner's photo of the Shanghai suicide Ma Zhenhua or the voluptuous portraits of Ruan Lingyu's face or entire body lying in her coffin, the media seems to have been more interested in displaying the formerly lithe bodies of young women than men. This discrepancy is not particularly surprising in light of the political and cultural profile of the "New Woman" (or her benighted "traditional" sister) in contemporary society, not to mention the unremittingly male (heterosexual) gaze of much journalism, advertising, and other media. Ibid.: "Nannü shuang fudu," *SMB*, 26 July 1931, 2; and "...si buming'an..." (...unclear murder case...), *SMB*, 18 February 1930, 2.

⁵³ "Huayuan fandan nannü fudu," *SMB*, 25 July 1931, 2; and "Nannü shuangfudu," *SMB*, 26 July 1931, 2.

CONCLUSION

The discrepancies among the three couples' situations and the media treatment that they received highlight the vagaries of publicity and the *Suzhou mingbao's* seminal role in the creation of the 1931 suicide crisis. As *cause célèbre* and a social fact conjured by the *Suzhou mingbao*, the 1931 suicide fashion was a true media event. Comparatively speaking, the spate of hotel suicides in Suzhou during the spring and summer of 1931 did not point to a spiraling epidemic; the eight suicides chronicled in the press from April to July were well below the fifteen reported for the May and June 1929, when the first statistics were compiled. Nor, strictly speaking, did the newspaper conclusively establish a causal link between the three hotel suicides discussed here, although it did infer and proclaim one in a wash of heavily inked headlines. The hysteria of the press coverage seems to bespeak the cleverness of *Suzhou mingbao* reporters and editors, as well as public empathy for tragic romance, suspicions regarding hotels as liminal spaces removed from quotidian social networks, and anxieties surrounding the treatment of suicides' corpses. That is not to say that editors and reporters consciously slanted their coverage in the interest of social impact or newspaper sales (this certainly may have been the case, but their intents and motivations are lost to us). Rather, the *Mingbao's* reporting emphasized the extent to which the newspaper itself had simultaneously come to be seen as and to proclaim itself a central actor in the investigation, analysis, and propagation of information regarding suicide as an urban social problem. Yet, as the *Mingbao* uneasily conceded, the power of publicity, potentially a tool for ameliorating social problems, could also exacerbate the self-same pathologies it sought to dispel.

This ambiguous evaluation highlighted the extent to which Republican newspapers, through their reportage and the publicity they helped create, had come to constitute urban life itself. Through its increased emphasis on "social news," Republican journalism had become a paradigm for scientific investigation and adjunct to state social service initiatives, while also serving as a touchstone for contemporary theater and other entertainment. Moreover, as the *Mingbao's* coverage of these three love suicides demonstrated, media-generated publicity and public sympathy had been acknowledge as a palpable and often unruly component of urban life. Decried as a contagion compelling acts of suicide, publicity also served as a fatal medium for star-crossed couples to declare openly their devotion. Public sentiment, though fickle, could challenge entrenched mores regarding the sanctity of marriage relations to sympathize with individual romantic desires. This celebration of personal affect and desire had the potential to remonstrate with society and promote social reform. Yet, as the *Mingbao* reports demonstrated, lurid sentimentality could not—indeed, the paper indicated, perhaps should not—overturn the structures of kinship that protected the integrity of one's body and one's place in the family. The paper's strident critique of patriarchal authority and sympathetic attention to the pathos of these suicides was counterbalanced by its conservative defense of societal conventions. In the end, then, the tragedies of the three pairs of "Fate-Bound Mandarin Ducks" were exacerbated by the infidelity of the *Suzhou mingbao* and the public to their memory.

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