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Shanghai Splendor

*Economic Sentiments and the
Making of Modern China, 1843-1949*

Wen-hsin Yeh



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
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life. Instead of vocational education for the working youth, Zou turned his attention to the political awakening of the literate public. It was not enough for a journal like *Shenghuo* to give voices to the everyday people. It was imperative that the journal spearhead the transformation of the new economy's "vocational youth" into the "progressive youth" in an age of evolutionary struggle.

Petty Urbanites and Tales of Woe

In the 1930s, a new group of writers began contributing to the pages of Shanghai's journals and magazines. Consisting of shop clerks, office workers, trade apprentices, business trainees, elementary school teachers, and so forth, these were individuals whose formal education had ended before university, but who were working in jobs that required literacy. They found their public forum in the left-leaning journals, to which they contributed autobiographical accounts of personal circumstances. By and large, these authors recounted tales of hardship. They suggested preoccupations with the economic problems of the era and evoked an atmosphere of insecurity and fear.

There was hardly anything new about shop clerks and trade apprentices complaining about their anxieties (see chapter 5). The "*ku*," or bitterness, in their lives was clichéd and proverbial. It was part of the normative expectation that success in business, whether in the sense of material accumulation or upward mobility, be predicated upon a capacity to "eat bitterness (*chiku*)."

But the descriptions of suffering in the 1930s broke new ground, both in their portrayal of the nature of their problems and in the medium of telling. Unlike the stories told in an earlier time, these accounts had little to do with violence or physical abuse. They were not about the kicking or beating of rickshaw pullers or bonded maids, nor about the undernourishment or mistreatment of teenage employees. The stories were told in the first-person voice with the narrative subject placed within his

or her familial context. The hardships had as much to do with the self as with family members. For every description of what an individual had to endure, there were corresponding accounts of the misery that stemmed from an inability to look after one's own kin. It was the incapacity to act and the strains placed on the bonds of caring that was the ultimate cause of suffering.

The tales had become introspective, in other words, to sketch the inner workings of petty urbanite thinking. The acknowledged dimensions of hardship had been expanded to encompass the ethical and emotional in addition to the material. A hardship was not just about an unwelcome condition that had been inflicted, but also about a desired state that had been denied. The narrators of these stories were not passive victims. They were subjects incapacitated by circumstances and prevented from attaining a sense of being.

A second point of departure had to do with the public nature of this self-representation and the literary debut of the petty urbanites (*xiao shimin*) in the pages of Shanghai's popular magazines. Literary realism of the 1930s, inspired by Eastern European trends, had contributed to the rise of a journalistic genre of popular reporting. In Shanghai there were productions of major projects such as *One Day in China* and *One Day in Shanghai*.¹ The volumes were embodiments of the belief that social reality was fully representable. This occurred when large numbers of individuals recorded the actual happenings in their everyday lives. Popular journals set aside special columns for amateur contributions in order to present portraits of "society." Along with the "letters to the editor," such contributions were believed to offer accurate depictions of contemporary social conditions.

Petty urbanite tales of hardship were thus practices that stemmed from particular notions about the literary representability of social reality.² Individual tales of woe were anything but personal concerns. Detailed narratives about daily lives were the materials that made up "society." Journal editors set aside space and encouraged amateur contributions. The lines were purposefully crossed between truthful representations of social experience and mediated constructions in the service of social ideology. The very conditions that enabled the public representation of personal circumstances had placed the tales in a liminal space between the authentic and the fabricated. The characters and circumstances in the tales were read, more often than not, as categories and types rather than as individuals, despite their first-person voice and detailed specificity.

A TRAGEDY

On June 12, 1935, Yue Lin, a fifty-five-year-old clerk, was charged by the Shanghai Municipal Police for the murder of his wife and six children.

According to the local paper, Yue, who hailed from Tianjin, had recently lost his job, and his savings were quickly depleted. After several trips to the pawnshops and rounds of borrowing from relatives and friends, he persuaded his wife that they should kill themselves. The couple decided to use opium and served it in a meal. The woman and the children died that evening; Yue alone survived. Utterly distraught, he then threw himself into a river, but was fished out by the police. The latter promptly imprisoned him on charges of multiple counts of murder.

After the Yue story appeared in paper, another family jumped to their deaths from atop the sixth floor of the Great World amusement center. This family consisted of a woman in her fifties, her thirty-year-old son, his wife, and their three children, aged seven, ten, and fourteen. None survived.³

Little else is known about these individuals apart from their deaths. Their tragedies nonetheless touched a nerve among Shanghai's petty urbanites. "My wife wept uncontrollably after reading of these deaths," wrote one Zhou Fang in a letter to the editor that appeared in the popular journal *Dushu shenghuo* (Reading and Livelihood). "Neither was I able to hold back my tears." The shock and dismay had much to do with the knowledge that the Zhangs were, not so long ago, well off, and Yue had been making more than one hundred *yuan* a month. Both families had been saving conscientiously for rainy days; the Zhangs and Yues were among the salaried and respectable urban workers. "Who would have thought that they could end this way!" wrote Mr. Zhou. "And the children, too!"

Zhou's wife pleaded with him not to lose his job. "You are a father of three and you have a family to support," she said. "Please be sure to do everything to stay on the good side of your boss and coworkers." She pledged to cut back on family spending and to save the best she could. "I'll do the cooking and washing myself and dismiss the maid at the end of this month," she said, "and we will also set aside money for emergency." The critical factor remained, nonetheless, that Zhou should hold on to his income, regardless of whether this meant having to go out of his way to please his superiors to the point of making himself unhappy. No price was too high to pay if it meant job security. "Please always think

of your responsibility as a father and a husband and please think of the family!" Zhou's wife pleaded.

These thoughts brought a sense of gloom to the evening hours after work. Zhou recognized what this meant for his pride and autonomy, which had to take second place to the needs of his family. "I looked at my three children: the newly born, asleep in the crib; the middle one, playing on the floor; and the oldest, doing his homework by the lamp." They all depended upon him as their father and provider. It was an unbearable thought how the bliss and tranquility in his children's lives would shatter if he were to lose his job. "How could I possibly ignore my wife's plea?" Zhou concluded.

But were his job prospects secure even with the compromise in personal pride and autonomy? When Zhou described his new resolve to a friend at work, the latter responded with a jeer. "It is very well that you wish to heed your wife's plea. But don't you see that there is no promise of security beyond the day? Where are you going to keep the money that you are to save? Banks go out of business all the time. The ones owned by foreigners close down too. Things change so quickly these days. You deposit one thousand *yuan* and it shrinks to five hundred. If you'd like some sensible advice from me, I say you spend your money and buy some pleasure when it lasts! Do you really believe that you can hold on to your job just by being pliant and even obsequious? People lose their jobs when business slows down, and you lose your job even if you are competent and helpful! People of our sort cannot afford to think about the future. We are like the sparrows in the spring. Let's sing our happiness and fill our stomachs when the sun shines. As for the winter, there is not much that any one of us can do!"⁴

Zhou Fang's purported dialogue with his wife and friend, prominently featured in *Dushu shenghuo*, was an attempt to spell out the significance of the two family suicides for Shanghai urbanites who saw themselves in these tragedies. It placed the primary emphasis on job security, linked it to family survival, and depicted the male heads of households as hostages both to the workplace and the marketplace thanks to their family obligations. It wasn't just that old-fashioned notions of pride and autonomy were out of place; when hard times hit, these dialogues suggested, middle class virtues such as thrift and diligence promised no reward. Because human factors had been removed from the processes controlling individual destinies, there was little that anyone could do either to steer one's own future or to save one's family.

Zhou Fang's letter to the editor thus was no mere reaction to the

two cases of family suicides. Invoking issues of life and death, and obligation and capability, it was a dire prognosis concerning the viability of middle-class social existence in Shanghai's prevailing economic system. It pried open the question: will middle-class economic virtue save white-collar families? It answered, emphatically, that the logic of the economic system was such that it simply would not permit petty urbanites to earn the social rewards of their hard work. If virtue was rendered irrelevant, then what values were petty urbanites to live by? Was there any escape from a fate that seemed comparable to that of a spring sparrow caught in a winter storm? How was a father and husband to assure the survival of his family in the economic turmoil of the 1930s?

It is worth noting that Zhou's letter appeared in the pages of *Dushu shenghuo*, a leading left-leaning journal in 1935. The fate of the bourgeois nuclear family occupied a strategic position in the formulation of a left-wing rhetoric that called for a socialist transformation of Chinese society. This left-wing discourse was centered upon the family rather than the individual; in that sense it represented a distinct departure from the cultural agenda of the May Fourth Movement of 1919. While the May Fourth radicals harangued the educated to urge individual liberation, the 1930s leftists mobilized the urbanites to seek national emancipation. While the former stressed the importance of a radical intellectual awakening to break with the past, the latter sought individual commitment to build up collective security. And while the former gave birth to radical politics and a socialist agenda, the latter ultimately led to the expansion of the CCP to include Shanghai's petty urbanites.

Left-wing publishing in the 1930s was progressive in the sense that unlike the student journals of the May Fourth Movement, it included the less educated and barely literate in its literary representations. A journal such as *Dushu shenghuo* gave space not only to the intellectuals, but also to shop clerks, factory managers, office workers, elementary school teachers, pawnshop apprentices, and so forth, all with their own tales of hardship and woe. This latter group appeared in print as authors instead of readers, unveiling the fears and frustrations in their lives while expecting exoneration instead of shame.

There were close connections between the stories of middle-class nuclear families and the construction of a socialist rhetoric of revolution. To better place these tales of hardship in historical context, let us examine the journal in greater depth.

DUSHU SHENGHUO

Dushu shenghuo was a bi-weekly magazine of social commentary that made its first appearance in Shanghai in late 1934. It was the work of four men—Li Gongpu, Ai Siqu, Liu Ti, and Xia Zimei (Xia Zhengnong). All, except the editor in chief, Li Gongpu (1902–1946), were clandestine members of the CCP.⁵ Li, who was noted previously for his editorial role with the “Dushu shenghuo” column in *Shenbao*, Shanghai’s leading daily, had built a career under Shi Liangcai, the newspaper’s owner.⁶ Shi had fostered the paper’s critical stance of Chiang Kaishek’s Nationalist government, and was consequently gunned down on November 14, 1934 by Nationalist secret service agents on an open highway.⁷ *Dushu shenghuo*, a publication of left-wing and dissenting intellectuals, was poised to be critical of the established order from the outset.

In the inaugural issue of the journal, the editors explained their goals and the editorial line. They had acted, first of all, in the spirit of a new era (*shidai*). The “old era,” in which access to the printed page was viewed as status-conferring and possible only for those with time on their hands, had now passed.⁸ The time had come for publishing to be shared with everyone.⁹

Literacy, the editors continued, remained a skill available only to an educated minority. Yet even within this minority there was a numerically significant majority who had been denied, as a result of their life circumstances, continuous access to the printed page. This majority included many of Shanghai’s petty urbanites—the tens of thousands of shop clerks and apprentices employed in Shanghai’s trades and industries, who had been “locked out of the iron gates of modern-style schoolhouses.”¹⁰ The hunger and thirst for knowledge among these men, the editors noted, went far beyond what the elite imagined. Yet they had been forced to limit their reading to after-work hours only. These men sought, as they should, knowledge only “of the sorts of practical relevance” that would enable them to “open their eyes and awaken their consciousness.” With their consciousness awakened, these individuals would then be able to “set the course of their own lives.”¹¹

If reading was to lead to an increased control for clerks and apprentices over their destinies, the editors reasoned, then it could not be an end in itself, but must be combined with the struggle to make a living. Seen from this perspective, not all publications in circulation would suit the needs of the petty urbanite readers; they required guidance in the selection of reading material, which would be the journal’s function. More-

over, the journal would not only suggest suitable material, but also teach “the correct method” of reading. The editors would conduct themselves, in short, as “earnest and sincere schoolmasters” vis-à-vis their reading pupils, who would be following the journal’s prescriptions for the sake of their own betterment and benefit.¹²

Dushu shenghuo would thus function as an educational forum (*jiaoyu yuandi*) that supplemented the formal school system. It would be a school without walls, transforming workplaces into classrooms whenever someone picked up a copy of the journal. In contrast to the lecture halls, the journal’s forum would not be dominated by the articulate and the learned, but would feature voices from the “vast and silent masses” who had been forced to drop out of school. The literary section of the journal was thus devoted to printing readers’ contributions. They were encouraged to “use the language and experience of . . . [their] own lives to express . . . [their] own thoughts and feelings.” The shared experiences reflected in these contributions were to provide the basis for a community among *Dushu shenghuo*’s reading audience.

There were over two dozen articles (about sixty thousand characters) in each issue. To implement the editorial policy, the journal divided its content into approximately ten headings. These included social commentaries, news analyses, book reviews, and essays on the natural sciences and social philosophy, which gave the journal a serious tone. There were also literary contributions, both autobiographical and fictional, by the readers. These stories contributed a rich description of the petty urbanite lives. Above all, the journal featured a section entitled “Questions and Answers about Readings” that continued the *Shenbao* column edited by Li Gongpu. This section featured the readers and the editors as joint contributors in an ongoing dialogue.

CHINA IN CRISIS

Take, for example, the May 1935 issue of the journal. Ai Siqu, who had already published a series of six or seven “talks” (*jianghua*) on ontology in the pages of *Dushu shenghuo*, entitled the latest segment “Heaven knows!” (*Tian xiao de!*). Ai treated “heaven” and “humanity” as opposites, and declared that consciousness was a product of humankind’s own history and past practices. Heaven, according to Ai, “does not know, despite ancient aphorisms to the contrary.” Knowledge and consciousness arose in the course of human action. Because so much learning came from experience, there could be no limits to a man’s capacity to know,

Ai continued, if one simply applied the correct scientific method to gather knowledge with diligence. Take, for example, the current economic recession that had affected so many lives. A person following the proper scientific method of analysis would easily see how this was entirely the fault of mankind rather than heaven. It was neither fate nor bad luck but the acts of human beings that had led to the closure of factories and the dismissal of employees.¹³

Qian Yishi's account and analysis of current events in the international arena, paired with Ai's philosophy, were meant to call the readers' attention to "the mess that the world is in," which Qian attributed largely to "evil dealings by monstrous imperialist powers."¹⁴ Qian saw imperialism in two areas: military buildup in preparation for war, and economic expansion through international interaction. His commentaries in the May 1935 issue began with reports of the European talks in Dresden and Geneva. He lambasted Great Britain—"all justice and integrity in talk yet whores and bandits at heart"—for its soft stance vis-à-vis Hitler's Germany. He juxtaposed the Polish-German non-aggression pact with the "unthinkable" alliance between imperialist France and the socialist Soviet Union, and confidently declared that Europe was on the brink of war. Qian also devoted considerable space to the Silver Purchase Act passed by the U.S. Congress, and linked it directly to the monetary crisis in China. He greeted the arrival of an American economic study commission in China with a sneer, declaring that the commission, despite its announced mission statement, had come, in fact, to "enhance America's trade benefits at the expense of the Chinese."¹⁵

In the social commentary section, Li Gongpu surveyed the domestic scene and drew attention to four dates: May 1, May 3, May 4, and May 9. May 1 and May 4, Li wrote, deserved to be marked in red, for these were moments of new beginnings. May 3 and May 9, by contrast, were anniversaries of tragedy and humiliation, and should be remembered in grief and anger. But commemorative rituals would not serve any productive goals; there should be action in lieu of ceremonies. It was only by taking firm action that "we wipe off the shame on the brows of our people" and create a new and improved environment for productive work.¹⁶

With the bankruptcy of its villages and the armed invasion by Japanese imperialists, Li went on, China was in the depth of an acute crisis. Furthermore, with the imminent outbreak of a second world war, China's future was inextricably connected with developments beyond its borders. The Chinese had to nonetheless act to assert control over their

own destiny. All actions, whether private, public, individual, or collective, must be geared toward the survival of the Chinese nation through active resistance against the Japanese and all forms of imperialism.

The laborers' fight against foreign imperialists, however, must not prevent them from simultaneously engaging in a struggle against the exploitation of Chinese national capitalism in a time of recession. Workers, for example, should continue to insist on their demand for an eight-hour workday. They must see themselves as entitled not only to unemployment benefits, but also to legal protection for the right to organize and to strike. Those who could read and write must serve as the nation's cultural workers striving toward the forging of an iron will of resistance. These were the trends of a new era. Cultural workers had to exercise vigilance and show no mercy toward those who wished either to reverse the current trends or to restore the values and beliefs of an earlier era.

The top task facing the nation and the people, Li concluded, was thus the consolidation of an anti-Japanese resistance front that would dedicate itself to fighting imperialism in all its forms. He urged "all readers of this journal" to commemorate the four anniversaries with a new awareness of the significance of these dates. He called for action whenever possible, and urged the petty urbanites, who might see themselves as insignificant "ants," to form "an army of ants in defense of the nation."¹⁷

Li Gongpu, however, was careful to remind his readers that they must hold on to their jobs and families while engaging in these wars of resistance. The appropriate action for the moment was not to cast aside the established order, but simply to gain a new consciousness about the world via reading and writing. This was to be done by following the reading program that *Dushu shenghuo* promised to outline.

Li Chongji, in a separate essay in the same issue, picked up where Li Gongpu had left off. On "Why Study Philosophy?" he explained that to live like a man, one must never mechanically perpetuate tradition, but should, instead, always make conscious choices. The very making of these choices constituted a form of action that lay well within the power of the average person. But most urbanites often failed to do so, because they tended to be constrained by their beliefs and outlooks, which were in turn products of their social circumstances. Their "philosophy of life," inherited and unexamined, limited their ability to grasp social reality. This might not be too much of a problem if the times were good. But in a time of economic hardship, "erroneous thoughts," which stemmed from uninformed value systems, might even lead people to tragic choices such as suicide. Philosophy, then, was the most important subject in a person's

life in order to lead the existence of a true human being. By acquiring the proper scientific method, one could gain new perspectives to see the world and thereby attain a new sense of being and purpose. Philosophical lessons were important for everyone, Chongji stated, and it was well within the capacity of all journal readers to pursue the subject. Once a person acquired a new consciousness, he would be well prepared for action when the right moment came.¹⁸

The Chinese people in the 1930s, according to the editors, lived in a world of imperialism and capitalist exploitation, both foreign and domestic. They had also been born into a time of recurrent national humiliation and widespread social misery. Factories and shops were closing, and unemployment was on the rise. With the rural economy on the brink of bankruptcy, large numbers of peasants were forced to leave their homes in search of food. Most found neither work nor support as they moved from town to town. Worse yet, under the relentless pressure of capitalist and imperialistic exploitation, even property owners and the educated felt the pinch of recession and the threat of unemployment. With dimming job prospects and an unpredictable marketplace, a growing proportion of college students began to grow restless. The Chinese state, constrained by its own resources and embroiled in domestic feuds, did little to provide guidance, planning, or relief. Those with the power and the means paid little attention to the well-being of the multitude at large. With the help of Chinese capitalists, much of the wealth produced by the hard work of the Chinese people went overseas into the pockets of foreign imperialists. Japan, meanwhile, had steadily stepped up its military pressure on China. The loss of Manchuria and Inner Mongolia to the Japanese further deprived the Chinese people of important natural resources for survival. As armed conflicts continued between the Nationalists and the Communists, villagers were forced to pay additional levies to help finance the war, which came on top of the rent, interest, and taxes that they had already been paying. Highways for military use were built at the expense of peasant lives along their path. China, in short, was in a dire state of crisis, and it was the Chinese people who were being asked to bear the entire brunt.

To lend visual components to this idea of widespread Chinese misery, the journal used ink-and-brush drawings and woodblock prints to provide powerful cover designs and pictorial illustrations.¹⁹ One drawing entitled "Their Picnic," for example, depicted two barefoot peasants, their faces buried in rice bowls, squatting under a tree for a hurried meal.²⁰ Another sketch, entitled "Refugees," depicts an uprooted peasant fam-

ily of four on the run. The man leads the way hauling two large sacks on his back that contain the family's belongings. The woman walks behind him carrying a toddler in one arm and a large bag of clothing in another. A small child walks alongside tugging his mother's blouse. None of the figures have distinct features—the drawing made little attempt to represent the individuals. It conveyed, in general terms, the idea of a peasant family in flight.²¹

The cover of the journal's October 1935 issue portrays a long line of refugees, mainly women and children, trying to board a train. On the cover of the next issue was yet another cluster of villagers leaving home under an open sky, this time wading across a flooded river, their personal belongings hanging from shoulder poles. In the same issue a woodblock print depicted a group of people huddled together aboard a small boat that was afloat in the midst of a raging stream. The darkened clumps of human figures were motionless and trapped in the tight frame, while white waves crashed violently against the fragile boat.²²

Those who turned to the pages of *Dushu shenghuo* in the mid-1930s could not help but be reminded of the scenes of flood, famine, destitution, and despair. As the leading popular left-wing journal seeking to establish itself with the middle class, its serious tone and austere appearance contrasted sharply with other popular publications of this time. *Liangyou*, for instance, featured colorful portraits of Westernized young women and glamorized images of modern Shanghai (see chapter 3).

While journals such as *Liangyou* devoted considerable space to commercial advertisements of consumer products, *Dushu shenghuo* ran no advertisements, only printing announcements of a selected list of new books. For this reason, *Liangyou* and comparable journals have been widely seen as part of a broader phenomenon of middle-class consumerism.²³ *Dushu shenghuo* was, by contrast, ideologically opposed to capitalism and consumption. Of the six hundred some journals published in Shanghai in the 1930s, *Dushu shenghuo* and *Liangyou* can be seen as occupying the opposite ends of the radical-conservative ideological spectrum.

Yet it is noteworthy that despite the ideological oppositions and other differences, the two journals shared one important point in common. Both delivered their message by presenting images and narratives that evolved around an idealized construction of the nuclear family. The nuclear family, with its conjugal bonds, parent-child love, material wants, and ethical expectations, had become the unstated subject in both sets of presentations.

This is not to deny the differences between the two positions. While *Liangyou* presented the nuclear family as a locus of comfort and consumption in a system of private ownership, *Dushu shenghuo* depicted these same families as fragile institutions in a time of deep recession and imminent warfare. While *Liangyou* encouraged its readers to imagine a life of ease and fulfillment, *Dushu shenghuo* attacked that confidence and raised specters of hardship and insecurity. While *Liangyou* spoke of youth, health, and longevity, *Dushu shenghuo* dwelled upon illness, hunger, death, and poverty. The woodblock images featuring the peasants, for example, were more than simply reminders of the disturbance lying beyond the confines of the city; the plight of the peasants carried subtle hints that the security of urban existence could be subjected to severe tests as well.

Despite such differences in representation, the point remains that both in *Liangyou* and *Dushu shenghuo* there was a shared assumption about the unstated subject, which was not the individual per se, but an individual as a member of a nuclear family. *Liangyou's* promotion of fashionable women was not quite so much a statement about women on their own, but about the way a beloved wife or a pampered daughter participated in the material benefits of modernity. *Dushu shenghuo's* stories about hardship and poverty, similarly, were not quite so much about poverty in itself, but about how the orphaned or the widowed were deprived of support. Whether in bliss or in hardship, either in the representations of *Liangyou* or *Dushu shenghuo*, it was, in the final analysis, via the nuclear family that a multitude of individuals were linked to the global trends of their time. This was particularly evident in the literary sections and the "Questions and Answers" columns of *Dushu shenghuo*, where, in dialogues between the editors and the readers, the journal spelled out the broader relevance of events that were taking place throughout the world, and related them to the family.

THE PLIGHT

In the pages of *Dushu shenghuo*, a family—of the sort that seems effortlessly bourgeois—is both a haven and emotional unit of sharing and love. It is through the routines of home life that one gains a sense of self and proper place. The family also functions as an economic unit that provides its members with their material desires.

There is, meanwhile, a marked division of labor and a hierarchical distribution of authority, which reflects differences on the basis of gen-

der and age. These divisions, accepted as natural and inviolable, shape a person's sense of worth and structure the expression of goals and ambition in the larger world.

Certain functions are attached to individual members of the family according to differences in sex and age. Those who assume these functions are expected, in turn, to display certain virtues. A mature man, who is the father and head of the household, is to assume responsibility as the decision maker, the breadwinner, and the protector. He is expected to be hard working as well as successful in his handling of the family's affairs with the outside world. A woman, meanwhile, is to take on the responsibility of caring, rearing, and nourishing. A good wife and mother is not only hard-working, but also frugal, loyal, and self-sacrificing. The children, meanwhile, are mainly passive and compliant in this structure. They do what they are told, and show loyalty and devotion by accepting whatever may seem to be the family's lot.

These bonds and duties, one learns in *Dushu shenghuo*, are fundamental and almost sacrosanct for both the individual and the whole of society. Virtuous families, with all members working hard, must be able to reap their just rewards and achieve their self-preservation. The happiness and prosperity of virtuous families are not just manifestations of a healthy society; they give proof to the soundness of the system as a whole. There is, in that sense, an implicit contract binding the family to the society. Should the connections between virtue and reward, and hard work and family preservation, ever be severed, this would not only bring attention to the suffering individuals, but must also raise fundamental questions about the fairness of the social system as a whole.

Several points are notable in *Dushu shenghuo's* treatment of petty urbanite tales of personal woe. It accepted the ethical and material dimensions of middle-class constructions of nuclear families, and used first-person narrative voices to represent hardships that were believed to be real. These hardships were compelling presumably as they involved real people with names, jobs, families, and difficulties—real lives that could be situated in time and place. But few of the characters were meant to be exceptional or interesting in their own right. It was as illustrations of normative expectations (that were either fulfilled or betrayed) that the stories of these characters were told.

Take, for example, the story of Wang Ping, who came from Yancheng, in northern Jiangsu. When Wang Ping was barely six, famine spread across the region, and his parents decided to flee the area. They packed their belongings and set off walking south, moving from town to town.

Whenever they found an opportunity, the couple hired themselves out as day workers in the fields. They planted crops, harvested rice, and ground husks. They worked hard and spent little, saving as much as they could in order to support the family's journey to the next town south. In this manner they finally reached, after five years, a small town lying just south of the Yangzi River, where they settled down.

Two years went by. Wang's father had saved a small sum of money and used it to set himself up as a street vendor. The entire family participated in this new venture. Each morning Wang's father would make the twenty *li* (six mile) trip to the county seat before daybreak, where he would buy candies and miscellaneous household goods totaling fifty to sixty catties (sixty-five to eighty pounds) in weight. He would then head back to town, carrying the entire load in two baskets balanced on a shoulder pole.

Wang's mother, meanwhile, attended the stand that was set up at a street corner in town. To help reach more customers, especially those who were confined to their workplace during the day, Wang Ping walked the streets hawking candies. They did well, Wang recalled, because his parents were "congenial people of a caring nature," and his father was "frugal and hard working." The whole family toiled all day long. They received their just rewards and, for a while, saw improvement in their income.

Wang's parents then decided to trade in the street stand for a rented store. As before, his father made daily runs to the county seat while his mother watched the store and Wang sold candies in the street. To help pay for the rental of the shop, Wang's father added an additional route to his itinerary, selling to outlying villages out of his baskets. Twice a year, during the planting and harvesting seasons when everyone was out in the fields, Wang's father would get up at three in the morning, make the solitary trek over to the county seat to obtain a good supply of preserved meat and fish, and then hurry over to the villages, arriving just in time to provide breakfast to the farm workers. The meat and fish were always popular, and attentive observations of market behavior paid off. Diligence and acumen reaped rewards. The senior Wang brought material benefits to his entire family.

Wang Ping, who by then was fifteen, was able to attend literacy classes in the local public school. Sales at the family shop exceeded one thousand copper coins each day. Wang's father found himself trusted as an honest and hard-working man in his new hometown.

Wang's parents then decided to have a second child. Things went

downhill for the family from this point onward. During his mother's pregnancy and childbirth, Wang's father took her place in the shop. He took his usual trek to the county seat each day, and he also took care of his wife and the new baby. But this turned out to be more than he could bear—before the baby had turned one, the father fell ill and died.

Wang's father received a respectable burial befitting his stature. The funeral, however, placed a considerable drain upon the family's resources and a downward spiral commenced at this point. Unable to keep up with the rental charges, Wang's mother closed down the shop and moved back to the street corner where the family had had their stand a few years earlier. It now fell upon Wang Ping to make the daily run to the county seat at daybreak in order to buy supplies.

With the livelihood for a family of three upon his shoulders, Wang Ping had to give up literacy classes at the local school. He strained under the weight of his burden each day, although he was barely carrying half of what his father used to haul. His mother came down with a chronic illness in addition to suffering from depression. She wept each time she saw her teenage son struggling under the weight of the shoulder pole.

Wang Ping wrote his story with pen and paper borrowed from his literacy class. Of his trip in the pre-dawn darkness, as he marched his aching legs over the hills with baskets dangling on each side, he would say, "I cannot help the tears that are rolling down my cheeks. I miss my father."²⁴

There are no visible villains in Wang's story. But nevertheless a family of virtue ultimately failed to receive its just reward. Diligence and dedication had brought this refugee family from Jiangsu to the threshold of a respectable life. Yet, in the end, the family's hard-earned new prospects were too fragile. The decision that Wang's parents made to have a second child seemed innocent and natural; the new baby was an event that deserved celebration. Yet things were thrown so disastrously out of kilter thereafter that the family's entire trajectory was tragically reversed.

A conclusion like this runs against well-established narratives about the connections between honest people and good fortune, and exemplary deeds and felicitous results. If real people are shown, furthermore, to face depressing prospects in places like a small town south of the Yangzi River, this poses a threat to the confidence of all who pride themselves in the same diligence and dedication, with the hope that hard work will lead their families to a better future. Like the family suicides that disturbed Zhou Fang and his wife, Wang Ping's story shook the foundations of the petty urbanites most fundamental beliefs, because it underscored the vulnerability of nuclear families in the current economic system.

Wang Ping's story ends with the loss of his father. Given the gender-hierarchical nature of the nuclear unit, no greater disaster could have befallen the family other than the death of the patriarch. The removal of such a paternal presence deprived the family of its main source of support and protection, and forced the women and children to confront the harshness of society.

This social independence, of course, is hardly what a woman or child would have chosen had it been possible for either to remain under the protective wing of the husband and father. Women and children, furthermore, were by definition weaker members of the family and the society. When left on their own, they were bound to be taken advantage of or coerced against their will. The following account, which features a woman worker and her mother, underscores this sense of loss following the death of a father. It is beside the point whether Qiao Ying, the twenty-something-year-old narrator, is earning a full wage in lieu of her deceased father. The loss of the father represents such an irreparable injury inflicted upon the wholeness of the nuclear family that the surviving widow and daughter could not but labor under the conviction that they had been deprived of a happier lot.

Qiao Ying was employed in a Japanese-owned cotton mill, and had the following to say about her payday: "This morning, before I left for work, mother gave me fourteen copper coins and a box of cooked noodles. She said: 'Ying, we are again out of rice. The cash is for you to get some breakfast before work. Be sure to get some sugar to flavor your noodles for lunch.' My money paid for three buns, but I ate only two. I gave the third to Ju, who had even less for breakfast."²⁵

That afternoon the workers received their quarterly wages. Ying's wages, after three months of work, were a mere four *yuan*. Her employers withheld six *jiao* (sixty cents) ostensibly for safe-keeping.

Upon returning home, Ying handed her wages to her mother. The landlady promptly showed up, demanding her three-*yuan* payment. In addition, she asked for a repayment on a two-*yuan* loan. "Mother pleaded with her long and hard. She finally agreed to take three *yuan* and left us with but one." That evening, with rice again at the table after many days, "I ate happily and hungrily. Mother looked on and hardly touched the food. She had tears in her eyes. She was thinking of father."²⁶

It is remarkable that Ying showed little pride in independently supporting her mother with honest labor. Because of the circumstances, Ying had become the household breadwinner. The villains in the account were stereotypes rather than real people—the landlady as the vile rentier and

the factory management as the exploitative capitalists. They had behaved in perfect accord with the logic of the economic system that was presumably in place. The removal of the father-protector exposed the women of Ying's family to the outside forces of hostility. It broke down the divisions separating the inner realm of the female from the outer domain of the male. A family run by women might be able to function adequately as an economic unit. Yet it could never hope to repair this sense of normative breach. The loss of the patriarch had reduced the surviving widow and children to a lesser state of existence. It was this knowledge that brought tears to the mother and resignation to the daughter.

Numerous other contributions to *Dushu shenghuo* traced the downturn in family fortune to the death of the father. Sun Shuzhi's hope to go to middle school and to become a teacher was dashed when he received news that his father had died in Shanghai. Sun was fifteen and had just finished elementary school in his home town. His maternal uncle then dutifully arrived to console the widowed sister and orphaned nephew. It now fell upon the uncle to look after the bereaved household. Using his personal connections, the uncle arranged to have Sun accepted in a county pawnshop as an apprentice. He was to learn a trade and to drop out of school. On the day Sun was due at work, his uncle came to perform the duties of the male head of the household. The uncle escorted Sun to the pawnshop and witnessed the initiation ceremony on behalf of the family. Both the ritual and the workplace were exclusively for men; Sun's mother had to stay behind. She tearfully saw her son off as he was led away from home. In the next three years he would be permitted to return but three times each year. How the teenage boy was to fare from that point onward became largely a matter in the hands of the new master-employer.²⁷

Yuan Fangxi was thirteen when his father died. Yuan's father had been a private tutor, school master, and finally the principal of a public elementary school. Yuan had learned how to read and write sitting on his father's lap and hovering around his desk. He had also been a pupil at the school and had always wanted to become a man of letters.

With the death of his father, Yuan was withdrawn from school and sent away to a distant town, where he was apprenticed to a soy sauce shop. Yuan did manual work and was kept on his feet all day.

If he could muster the energy at the end of the day, Yuan would peruse a set of collected essays written by his father, which he treasured as a special text of wisdom. He hoped to absorb the learning they embodied and restore himself one day to the company of the educated.

Yuan had to keep his reading secret, however. It was a "must" that trade apprentices learn use of the abacus and bookkeeping. It was a "must not" that they read literature and hold literary aspirations. Yuan thus risked exposing himself to the ire of his master trying to read his father's essays.²⁸

Jin Manhui of Huizhou was a twelve-year-old elementary school student when his father died. He was immediately withdrawn from school, and, thanks to an uncle, accepted as an apprentice by a fellow Huizhou merchant in Shanghai.

The night before Jin left home, his mother helped him pack. Jin wanted to take along his ink slab, brush, paper, and books. He also wanted his Tang poetry collections and English textbooks. His mother said no and took them away; they were objects that belonged to a literary life. They no longer suited him in trade and were bound to annoy his new master.

The boy burst into tears and said that he would rather stay home; he was apprehensive about the apprenticeship. But the resistance was futile and only brought tears to his mother's eyes. Without a father, the son was lucky to find an apprenticeship. The next morning the uncle picked him up and delivered him, "lonely and dejected, . . . gripped by fear and sadness," into the hands of his new master.²⁹

Jiao Daqiu, a twenty-seven-year-old farm laborer who wrote to *Dushu shenghuo* by the light of a kerosene lamp in a corral, dated his hardship to the summer when his father died. Jiao was sixteen and a secondary school student when tragedy struck. The family owned a three-room dwelling and eight *mu* of land. But it also went into debt during his father's illness. In order to pay off the debt and support his mother and four younger siblings, it fell upon Jiao to work in the fields. He mortgaged the family land and indentured himself to his father's creditors. His mother and sisters helped too, knitting, washing, and mending whenever they could find such work. The family managed with barely enough for two meals each day. Ten years had gone by, and Jiao saw neither hope nor respite from his incessant toil.³⁰

Numerous accounts of this sort filled the pages of *Dushu shenghuo* during its two years of publication. The formulaic representation encapsulates a central trauma consisting of the loss of the father, the end of a familiar way of life, the departure from home, and the beginning of a new life of dependency. The recurrence of this storyline in the journal produced, in the end, a distinct effect. It turned individual narratives into sample reports about the conditions of a whole class of people. In the language of the 1930s, those who had lost their fathers (*shifu*) were inevitably

deprived, at the same time, of opportunities for an education (*shixue*). Arrangements were made at the father's funeral between the widowed mother and a visiting male relative. The young man thus passed from his father's care into the home of a new master.

While the master-employer wielded patriarchal authority that was no less absolute than that of the father, it was power of a different sort. The teenager entered into a personal dependency that was not only contractual, but also entailed a loss of autonomy and a measure of degradation. As the relationship was based on a transaction, it was vulnerable to the changing tides of the marketplace. In that case the youngster was also likely to lose his apprenticeship—*shiye*, which along with *shifu* and *shixue* made up the complete picture of destitution.

All in all, for a "vocational youth" the new addition of a master and a vocation (*zhiye*) would hardly make up for the loss of a father and an education. These personal accounts in the pages of *Dushu shenghuo*, as they dwelled upon the hardships that awaited the orphaned, simultaneously idealized the sanctity of the nuclear family and underscored its centrality in the well-being of everyone.

This is not to suggest, of course, that all Shanghai apprentices had been traumatized by the loss of their fathers. Nor that, despite the high personnel turnover rate in trades and shops, all vocational youths were on the verge of losing their jobs. It does mean, however, that there was a latent frustration and insecurity among Shanghai's petty urbanites, and left-wing journals such as *Dushu shenghuo* either gave expression to it or persuasively suggested it. These individuals saw themselves as the underprivileged and disadvantaged who had been denied access to education, deprived of the benefits of a more beneficent patronage, and blocked from a future of career advancement. In a time of recognized hardship such as the mid-1930s, the petty urbanites saw themselves as being particularly vulnerable; they had been deprived of a social safety net. They were forced to face the incalculable forces of the global marketplace on their own.

Dushu shenghuo, by painting a catastrophic picture of flooding, drought, famine, recession, and warfare, amplified this voice of fear, destitution, and despair. By printing the stories submitted by the readers, it also allowed these individuals to see that they were not alone in their plights. The journal's message, repeatedly stated, stressed that there was no viable future for any single individual, and that the bourgeois dream of someday moving ahead into the warmth of comfort and the ranks of the respectable was destined to fail. For the widowed, the orphaned, and

the unprotected, virtue and hard work would not guarantee their survival. Nor, given the real cause of misfortune, should anyone hope to escape the general fate that befell the Chinese nation in the face of imperialism and global capitalism. The only viable course of action open to the petty urbanites was to band together and transform themselves into patriots and warriors who fought foreign aggressors in defense of the nation. For those deprived of paternal patronage, it was futile to lament the loss of their fathers. It was all the more imperative, in an acute struggle for survival, that they become patriots. By giving life to the nation, they would then give a fighting chance to themselves.

STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL

Those who read *Dushu shenghuo* and wrote to its editors for advice could not fail to learn that the key to self-help was a reformed way of life, which could be summed up in two words: survival and struggle. No one was safe from the forces of foreign imperialism, which subjected the Chinese nation to external aggression. Under such circumstances, career failures and personal frustrations were only to be expected. No one needed to personally take responsibility for his or her condition. By the same reasoning, no one could realistically hope to better his or her prospects under prevailing circumstances. Such improvements would not be possible until the Chinese nation and its people had won liberation from imperialism. The prospects of the individual—the material well-being of the wives and children of the petty urbanites—were inextricably linked to the struggle for the liberation of the nation (*minzu jiefang*). This simple truth, as the editors of *Dushu shenghuo* endeavored to show, was founded on principles of social science. It was a truth for all to grasp. The campaign for national liberation must therefore begin with a refashioning of petty urbanite consciousness through reading and thinking. It would gather momentum only as the petty urbanites engaged in struggles (*shenghuo douzheng*) that concerned them in their daily lives.³¹

The notion of self-help, of course, had been prominent in Shanghai popular journals well before this time. It was a main theme developed in Zou Taofen's *Shenghuo zhouban*, which enjoyed enormous popularity with petty urbanite readers. Although barely a decade apart, *Dushu shenghuo* had redefined the terms of the discussion as developed in *Shenghuo zhouban*. It rejected self-help as a means to improve professional skills and promote career advancement. It directed attention emphatically to outright unemployment and the absence of job security, and

displayed a strong skepticism about the relevance of competence, merit, and work ethics to the improvement of one's lot. A willingness to adhere to high professional standards, of course, had been the cornerstone of Zou Taofen's prescription to the job-seeking petty urbanites. Like Zou and many other reformers, *Dushu shenghuo* sought the betterment of individuals through their transformation. This betterment, however, was not to take place within the context of accepted workplace relationships within a corporate framework. It was to lead, instead, to a total refashioning of socio-political relationships in the larger society, including a thorough revision of the basic principles of economic operation.

What, then, should be an appropriate response to the family suicides that had so shaken Zhou Fang and his wife? What should be the proper course of action for petty urbanites during the recession of the 1930s? From the perspectives of *Dushu shenghuo*, both Zhou's wife and his friend had displayed "the narrowly self-centered perspectives of the small property owners." Zhou's wife, like all virtuous women of the past, believed that she could save her family with old-style frugality and good-natured docility. Zhou's friend, on the other hand, had given himself to modern man's hedonistic impulses, which were just as misdirected. What Zhou should do, advised the editors, is prepare himself for the challenges of a different kind of life. Was manual labor truly shameful? Was social degradation into the ranks of the laborers a condition worse than death? Was it truly justifiable that parents should kill their children so as to spare them the prospect of a "lower" status in life? The answer to each one of these questions clearly had to be "no." The Yues and the Zhangs, in that sense, were victims of their own erroneous thoughts, products of social circumstances. They made the mistake of doing little to fight their false values. The families were killed by their unreformed state of mind.

There was, *Dushu shenghuo* continued, a collective life above and beyond that of the mere individual, in the stream of which one man was but "as insignificant as an ant." This was the life of the masses, which would continue on even if the individuals were to perish. What the "spring sparrows"—petty urbanites at a time of economic recession—ought to do, then, was to regard the world in a new way, to join the life that flew in this powerful stream, and to fight to enrich and enhance the vitality of a larger collective existence. Those with jobs and families "need not take up the vanguard position, but . . . must join the camp." One could do so by training oneself to have the right kind of thoughts in everyday life.³² Although no promise was offered that this would help guarantee the security of Zhou's employment, he was at least shown a way to cul-

tivate a consciousness that would give him and his family a life without a white-collar job.

A critical number of individuals had come under the influence of journals such as *Dushu shenghuo* in the mid-1930s. As Japan intensified its attempt to gain control over northern China in 1935, Shanghai's petty urbanites mobilized for patriotic action. The Shanghai National Salvation Association of Vocational Youths was one of the most active divisions in the All-China Federation of National Salvation Associations.³³ The Ants Club (Yishe), which pledged to build "an army of ants" to struggle for the survival of the nation, developed a membership of over ten thousand people. After the outbreak of war in July 1937, the Shanghai branch of the Chinese Communist Party, led by the accountant Gu Zhun (see chapter 7), facilitated the formation of Society of Beneficial Friends (Yiyoushe), which used cultural and social events as a front for political mobilization.³⁴ These organizations did much to draw the city's clerks, office workers, and apprentices out of the established networks of relationships centering upon their activities at home and work. These "ants" built new communities that evolved around their patriotic activities. They formed drama troupes, choirs, news clubs, and reading groups. Such mobilization profoundly altered the use of literacy and the dissemination of ideas in Shanghai's petty urbanite society.³⁵ The rise of the nation, in this sense, had stemmed from a deep-seated uneasiness at the workplace, and was concurrent with an acute sense of crisis within the nuclear family.

Pre-war left-wing discourse on the nuclear family is significant in several ways. As it shifted attention away from the individual to focus instead on the family, it directed concerns to issues of survival and familial obligations rather than to rights and individual happiness. It pushed aside the May Fourth agenda of the articulation of individuality and developed a gendered construction of "male" and "female" within the context of the family.

Ethical norms governing familial relationships, meanwhile, became closely intertwined with a consideration of material well-being. It was essential that as a father or a husband, a man should provide for and shield his family. It was in keeping with a time-honored Confucian teaching, similarly, that as a filial son a man must be able to provide for the comfort and support of his aging parents. An inability to provide was not only an economic hardship, but also a moral failure and an emotional misfortune. When a whole class of hard-working men found themselves unable to fulfill such obligations, the time had clearly come for there to be drastic changes within the entire society. There

was, once again, an "economistic" turn that demanded a place in Chinese democracy.

Left-wing discourse of the 1930s presented individuals as the product of a web of ethical and material relationships, and thus laid the foundation for a systemic critique of the social system. The result was not only a radical rejection of a capitalist economy of private ownership and market mechanisms, but also an attack on the practical viability of the very idea of an idealized nuclear family.

As the heads of households were shown to dysfunction, there emerged at the same time an idealization of a paternalistic socialist state that institutionalized its functions both as a provider for and protector of the Chinese people. The state, in a sense, had taken over the tasks of the family. Familial bonds had not been rejected, they had been depersonalized. Under state management, Chinese modernity emerged as an economistic project of material comfort and moral conservatism, instead of a critical exercise in intellectual self-reflection.

Chinese modernity, as it had taken shape in the social and cultural context of Republican Shanghai, came to promise endless progress and sustained prosperity, and, at the same time, inspired demands for security and protection against the backdrop of recession and imminent warfare in the 1930s. During the War of Resistance these demands converged in a popular idealization of a paternalistic state powerful enough to look after individual well-being. Virtue and authority came to rest neither with the heads of the households nor with the corporate leaders. Neither would be able to live up to the moral obligations toward their dependents in the larger circumstances of the time. Worse yet, some would even be forced to compromise their principles. But the promises of a good life in a just society continued to inspire. In the end, Shanghai's petty urbanites pinned their hopes on the construction of a modernized, socialist state.