Eugenia Lean’s *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* is a work admirable for its extensive and intensive archival study. Using the filial revenge murder by Shi Jianqiao of militarist Sun Chuanfang to examine public sympathy, *Public Passions* is a genealogical study of the force of emotions (*qing*) that arose in modern Republican China. (*Qing* manifests itself in Lean’s account of the Shi case in three ways – as an “ethical sentiment” driving Shi’s act of revenge, public sympathy for her heroism and the juridical consideration of this sympathy and sentiment.) Throughout her book and in her reading of Shi, Lean believes that this Republican case of *qing* exemplifies discursive practices associated with the language of ethics and the experience of modernity. For Lean, urban popular practices relentlessly punctuated/fractured an intellectualist discourse of modernity articulated by Habermas and also called into question the account of a dominant, rational legal regime in Republican China. Through her genealogy, Lean hopes to demonstrate that historically, “the moral authenticity of emotions has been a powerful motivating force” (p. 212) that articulated the meaning of justice and modern subjectivity within society and within the Chinese history of modernity. Thus her investigation into the historicity of Shi’s case questions the legitimacy of reason with regard to the foundation of civic society. Writing in the context of Republican China, Lean’s book is also an attempt to “deconstruct universal narratives of modernity” (p. 213), narratives that are legacies of Western Enlightenment.

Without neglecting the abundance of scholarship on *qing*, *Public Passions* is a reading of Shi Jianqiao that attempts to put her story on the genealogical map of 1930s Republican China. In Tianjin in November 1935, Shi Jianqiao killed the Republican warlord Sun Chuanfang to avenge the death of her father, Shi Congbin. The female assassin’s act of revenge immediately triggered a media sensation and Supreme Court debates, and she was curiously granted a state pardon. Lean examines contemporary interpretations of Shi Jianqiao’s passionate act of revenge. Shi understood her passionate act of murder as an expression of filial piety or ethical sentiment that powerfully mobilized public sympathy. The media treated her successful killing of a warlord as heroic, a symbol of “national redemption” in a time of moral crisis (p. 73). The Republican
legal reformists treated *qing* as a manifestation of brutal violence incompatible with the pursuit of justice and judicial autonomy (hence their insistence on legal punishment). Finally, the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek sanctioned such an act of filiality both to increase its own popularity and to support its campaign for a Confucian moral revival. Neither the reformists nor the Nationalists sufficiently explained *qing* in the Shi case because while the reformists sought to dismiss *qing* from the realm of reason, the Nationalists made use of *qing* to consolidate their rule by moral doctrines.

Lean’s main task in the book, then, is to analyze the ethical elements in Shi’s case. In the imperial historical and literary representations of *qing*, it was the female heroine’s self-fashioning and independent assertion that often helped to articulate authentic, ethical sentiment.¹ In this Republican case, however, the court and the mass media joined the female performer. They emerged as sites where the historicity and ethicality of Shi’s act of violence were universally recognized. It seems to me that this phenomenon accounts for the uniqueness, or modern-ness, in Shi Jianqiao’s case. Lean’s discussions about the court proceedings and the media coverage demonstrate the freshness of her scholarship.

In the case of media, Lean explores how the genres of serialized fictions and urban theatre (historically, they had developed into a critique within the “repressive” political environment starting from the late Qing) turned Shi’s case into a “compelling ethical narrative” by establishing Shi’s *woman warrior* persona or *xia* (“chivalrous righteousness”) nature, thus successfully converting the killing of a warlord into the articulating of a new transgressive social order. “Celebrated in the media and entertainment worlds as a heroic *xia* story,” Shi’s killing “was seen as an act of national redemption and expression of public justice” (p. 73). The media adaptations based on Shi’s case “allowed the reading public to explore radically new gender norms” (p. 75), “consider new ways of being” in the Republican order (p. 54), and pursue “alternative forms of justice outside the official court system” (p. 75). In Lean’s view, these less serious forms of media became venues for the public to bypass state censorship and *act upon* the modern legal system. The considerations of public sympathy also helped articulate the order of

justice in the court. In general, Lean’s arguments are sympathetic to the xia space that Shi’s case had created among urban forms of communication, although some readers will undoubtedly deviate from Lean and see the 1930s media as highly regulative.

Lean addresses the courtroom performance in Chapter 4, “The Trial: Courtroom Spectacle and Ethical Sentiment in the Rule of Law.” This chapter interestingly describes how Shi’s lawyers showed their understanding of the Republican world of justice by their mastery of the technique for its practice. They “devised a compelling strategy that was grounded in the Republican Code, the rule of rites and in the moral authority of public sympathy” (p. 117). Thus although reformists of the early Republican period sought to expel imperial rites and feelings from their modern image of law, we see the return of both in Shi’s trial.

It is not possible to reconstruct the comprehensive nature of Lean’s writing in a review, and my account remains as much an interpretation as a summary. Public Passions involves Lean’s ambition of unfolding history into historical details. The Republican period, especially the Nanjing Decade, has long been seen as a time of state rationalism and commercialism. The Shi case exemplifies Lean’s argument that qing played an essential role in constituting modern subjectivity. The fact that this Republican case had other histories casts doubt on the hypothesis that the Republican experience of modernity was marked by rituals and laws. Public Passions challenges the way history has been written and the way we understand the present and our historical moment. Therefore, Lean’s work delivers a sense of “critical modernity,” a phrase murkyly suggested, yet crucial to her analysis of popular sympathy.

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