

# The Battle over the Employment of Waitresses in Beijing, China, during the 1930s

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*Waitresses were introduced into Beijing commercial life in 1928, when restaurant owners employed women for the first time in a bid to adapt to a declining economy. Women's presence in a public sphere that had been the exclusive domain of men precipitated a major debate in the city, influenced by the interaction of class and gender. Conservative moralists represented waitressing as a threat to public morality and to traditional Chinese values. Municipal authorities issued rigid regulations to control waitressing and considered outlawing it altogether. Many male intellectuals opposed the proposed ban, but lamented the commercialization of these women. Female social reformers defended waitresses' right to work, hailing this new occupation for women. However, the struggling working lives of most waitresses posed a contrast to intellectuals' construction of the Chinese "new womanhood."*

*Les serveuses ont fait leur entrée dans la vie commerciale de Beijing en 1928, lorsque les propriétaires de restaurant employèrent des femmes pour la toute première fois dans une tentative d'adaptation à une économie déclinante. La présence des femmes dans une sphère publique qui avait été une chasse-gardée masculine fit éclater à Beijing un débat majeur sur l'interaction entre la classe et le genre. Les moralistes conservateurs voyaient l'emploi de serveuses comme une menace à la moralité publique et aux valeurs chinoises traditionnelles. Les autorités municipales décrétèrent des règles rigoureuses pour régir le métier de serveuse et envisagèrent de l'interdire du tout au tout. De nombreux hommes intellectuels s'opposèrent à l'interdiction proposée tout en déplorant la commercialisation de ces femmes. Les réformatrices sociales défendirent le droit des serveuses de travailler, saluant l'arrivée de cette nouvelle profession pour les femmes. Toutefois, la vie professionnelle difficile de la plupart des serveuses contrastait avec l'idée que se faisaient les intellectuels de la « nouvelle féminité chinoise ».*

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THE CHINESE new woman first appeared during the May Fourth era as a construction of intellectual reformers<sup>1</sup> who presented new women as independent, patriotic individuals with moral integrity in reaction to Confucian traditions.<sup>2</sup> To most May Fourth thinkers, a new woman would achieve full personhood mainly through education and a meaningful vocation.<sup>3</sup> After Chiang Kai-shek purged the communists in April 1927, conservatism and commercialism began to dominate the social landscape of the major metropolitan centres. Yet, by the beginning of the 1930s, while educated women longing for independence were still marginalized in the male-dominated job market,<sup>4</sup> the image of the new woman was altering. No longer a politically oriented figure, the new woman became “a modern girl,” especially in Shanghai, China’s largest commercial centre. “Striding along city streets with bobbed hair and high-heel shoes,” she symbolized a glamorous consumer lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> She could also be an opera actress in Beijing,<sup>6</sup> where her vulgar performances and straightforward acting were warmly welcomed by commoner audiences. Her romance and unconventional behaviour were gossiped about among urbanites and imitated by youth.<sup>7</sup> While commercialization shaped the image of Chinese new women, the commercially centred modern women were important to the growth of this new urban culture.

In 1928, after the newly formed Nationalist government moved the capital from Beijing to Nanjing, waitresses were introduced into

1 Louise Edwards, “Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China,” *Modern China*, vol. 26, no. 2 (April 2000), p. 116.

2 *Ibid.*; Bryna Goodman, “The Vocational Woman and the Elusiveness of ‘Personhood’ in Early Republican China” in Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson, eds., *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor & Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), p. 265.

3 Chen Duxiu, one of the most prominent May Fourth thinkers, stated in 1921: “Chinese woman, whether she obeys her father or her husband, has an incomplete and defective personhood.” Chen Duxiu, “Funu wenti yu shehui zhuyi [Women’s Issue and Socialism],” *Guangdong Qunbao* [Canton Masses Paper], January 31, 1921, cited in *Zhonghua quanguo funu lianhehui* [Women’s Movement Research Center of All China Women’s Association] and *Funu yundong lishi yanjiu shi* [Research Institution for History of Women’s Movement], eds., *Wusi shiqi funu wenti wenxuan* [The Selection of Papers on the Women’s Issue Published during May Fourth Era] (Beijing: Chinese Women’s Press, 1990), p. 82; Goodman, “The Vocational Woman,” pp. 268–269.

4 Bai Wei, “Sanshi niandai zhongguo ‘xin nuxing’ de jiaose banyan yu shehui hudong — yi dianying ‘xin nuxing’ wei ge’an [Chinese New Women in Films and Society in the 1930s: A Case Study of Film New Women]” *Funu yanjiu luncong* [Collection of Women’s Studies], serial no. 272 (September 2008), no. 5, p. 60; He Liping, “Kangzhan yiqian guotongqu funu zhiye zhuangkuang yanjiu [Women’s Vocations under the Nationalist Regime before the Anti-Japanese War],” *Wen shi zhe* [Journal of Literature, History, and Philosophy], serial no. 272, vol. 5 (2002), p. 166.

5 Edwards, “Policing the Modern Woman,” p. 123.

6 Beijing was named Beiping before 1949. In this paper, I use Beijing to avoid confusion.

7 Cheng Weikun, “The Challenge of the Actresses: Female Performers and Cultural Alternatives in Early Twentieth Century Beijing and Tianjin,” *Modern China*, vol. 22, no. 2 (April 1996), pp. 219–221.

Beijing's commercial life to boost the declining economy. Beijing had served as the country's capital for over 500 years; the nationalist leaders, however, condemned the city for a "mix of Manchu, militarist, and Communist influences" and firmly denied its fitness to be the capital.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of the 1930s, in comparison to the treaty ports of Shanghai and Guangzhou, Beijing retained a "heavy official atmosphere," a "bureaucratic odor."<sup>9</sup> Its pace of modernization and urbanization was slower. Shanghai and Guangzhou had been transformed into a "garishly illuminated metropolis of night-life," urban centres famous for their Western cuisine, sports, and entertainment.<sup>10</sup> Yet Beijing was well known for its magnificent array of palaces, museums, and archives, its "palpable administrative and political aura,"<sup>11</sup> as well as rigid gender segregation.<sup>12</sup> The Beijing Police Bureau forbade males and females from sharing the same barbershops until 1927,<sup>13</sup> but public bathhouses became "centers of social intercourse" for the city elites.<sup>14</sup> Less public, but by no means unusual, were the meetings held in the city's "flower world." Following the footsteps of politicians and contemporary literati, newspaper reporters visited brothels, not only for pleasure but also to collect information.<sup>15</sup>

Waitresses in Beijing met a hostile reception from most of the social elites and media of the city. The controversy surrounding the hiring and employment of waitresses reached its peak in 1932, with an attempt on the part of the Beijing Chamber of Commerce to outlaw waitressing. The media played a crucial role in the debate through their power to shape public discourse.

Little has been published to date on the topic in English, and only a little work has been done in mainland China and Taiwan. A Yanjing University student wrote her BA thesis on Beijing waitresses in 1933.<sup>16</sup>

8 David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 10.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

10 Frederic Wakeman, Jr., "Licensing Leisure: The Chinese Nationalists' Attempt to Regulate Shanghai, 1927 to 49," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 54, no. 1 (February 1995), p. 19; Virgil K. Y. Ho, *Understanding Canton: Rethinking Popular Culture in the Republican Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 63–69.

11 Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing*, p. 12.

12 Xu Huiqi, "Xunzheng shiqi de Beiping nu zhaodai (1928–1937) — guanyu dushi xiaofei yu nuxing zhiye de tantao [Beijing Waitresses during the Najing Decade (1928–1937): A Study on Urban Consumerism and Female Occupations]" *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi jikan* [Modern History Collection of Academia Sinica], no. 48 (June 2005), p. 62.

13 *Beiping Ribao* [Beijing Daily], January 12, 1927.

14 Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing*, pp. 169–170.

15 "Shao Piaoping furen Tang Xiuhui de chuanqi rensheng [The Legendary Life of Tang Xiuhui, Wife of the Newspaperman Shao Piaoping]," retrieved October 21, 2009, from <http://www.chinaqking.com/rm/2007/14295.html>.

16 Zhang Ruyi, "Beiping nu zhaodai yanjiu [Study on Beijing Waitresses]" (BA thesis, Yanjing University, Beijing, 1933).

Undertaken from the perspective of a sociologist, her work offers invaluable information on many aspects of waitressing. Over eight decades later, two female scholars published on the subject: Beijing researcher Wang Qin examines the battle over waitresses' employment in the context of the power struggle among different social groups, trying to highlight the agency of these oppressed women,<sup>17</sup> and Taiwan-based scholar Xu Huiqi emphasizes the ambivalence of the occupation in her well-researched article. She sees both waitressing and the sensational media coverage of waitresses as motivated by consumerism.<sup>18</sup> Inspired by their work and also drawing upon western scholarship, I explore the interactions of class and gender through the discrepancies between the struggling and ambiguous working lives of waitresses and intellectuals' constructions of the "Chinese new womanhood," a theme neglected by previous authors.

The ban on waitressing was not a proposal limited to Beijing. In 1921 and 1924, Guangzhou authorities twice tried to outlaw waitressing. Unlike the case in Beijing, however, in Guangzhou the male teahouse union played a leading role in the battle. Although Guangzhou waitresses were attacked on the grounds of moral decay, the violent riots organized by teahouse waiters were what temporarily drove waitresses out of the vocation in the city.<sup>19</sup> Gender conflict in Beijing was less intense, and gender played a more complicated role in the debates. There were tensions and conflicts between waitresses and waiters, yet solidarity also bound them together in the face of abusive customers. Although the ban on waitressing was proposed partially in the name of defending male workers' right to employment, the battle was in fact engineered by the men of the Beijing Chamber of Commerce, who claimed a strong sense of responsibility for safeguarding public morality. Beijing, therefore, is a suitable place to unveil the complex and entangled interplay of class and gender in this controversy.

### **The Beijing Waitress in the Public Eye**

At the end of the 1920s, Beijing underwent a steep economic decline following the relocation of the capital.<sup>20</sup> The service and entertainment industries were hit particularly hard by the departure of government officials

17 Wang Qin, "Ershi shiji sanshi niandai Beijing qudi nu zhaodai fengbo [The Debate over Waitress Ban in Beijing of the 1930s]," *Beijing Shehui Kexue* [Social Sciences of Beijing], vol. 1 (2005), pp. 120–127.

18 Xu, "Xunzheng shiqi," pp. 47–93.

19 Li Shuping and Jiang Fen, "Ershi shiji ershi niandai Guangzhou jinzhi nu zhaodai fenbo chutan [On the Waitressing Ban in Guangzhou during the 1920s]," *Lishi Jiaoxue* [History Teaching], serial no. 549, vol. 8 (2008), pp. 91–92.

20 Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and its Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 80.

and bureaucrats, and many businesses went bankrupt.<sup>21</sup> Business owners, especially restaurateurs, began trying various ways to attract more customers. One restaurant owner, Zhang Youhuan, thought of hiring young women to attract customers and in 1928 became the first restaurateur in Beijing to do so.<sup>22</sup> As he had hoped, business boomed in his Xiao Xiao Restaurant, thanks to the hospitality of the waitresses. Other restaurant owners envied Zhang's success and began to follow suit. Within two years, 197 restaurants had a total of 1,147 females waiting on tables. In 1930 the Beijing Department of Social Works officially approved the occupation of waitressing. At a time when few careers were open to women, the food service industry became the largest employer of women in the city.<sup>23</sup> The restaurants hiring women were mainly cafés, neighbourhood restaurants, and diners serving middle-class customers. The first-class restaurants, exclusive tea rooms, and private clubs that catered to political, economic, and intellectual elites still preferred to employ well-trained male waiters to show their status. Most of the smaller establishments serving labourers and coolies could not afford to hire waitresses.<sup>24</sup>

Age and appearance were two of the most important criteria for becoming a waitress. The majority of Beijing waitresses were young and good-looking. Most were also illiterate and lacked any special skills. A typical job advertisement ran: "Help wanted. Three waitress positions available. Must be female, 16 to 24 years old, good looking, and of proper character. Meals are provided and wages are competitive."<sup>25</sup> Statistical data are sketchy, but records from the Department of Social Works reveal that, while the age of waitresses ranged from 13 years to the mid-30s, most were young women between 16 and 20.<sup>26</sup> A common tactic used by restaurants to solicit customers was to hang a sign at the front entrance with an eye-catching phrase such as "newly hired waitresses to offer you good service" or "beautiful waitress" to highlight the sexual attractiveness of their employees.<sup>27</sup> In this respect, Beijing waitresses were comparable to the tea hostesses in Shanghai who were popular during the 1930s and

21 Statistics from the Department of Social Works reveal that 264 enterprises went out of business in merely one year from 1928 to 1929. "Xiaotiao de Beiping [Beijing in Recession]," *Beiping Chenbao* [Beijing Morning News], October 2, 1929, cited in Wang Qin, "Nuxing zhiye he jindai chengshi shehui [Women's Occupation and Modern Urban Society]" (PhD dissertation, People's University of China, Beijing, 2005), p. 110.

22 *Jing Bao* [Capital Daily], April 18, 1932.

23 Zhang, "Beiping nu zhaodai," p. 8; Wang, "Ershi shiji," p. 116.

24 *Jing Bao*, April 18, 1932.

25 Wang, "Ershi shiji," p. 116.

26 *Ibid.*; Zhang, "Beiping nu zhaodai," pp. 13–14; *Jing Bao*, April 18 and August 1, 1932. Zhang's investigation of Beijing waitresses also indicates that, although the regulation issued by the Department of Social Works permitted only the hiring of women 18 years of age and older, restaurants hired girls as young as 14 ("Beiping nu zhaodai," pp. 13–14).

27 *Jing Bao*, April 18 and August 1, 1932.

1940s. Useful for attracting customers, these women were described as “experts at winking, joking, flirting, ‘selling romance,’ and being fondled”; many were seen as casual prostitutes.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of the dress code laid down by the Department of Social Works, Beijing waitresses “did try to follow fashion closely.” Most had their hair cut in a fashion that challenged the old way of life. Beijing waitresses were fond of high-heeled shoes, but most wore low-heeled shoes because they had to walk up and down long stairways. In the spring and summer, when jasmine and gardenia were in bloom, they often wore flowers in the belief that “the fragrant smell increased their charm.” Waitresses also took vividly coloured handkerchiefs to work. Made of Indian silk, the handkerchiefs were presents for favoured customers. One newspaper reported that “at least a couple of gold rings were shining on their fingers.”<sup>29</sup>

The primary role of Beijing waitresses was to entertain male customers. They were required to greet customers with a charming smile and to engage in “sweet talk.” Xiao Xiao Restaurant started a number of innovative practices that other restaurants emulated. A waitress was not addressed by her name but by the number of the room in which she worked. When a “regular” entered the restaurant, the manager would loudly call out the room number of the waitress who routinely took care of that customer. The waitress then ran to the restaurant entrance to greet her patron. Casual customers, in contrast, were normally greeted by any waitresses available. Waitresses would spend between 15 minutes and an hour chatting with especially generous customers before the meal was served. After the meal, waitresses would spend some private time with their customers.<sup>30</sup>

Restaurant owners used flirtatious young women at times in an effort to entice more customers. Sometimes waitresses were sent into the street to attract male patrons inside.<sup>31</sup> Such practices might have helped to turn many men into regulars, but they did not meet with universal approval. The press, for example, took a dim view of the way waitresses behaved, depicting them as “worse than prostitutes, being willing to act in a way that prostitutes refused to act out of shame.”<sup>32</sup> The public consensus was, by and large, that most of these young women came from good families. Poverty forced them into an environment where their sexual attractiveness, along with their labour, was “sold” to restaurant owners in “exchange” for

28 Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasure: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 58–59.

29 *Jing Bao*, April 19, 1932.

30 *Jing Bao*, April 20, 1932.

31 *Jing Bao*, April 19, 1932; *Dousheng Ribao* [Ring Bell Daily], December 4, 1933.

32 *Shijie Ribao* [World Daily], February 4, 1932.

income.<sup>33</sup> The result was that restaurant owners were in a position to require these women to endure sexual innuendoes, verbal advances, and sometimes physical assault from male customers on a daily basis.

Unlike prostitutes, however, waitresses were not forced into sexual relationships with customers. They were also not bound to restaurant owners in the manner of indentured labour. In this regard, economic independence and the freedom to change jobs and to choose sexual partners distinguished Beijing waitresses from traditional female entertainers in China. Yet the situation created significant ambiguity: while waitresses were brought into the job market to promote women's vocation, the very act of waitressing reinforced the tyranny of gender stereotypes and further entrenched "gendered power relations."<sup>34</sup>

### **Waitressing in a Gender-Segregated Society**

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese women began to challenge the Confucian notion of gender separation. This trend was led by a group of women who left China to study in Japan.<sup>35</sup> Yet the most thoroughgoing attack on Confucian traditions was launched in the May Fourth era, when a much larger number of educated young women, inspired by Ibsen's *Nora*, left their families in search of independent personhood.<sup>36</sup> After the coup of April 1927, the conservative turn in politics came side by side with an increasingly commercialized urban mass culture, in which fashionable young women, taxi dancers, erotic opera singers, and waitresses were highly visible.

Different people saw waitresses in different lights. To male restaurant patrons, waitresses deserved to be treated as commodity; their entrance into the vocation proved their availability. To tabloid newspapers of the

33 Zhang, "Beiping nu zhaodai," pp.14–16, 18. Zhang's investigation of 220 Beijing waitresses indicates that about 89 per cent of them were Beijing residents, and 76 per cent had a father or husband who was unemployed.

34 Lisa Adkins, *Gendered Work: Sexuality, Family and the Labor Market* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1995), p. 135. Gail Hershatter apparently identifies tea hostesses, coffee-shop waitresses, and bar hostesses as a modern form of prostitutes, or casual prostitutes. Not under the control of a brothel, they sold their bodies to earn additional income (*Dangerous Pleasure*, pp. 58–59). Yet Elise K. Tipton, in her study of Japanese café waitresses, emphasizes their ambiguous social role and does not assign these women a more definite identity. See Elise K. Tipton, "Pink Collar Work: The Café Waitress in Early Twentieth Century Japan," *Intersections* (March 2002), retrieved October 20, 2008, from [http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue7\\_contents.html](http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue7_contents.html).

35 These Chinese students in Japan did not call for an outright abandonment of gender segregation. They either maintained that a woman could have influence in the outer sphere through her husband and sons, or took a career such as teaching or nursing that could be viewed as an extension of "women's long-standing roles as nurturers and instructors of the next generation." See Joan Judge, "Between Nei and Wai," in Goodman and Larson, eds., *Gender in Motion*, p. 134.

36 Bryna Goodman, "The Vocational Woman" in Goodman and Larson, eds., *Gender in Motion*, pp. 279–280.

mosquito press, waitresses were a source of morality tales and gossip that expanded readership. To conservatives, waitresses constituted one of the social vices that had to be eliminated. To reformers, waitresses were unfortunate but vain sisters who should be saved. It was not long before Beijing residents began referring to dining in restaurants as “eating waitress,” a derogatory and strongly erotic term in the context of Chinese culture. Food was no longer viewed as the main reason to go to a restaurant. Instead, flirting with waitresses, sexually teasing them, deliberately touching them, and pressing them for sexual favours became the major preoccupation for many male customers.<sup>37</sup>

Reports of unruly customers who “acted obscenely toward waitresses, wantonly teasing them,” frequently appeared in newspapers.<sup>38</sup> Outspoken and bold waitresses who refused to put up with bad behaviour often faced punishment and even dismissal.<sup>39</sup> Sometimes young men loitered outside the restaurants, intending to ask waitresses out on dates. Admirers went so far as to ask waitresses for their addresses with the aim of meeting privately. Many waitresses stalled these men with vague answers or gave them fake names and addresses,<sup>40</sup> but some engaged in intimate relations with their customers, a development that became the focus of much press coverage. Both Chinese and Western scholarship has pointed out that recognizing women’s vulnerability to exploitation in sexually typed occupations is not to define them solely as exploited victims.<sup>41</sup> Some women prized the social intercourse with their male customers as well as the lucrative tips they earned while working in restaurants. However, intolerant parents or non-supportive husbands could precipitate family squabbles that sometimes ended in daughters and wives running away.<sup>42</sup>

Like Shanghai courtesans, some Beijing waitresses were able to manipulate male customers to gain significant economic benefits. Their “marks”

37 *Jing Bao*, April 18, 1932.

38 For instance, reports in *Minguo Ribao* [Republican Daily], March 21 and May 12, 1931, covered three such cases.

39 *Beiping Chenbao*, September 18, 1931, reported a customer-waitress conflict. The customer, a rickshaw-puller named Bai, teased a waitress surnamed Li while dining in a restaurant. Li refused to play along and cursed Bai in return. Furious, Bai made a big fuss, forcing the restaurant owner to fire Li immediately.

40 *Jing Bao*, April 19, 1932.

41 Ho indicates that most prostitutes in Canton were able to defend themselves against unfair treatment (*Understanding Canton*, p. 266). Kate Purcell, in her study of women working in the service industry in the United Kingdom, also notes that many women felt such sexually typed work was more attractive. See Purcell, “Women’s Employment in UK Tourism” in M. Thea Sinclair, ed., *Gender, Work & Tourism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 54.

42 *Dao Bao* [Guide], January 11 and June 8, 1931. According to the newspaper report on January 11, a young newlywed, Zhao, ran away from her husband because he had refused to let her work as a waitress. The same paper published another story on June 8 about a 17-year-old girl who escaped from her father because he had not allowed her to work as a waitress.

were normally well-to-do business people and men with steady incomes. While Shanghai guidebooks repeatedly warned new brothel-goers against the tricks that courtesans skilfully played,<sup>43</sup> Beijing newspaper reporters sneered at visiting merchants from other cities who lavished much of their hard-earned income on waitresses.<sup>44</sup> Some articles recounted stories of generous patrons who actually became victims of their spend-thrift waitress lovers and ended up in bankruptcy.<sup>45</sup>

The tip a waitress received was divided into two portions. One was a regular tip that all the restaurant employees shared; the other was a special, personal tip for the waitress herself. The size of the personal tip usually corresponded to the level of hospitality the customer enjoyed. Waitresses earned wages as well, but these accounted for only a small part of their income. An attractive and sociable waitress could easily keep several regulars who would give her generous tips and gifts. The monthly income of Beijing waitresses could be as high as 50 *yuan*, yet the vast majority earned less than 15 *yuan* per month. In comparison, the average monthly salary of a university professor was about 50 *yuan*, and a medium-level government official earned 60 to 70 *yuan* per month. Thus waiting on tables could be a relatively well-paid job for some young women without special skills. The overwhelming majority of waitresses (nearly 70 per cent) worked as long as 12 to 13 hours daily.<sup>46</sup>

43 Hershatter details a variety of tactics that Shanghai prostitutes played to squeeze money out of their customers. See Gail Hershatter, "Courtesans and Streetwalkers: The Changing Discourses on Shanghai Prostitution, 1890–1949," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, no. 2 (October 1992), pp. 258–260.

44 *Shijie Ribao* [World Daily], February 4, 1932; *Minguo Ribao*, February 26, 1932.

45 Zhang, "Beiping nu zhaodai," pp. 51–53; *Dao Bao*, May 17, 1931. Both sources related stories about businessmen who fell for beautiful waitresses, squandered all their money on them, and ended up in bankruptcy.

46 There was no minimum wage for waitresses. The consensus is that tips accounted for the main portion of their actual income. Wang Qin's study gives a general sum of their monthly income ranging from about 10 *yuan* to 40 or 50 *yuan*. See "Xianweijing xia de nu zhaodai [Waitresses under Scrutiny]" in *Beiping Chenbao*, April 20, 1932, cited in Wang, "Nuxing zhiye," pp. 114–115. Zhang Ruyi's investigation of 220 Beijing waitresses offers a more meticulous estimate ("Beiping nu zhaodai," pp. 21–22):

	Tip		Wage	
	No. of waitresses	%	No. of waitresses	%
Under ¥ 5	24	10.91	188	85.0
¥ 5–9	107	48.64	30	14.0
¥ 10–14	65	29.54	2	0.1
¥ 15–20	19	8.64	0	0
Over ¥ 20	5	2.27	0	0
Total	220	100.00	220	100.0

The introduction of women into restaurants not only directly violated the Confucian moral code, which confined women to the home, but also challenged deeply rooted conventions that had governed the food service business for generations. The result was growing antagonism between female and male employees. Each of the city's numerous restaurants was a hierarchic world bound by rigid guild regulations and apprenticeships. The top position in this world was that of manager. Below him were the various levels of the hierarchy: chefs, head waiters, junior waiters, and apprentices. All of these posts were held by men who were connected to each other through kinship, regional ties, and nepotism. Managers and chefs, for example, often took fellow villagers as apprentices. Although waiter apprenticeships were open to boys from other regions, they had to be brought in by the head waiter's relatives or friends. A waiter who had completed his apprenticeship was not only able to help order dishes and arrange tables, but also kept in close contact with the chef. With waiters' assistance, food was cooked with special attention, smelling and tasting delicious and beautifully presented. An unwritten rule regulated a waiter's conduct: he was required to be patient, gentle, and amiable to all customers, showing no negative feelings when a customer paid no tip.<sup>47</sup>

The entry of waitresses into restaurants rocked the entire system. Unlike waiters, attractive young women were openly recruited. They did not serve an apprenticeship but began serving customers immediately. Although waitresses took over many tasks from waiters — presenting tea, bringing in napkins, serving food, and wiping tables — they were specifically hired to solicit male customers, and much of their routine work involved coping with all manner of sexual advances.<sup>48</sup>

The emergence and development of waitressing led to gender confrontations in restaurants, especially between waiters and waitresses. Waiters were better trained, fulfilling tasks waitresses found difficult, and waiters feared losing their jobs. Soon waitresses were viewed as "intruders." In 1921 male restaurant workers in Guangzhou organized a city-wide strike to protest the replacement of waiters with waitresses. Riots broke out after some restaurant owners refused to lay off waitresses. In the face of violent threats from the teahouse union, supported by the municipal government, all restaurants in the city, with two exceptions, laid off their female employees. In 1922, when Guangdong warlord Chen Jiongmeng

47 Chen Yucheng, "Fangguan [Restaurants]" in *Zhonghua renmin zhengzhi xieshang huyi* [People's Political Consultant Conference] and *Beijingshi waiyuanhui wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui bian* [Literature and History Study Committee of Beijing Municipality], eds., *Chat of Old Beijing* (Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 1988), pp. 6–8, cited in Xu, "Xunzheng shiqi," pp. 63–64.

48 "Zhaodai fukan [Waitress supplement]," *Dousheng Ribao*, December 4, 1933, cited in Wang, "Ershi shiji," p. 121; Zhang, "Beiping nu zhaodai," p. 20.

betrayed the Nationalist revolution, the unstable political situation allowed waitressing to revive and grow. Waitresses were driven away from the city again in 1924. Although Beijing did not experience rioting, there was still considerable tension in restaurants, and many male restaurant workers despised waitresses who received big tips simply for being charming.<sup>49</sup>

Yet the conflict between waitresses and waiters should not be exaggerated. Although the Department of Social Works ruled that gender segregation be the norm in the workplace, most stores and restaurants did not observe the practice. According to one of the department's investigation reports, "in restaurants, during the afternoon break, male and female employees always sit close to each other, talking and laughing, enjoying their free time tremendously."<sup>50</sup> Moreover, when waitresses could not handle the abuse and insults from unruly customers, waiters often came to their assistance. *Dao Bao* covered two such cases in May 1931. On one occasion, when a waiter tried to stop two aggressive customers, he was "yelled at, cursed, grappled and beat up by them with both fists and feet."<sup>51</sup> Male and female restaurant workers sometimes demonstrated a sense of solidarity when confronting abusive customers.

### Media Coverage of Waitresses

Republican Beijing had a different economic structure from that of metropolitan Shanghai. Shanghai was by far the leader of Chinese industrialization; more than half of its massive number of factory workers were women.<sup>52</sup> Beijing's production, in contrast, was dominated by craft workshops, where women were almost invisible.<sup>53</sup> In 1932, only 2 per cent of Beijing women of working age (16 to 50 years old) were listed as employed outside the home, and waitressing was the single largest female

49 Li and Jiang, "Ershi shiji ershi niandai," pp. 91–92; *Chen Bao* [Morning News], January 7 and February 26, 1922, cited in Wang, "Nuxing zhiye," pp. 124–127.

50 *Dao Bao*, February 26, 1931; *Jing Bao*, April 11, 1932.

51 *Dao Bao*, May 12, 1931. The confrontation took place in the Xiao Xiao Restaurant, when two young customers verbally abused a waitress and then tried to physically assault an under-aged waitress who was "very angry, but dared not to say anything." A waiter then confronted the assailants and was beaten. On another occasion, a man attempted to seduce a waitress at the Wan Xing Restaurant. When she refused to play along, he began to curse and then physically attacked her. At this point, a waiter "went forward to bring in a policeman out of concerns for the safety of his female co-worker."

52 In Shanghai, male workers accounted for 33.9, 33.6, and 35.3 per cent of the total factory labour force in 1928, 1931, and 1933 respectively. See *Shanghaishi shehui ju* [Bureau of Social Affairs, the City Government of Greater Shanghai], *Standard of Living of Shanghai Laborers* (Shanghai: China Publishing House, 1934), pp. 86–87; D. K. Lieu, *The Growth and Industrialization of Shanghai* (Shanghai: China Institute of Pacific Relations, 1937), p. 113.

53 Dong, *Republican Beijing*, pp. 105–141.

occupation. About 14 per cent of all working women were waitresses.<sup>54</sup> They were doubtlessly exotic in the early 1930s.

Traditional family systems underwent significant changes in response to economic and political transformations of the Republican era. Although criticized as giving only a token endorsement of women's liberation, the Civil Code promulgated by the Nationalist government did grant women the right to divorce. In metropolitan centres, the number of divorce cases rose significantly in the early 1930s, accounting for almost one-third of all civil litigations. Most divorce cases, according to statistics, were initiated by women.<sup>55</sup> In the face of this apparent undermining of the traditional family system, the media paid much attention to waitresses, especially the impact of their work and decisions on their families.

Most of Beijing's newspapers wrote widely on waitressing, and some published special issues or dedicated special columns to the subject. Their coverage could be divided into two categories. The mainstream papers, such as *Minguo Ribao* (Republican Daily), *Shijie Ribao* (World Daily), and *Jing Bao* (Capital Daily), tended to comment on waitressing's impact on society, to attack abusive customers, and to discuss government policies and regulations pertaining to waitressing. Some reports admonished these young women to preserve their dignity in a contaminative working environment. The tabloid press fell into the second category. In the name of "promoting women's careers," the mosquito papers tried to increase circulation with juicy and novel stories involving waitresses. *Duosheng Ribao* (Ring Bell Daily), for instance, published a supplement entitled "Waitress," in which most stories had exotic titles to attract readers and offered lurid details about waitresses' small feet, irregular menstruation, irresistible charm, and especially their love affairs as well as domestic quarrels.<sup>56</sup> Much negative discourse depicted waitresses as a vicious threat to family and society. In addition to marketing papers, these stories were consciously constructed and sensationalized to teach moral lessons.

Based on a few available police records,<sup>57</sup> Xu Huiqi correctly indicates the discrepancy between the factual, objective, and concise police

54 "Beiping you zhiye funu chunji xin tongji [Spring Survey of Vocational Women in Beijing]" in *Beiping Chenbao*, April 22, 1932, cited in Wang, "Nuxing zhiye," p. 116.

55 *Jing Bao*, April 29, 1930; Pan Guangdan, *Zhongguo zhi Jiating wenti* [The Family Issue in China], (Shanghai: Crescent Press, 1929), pp. 82–85.

56 Xu, "Xunzheng shiqi," pp. 49, 71–73; Wang Bin, "Wangzhe ke jian: tan jianguo qian zaoqi funu baokan zhong nuxing yishi de piancha ji dui chuanbo de xianshi yiyi [Learning from the Lessons of the Past: On the Improper Coverage of Women in the Women Press before 1949 as well as its Impacts on Current Journalism]," *News World*, March 16, 2006.

57 For the police reports, see "Wai wu qu guanyu nu zhaodai Pi Shuzhen zhaoyin fanzuo Yu Ren deng maijian yan [The Report on the Case of Waitress Pi Shuzhen Prostituting Herself to Customer Yu Ren and the Others Provided by the Police Station in the Outer Fifth District]," Beijing Archive J181–21–8474, cited in Xu, "Xunzheng shiqi," p. 72.

documents and the flowery, judgmental, and fiction-like narration of newspaper coverage.<sup>58</sup> At times, reporters dropped hints and employed metaphor and euphemism to fire readers' wildest imaginations about the worst possible conduct on the part of waitresses. Stories about waitresses' love affairs mainly followed a formula of customers using money to seduce pretty waitresses or seductive waitresses enticing rich customers, neglecting the intricacy, complexity, and diversity of lived realities. We have no choice but to rely largely on newspaper reports to reconstruct the lives of these women because very few waitresses left written documents on their own experiences, and other records on the subject are scanty. Instead of accepting these stories as truthful descriptions, however, we should acknowledge that they were strongly affected by the writers' values, concerns, and especially desire to purify society by using waitresses as a symbol of two urban vices — money and sex.

Between November 1930 and the end of December 1930, in a period of merely two months, *Dao Bao* (Guide) reported on six love affairs involving both married and unmarried waitresses. The affairs included two married waitresses who abandoned their husbands for customers, a young single waitress who moved in with a married restaurant owner, two young waitresses who had recently left home and began cohabiting with their customers, and a newlywed woman who ran away from her husband after he expressed his disapproval of her decision to become a waitress.<sup>59</sup> As a rule, the male marriage partners of waitresses were stuck in low-paying jobs, and thus most of the women who worked in restaurants did so to subsidize meagre family incomes.<sup>60</sup> Work in an environment where traditional moral restraints were removed sometimes led to the collapse of the family, however, especially when married waitresses began dating their customers. In some instances women abandoned their families and men filed missing person's reports with the police.

The strong desire for money was invariably pinpointed as the cause of these women's "fall." Although the media usually condemned customers for seducing waitresses, accusing them of "using evil money as bait," waitresses nevertheless were considered guilty of being susceptible to the impurities of a market "driven by the destructive desires for monetary gains."<sup>61</sup> *Dao Bao* told stories about waitresses An and Wang. An's husband, Ma Rong, was unable to make a living and sent his wife to work in the Xiao Xiao Restaurant, where, "at the age of 20, [she] pleased many customers with her hospitality." Soon An established intimate relations with a customer named Wang, who claimed to be a

58 Xu, "Xunzheng shiqi," pp. 72–73.

59 *Dao Bao*, November–December 1930.

60 *Dao Bao*, November 11 and December 6, 1930.

61 *Dao Bao*, May 12, 1931; *Jing Bao*, February 28, 1933.

banker. Ma Rong was jealous and started to stalk her. After a quarrel with Ma, An failed to return home after work.<sup>62</sup> Waitress Wang was described as 23 years old and “extraordinary both in her beauty and dissolution.” Since she was very popular among customers, her monthly income was more than 20 *yuan*. Wang’s regular was a young man named Liu, a bank employee. After a while, they “fell for each other” and started to spend time at a hotel. When they decided to get married, Wang ran away from her husband.<sup>63</sup>

In both stories, waitressing was described as providing an opportunity for young women from poor family backgrounds (An’s husband likely was unemployed, and Wang’s husband was a vendor) to meet men of higher social status and with secure income. In Republican China, bank employees, with fairly good salaries and job security, were referred to as “silver rice bowl” holders — desirable marriage partners in the public eye. To ordinary readers, these women’s decisions to abandon their low-income husbands and turn to men who were better off were certainly motivated by monetary desires. Their morality was stained first of all by their love for money.

These women were also normally portrayed as “dissolute” and “lascivious.” Their morality was therefore further tainted by their exotic appearance and loose conduct. Working in a sexualized environment, they quickly betrayed their husbands, getting involved with other men. In Republican China, adultery was considered a criminal offence punishable with a prison term.<sup>64</sup> Unfaithful waitresses therefore elicited much attention in the media. *Dao Bao* published a story about Yu, a waitress who had an extra-marital affair with her customer. Yu was described as “a dissolute woman” who “had betrayed her husband frequently”; her affair, readers were told, was “driven by the force of money.”<sup>65</sup> A similar story in the same paper involved a waitress named Li and her customer-lover Lan, who worked for a foreign company. Lan paid a late-night visit to Li when her husband was away, and both Lan and Li were arrested by a policeman on patrol. The newspaper coverage bore the headline: “Wild Mandarin Ducks Arrested in the Middle of the Night when Waitress

62 *Dao Bao*, November 11, 1930.

63 *Dao Bao*, April 8, 1931.

64 Until July 1935, the law of Republican China followed the Qing Law, punishing unfaithful wives but tolerating the husband who committed adultery or took in concubines. When a married woman had an affair or ran away with another man, both the woman and her paramour could be punished with up to two years’ imprisonment. Under the 1935 Criminal Code, adultery became a criminal offence for husbands as well as wives. Article 239 of the 1935 Criminal Code states: “whoever, being married, commits adultery with a person shall be punished with imprisonment for not more than one year.” Kathryn Bernhardt and Philip Huang, eds., *Civil Law in Qing and Republican China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 186; *Da Wan Bao* [Big Evening News], April 28, 1935.

65 *Dao Bao*, May 4, 1931.

Met with Her Customer.” The allusion to a link between waitressing and prostitution was clear.<sup>66</sup>

The stories appearing in the media began to alarm the public, partly because waitressing seemed to be threatening the marriage system, but also because the reports appeared to reflect a weakening of the traditional authority of parental control over daughters. In the early 1930s, among working people, marriage was still arranged mainly by parents. The 1930 civil code stipulated that the engagement or marriage of minors, defined as anyone under the age of 20, had to be approved by parents or legal guardians.<sup>67</sup> Considering that in Republican China a large number of girls were either married or at least engaged before the age of 20, the law gave parents considerable authority over the matter of whom their children could marry. Few waitresses could escape paternal authority. With the amount of freedom it allowed women to interact with male customers, waitressing was instrumental in fomenting rebellion against traditional marriage arrangements.

Waitresses faced many difficulties when it came to the marriage market. On one hand, holding relatively well-paid jobs, waitresses did not consider young men without a secure income as desirable suitors. On the other hand, men who had property and social status despised women who made their living by engaging in intimate social contact with so many men.<sup>68</sup> The many stories that appeared in the media about the romantic liaisons of waitresses suggest that this paradox did not stop waitresses from seeking suitable marriage partners. Certainly male customers often took the lead in pursuing relationships that challenged contemporary social conventions, but the waitresses themselves played a role in what was deemed to be rebellious conduct. One article recounted the story of Wang, a young man with a poor reputation who fell in love with a beautiful 19-year-old waitress named Fu. To attract her attention, Wang ate twice a day for more than a month in the restaurant where Fu worked. They eventually began an affair, and Fu moved to Wang’s house. Ten days after Fu failed to return home, her brother laid a seduction charge against Wang.<sup>69</sup>

The media did not portray rebellious waitresses as new women who, relying on economic independence, sought true love and complete personhood. The lovers of waitresses were often referred to as “playboys who consistently hunt for pretty girls” and who usually had money to lavish

66 *Dao Bao*, February 24, 1931.

67 *Zhongguo fagui kanxing she* [The Institute for Chinese Legislation], ed., *Liufa Quanshu* [The Complete Version of the Six Legal Codes] (Shanghai: China Legal Documents Publishing House, 1948), p. 87.

68 *Jing Bao*, April 20, 1932.

69 *Dao Bao*, January 11, 1931. Since Fu was under the age of 20, Wang could be charged with the abduction and seduction of a minor and sentenced to imprisonment of “not more than 3 years” in accordance with the Criminal Code. See *Zhongguo fagui*, ed., *Liufa Quanshu*, p. 222.

on waitresses. Reporters narrated stories about fickle customer-lovers abandoning their waitress girlfriends.<sup>70</sup> The waitresses were depicted as “seductive,” “loose,” and dependent, as old-style women who held paid jobs outside the family. Reports indicated the strong sense of responsibility expressed by employers and the state to discipline waitresses to safeguard female morality. This was clearly apparent in another tabloid story involving a waitress who had an affair with one of her customers. Liu was 24 when she met and fell in love with Miao, a young merchant who owned a small corner store. When the restaurant owner discovered the affair, he fired Liu. On her way home, Liu happened to meet Miao, and they checked into a motel. The patrolling policemen, however, thought the young lovers were “acting suspiciously” because they, “without luggage, slept in the same room.” The police arrested them later that night.<sup>71</sup>

The story was written in a sympathetic tone. Liu and Miao were depicted as “lovers who admire each other” and who “have feelings for each other.” Perhaps on purpose to lure the reader with a sensational style, however, the report had a misleading headline: “Waitress Holds a Sideline Job, Using Restaurant as Medium to Enter the Motel.”<sup>72</sup> Although the story said nothing specific about Liu accepting money for sex, it established a clear link between waitressing and prostitution.

Many parents’ control over their waitress daughters was based, more or less, on economic considerations. In the sample of 220 Beijing waitresses whom Zhang Ruyi studied in 1932, nearly 60 per cent were unmarried young girls. Most came from households in which the head of the family was unemployed. The majority of these girls worked very hard to help support their families, keeping only a pittance (10 to 20 per cent) for personal expenses or purse money.<sup>73</sup> Working in an environment where an alluring appearance and stylish clothing were important to success, however, meant that some young girls yielded to temptation. In one extreme case, a young waitress fabricated a robbery to cover up the fact that she had spent her wages on cosmetics instead of contributing to the family coffers. After the police unmasked the plot, the press had a field day. “Tricky Waitress Fooled Herself” was the headline, and the story clearly conveyed the reporter’s abhorrence of such behaviour.<sup>74</sup> A few days later, the same paper released a similar story about a young waitress who failed to return home. It was printed under a bold banner: “She Did Not Return Home for Two Days: Inappropriate Act.”<sup>75</sup>

70 *Dao Bao*, March 20, 1931. In the story, waitress Zhang fell ill and was abandoned by her businessman live-in lover. Zhang committed suicide.

71 *Dao Bao*, December 30, 1930.

72 *Ibid.*

73 Zhang, “Beiping nu zhaodai,” pp. 24–25.

74 *Beiping Chenbao*, April 9, 1931; *Dao Bao*, April 9, 1931.

75 *Beiping Chenbao*, April 13, 1931.

The most serious accusation against waitresses, however, was their destructive impact on public morality. By raising a hue and cry about waitresses' flirtatious acts, disreputable deeds, sexy clothing, and heavy makeup, the press played a role in shaping public opinion and in convincing social elites to lobby for an outright ban on waitressing. In addition to covering waitresses' "jollies" with customers in restaurants, a number of newspapers began to focus on the apparently improper behaviour of waitresses during their leisure time. The press reported that waitresses yelled and laughed rudely and loudly in tea houses, movie theatres, and parks. They used coarse language and displayed vulgar manners that attracted hoodlums and playboys.<sup>76</sup> There were even reports of waitresses kidnapping other women.<sup>77</sup> In addition to this type of press coverage, reporters began exploring the more negative association of waitressing and opium addiction, alleging that waitresses ran underground opium dens or gambling houses at home after work.<sup>78</sup> In such stories, the unconventional behaviour of waitresses was not the consequence of a polluted work environment; rather, waitresses were the ones polluting society.

With widespread negative media coverage, waitressing acquired the reputation of being a disreputable occupation. At a meeting with reporters, Beijing mayor Zhou Dawen admitted that the negative reports were raising growing concerns among city officials. "[R]ecent newspaper reports," he was quoted as saying, "often criticize dancers and waitresses sternly. In consideration of the large number of students in the city, who are seduced and morally corrupted by dancers and waitresses, I have wanted to ban them altogether for some time." Mayor Zhou then focused specifically on waitresses, arguing that, "since the emergence of the waitress, the cases of seduction and kidnapping appearing in the papers have tripled or quadrupled." On the basis of this claim that poorly educated waitresses were falling into moral decay and debauchery, Mayor Zhou reported that the government was planning to implement a rigid registration system to control them.<sup>79</sup>

### **Government Control over Waitresses**

By the time Mayor Zhou made these comments, waitresses were already under scrutiny. The municipal government issued rigid rules to regulate the occupation of waitressing. All restaurants that planned to hire females were required to obtain government permission. Waitresses also

<sup>76</sup> *Beiping Chenbao*, July 12, 1931.

<sup>77</sup> *Dao Bao*, March 1, 1932. The report told of a lawsuit involving an 18-year-old waitress who abducted a 19-year-old woman.

<sup>78</sup> *Beiping Ribao*, August 4, 1930; *Dao Bao*, January 21, 1932; *Minguo Ribao*, January 21, 1932; *Beiping Xinbao* [Beijing Novelty Paper], March 16, 1932; *Beiping Chenbao*, March 29, 1932.

<sup>79</sup> *Jing Bao*, September 6, 1931.

needed to register with the Department of Social Works. They were required to have a guarantor and to fill out a detailed registration form providing name, age, birthplace, home address, marital status, and the names of family members. In June 1930, the municipal government set up a "Training Center for Career Women," which offered a three-month programme for waitresses. Aside from providing basic occupational skills, the programme focused on social responsibility and proper moral conduct. The tuition fee of two *yuan* was paid by restaurant owners.<sup>80</sup>

Several months earlier, in April 1930, the Department of Social Works had issued its Regulations on Female Clerks. The regulations set out detailed and meticulous requirements that covered everything from recruitment procedures to working conditions as well as behaviour and dress codes for restaurants and stores. Newspaper reporters observed that many of the rules were far too rigid to be implemented.<sup>81</sup> Item IV, for example, forbade waiters and waitresses hired by tea houses, bars, and restaurants from working together. In restaurants, waiters and waitresses were to work in separate sections of the dining area; establishments located in smaller premises that were unable to comply were not allowed to hire women. Item V singled out waitresses by specifying strict conduct and stringent dress codes. Waitresses were not permitted to wear heavy makeup or to dress stylishly; instead, they were supposed to wear a regular uniform that consisted of a long robe of cotton or a short blouse with a long skirt. They were to act in a solemn and gentle manner and were to avoid laughing, swearing, or acting obscenely. The regulation also banned women from standing at the front entrance to lure male customers into restaurants. As if to stress the importance of item V, item VI of the Regulations decreed that anyone violating Item V would be fired. Moreover, a restaurant could be closed if an investigation confirmed wrongdoing that the Department of Social Works determined to be of an extremely serious nature.<sup>82</sup>

Although it was difficult for the Department of Social Works to enforce the rules owing to the large number and wide distribution of stores and restaurants, the regulations nevertheless gave police the power to keep an eye on waitresses and to punish them on the grounds of safeguarding public morality. On April 11, 1932, two years after the Regulations on Female Clerks had been issued, the department published a statistical report on offences committed by waitresses. The report appeared in the press, with one editorial noting that "over the last two years an innumerable number of waitresses committed offences, most of which involved them in immoral behaviour. . . . Waitresses therefore became the favourite

80 *Beiping Ribao*, April 27, July 25, and August 4, 1930; Zhang, "Beiping nu zhaodai," pp. 25–26.

81 *Beiping Ribao*, April 27, 1930; *Jing Bao*, April 27, 1930.

82 *Jing Bao*, April 27, 1930; *Beiping Ribao*, April 27, 1930; Zhang, "Beiping nu zhaodai," pp. 38–40.

topic of chitchat among the urbanites of Beijing.” According to the department’s report, most restaurants did not observe the rule regarding gender segregation, and “male and female employees normally had lunch together.” The department did not strictly enforce the segregation rule, and only one restaurant was actually penalized. The report indicated that violations of the behaviour code were common among waitresses, although only four restaurants were punished for offences involving 19 waitresses.<sup>83</sup> The penalty for committing an offence, however, could be much more severe than dismissal from one’s job. One particularly dutiful district police chief, for instance, despatched a number of officers to patrol hotels and restaurants in December 1930. In short order they rounded up several waitresses from three different restaurants who “wore heavy makeup, beautiful dresses, and acted frivolously.” Four waitresses and their employers were arrested on that occasion.<sup>84</sup> Such incidents received wide coverage, usually under disparaging headlines.<sup>85</sup>

Beijing waitresses were caught between their own and their families’ economic needs and the demands of two conflicting groups. On one side stood the customers and restaurant owners who wanted waitresses to play up their sexuality. On the other side were the conservative moralists and government officials who sought to punish waitresses for doing what employers expected of them. The dilemma waitresses faced was reflected in the way they dressed. Beijing waitresses wore multicoloured, close-fitting *qipao* or long skirts made of silk, the lining of which was usually red, yellow, or green, but, to obey the dress code, they had to cover their stylish dresses partially with a black or blue cotton robe.<sup>86</sup> The half-hidden, half-shown lure symbolized the awkward dilemma in which waitresses found themselves.

### Public Debate over Waitresses

In February 1932, the Beijing Chamber of Commerce proposed outlawing waitressing on the grounds that waitresses were taking jobs away from men and damaging public morality. The Chamber of Commerce sent a request to the municipal government and asked the restaurant guild to “lay off all

83 *Jing Bao*, April 11, 1932.

84 *Jing Bao*, December 29, 1930.

85 On June 20, 1930, when an undercover policeman discovered a waitress at Baijingluo Restaurant drinking and flirting with customers, the waitress was fired and the restaurant owner received a warning. The incident was reported under the headline: “Frivolous Baijingluo Restaurant Waitress Who Was Caught Drinking Together with Customer Was Laid Off under Order of the Department of Social Works” (*Jing Bao*, June 20, 1930). The December 1930 arrest was reported under the headline “Waitresses under Arrest Due to Immoral Behavior” (*Jing Bao*, December 29, 1930).

86 *Beiping Chenbao*, April 20, 1931; *Jing Bao*, April 18, 1932.

waitresses, and hire waiters to replace them.”<sup>87</sup> The Chamber of Commerce explained that the motion had been triggered by numerous complaints from rice shop owners. Apparently apprentices working at rice stores had been failing to return to work after finishing their deliveries. They were reportedly spending time and money on waitresses. The Chamber of Commerce claimed that, since waitresses had been introduced into the Beijing business community, more than 200 shop clerks in the city had stolen money to spend on these women. There had been a tenfold increase in the number of cases of embezzlement involving shop clerks. The Chamber declared that it was determined to eliminate waitressing altogether in an effort “to defend the business integrity of merchants and public morals.”<sup>88</sup>

The most crucial reason behind the attempt to ban waitressing, however, was the increasingly conservative climate of opinion under the Chiang Kai-shek regime. To this Nationalist regime, which was determined to restore law and order, the female figures symbolizing commercialism were harmful both to a stable family and “a well-ordered society.”<sup>89</sup> In the battle against the vices brought about by modernity, social elites and literati worked in concert to send women back to their rightful place — the family.<sup>90</sup> To conservatives, women’s education was not necessarily harmful; a degree or a diploma, especially from a prestigious girls’ school, could be seen as an asset, a dowry for a young woman to marry into a wealthy family, providing her with the luxury of not holding a paid job. In contrast, females employed outside the home, especially those who used their hands to make a living, directly challenged the Confucian notion of gender separation.<sup>91</sup> Beijing waitresses, similar to Beijing opera singers and Japanese café waitresses, became targets because of their perceived damaging impact on the already crumbling Confucian value system, their easy access to the public, and their contribution to a growing urban mass culture.

Comparing female opera singers to prostitutes, Beijing elites claimed the former to be more dangerous. Decent people, they explained, could

87 *Dao Bao*, February 16, 1932.

88 *Minguo Ribao*, February 13 and 16, 1932; *Beiping Wanbao* [Beijing Evening News], February 16, 1932; *Dao Bao*, February 17 and 29, 1932; *Shijie Ribao*, February 18, 1932.

89 Wakeman, “Licensing Leisure,” p. 22; Hershatter, “Courtesans and Streetwalkers,” p. 267.

90 The first major debate on women’s role started in the beginning of the 1930s, culminating in the New Life Movement in 1934. It focused on the issue of what a woman’s primary role should be: holding a career or taking care of her household. Two more similar debates were held in Chinese history. See Lu Meiyi, “On the Debate of Virtuous Wife and Caring Mother in Republican China,” *Tianjin Social Sciences*, vol. 5 (1995), pp. 73–79; Xia Rong, “Ershi shiji sanshi niandai zhongqi guanyu ‘funu huijia’ yu ‘xianqi liangmu’ de lunzheng [The Debate on ‘Women Returning Home’ and ‘Virtuous Wife and Caring Mother’ in the mid-1930s],” *Huanan shifan daxue xuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* [Journal of South China Normal University, Social Science Edition], no. 6 (December 2004), pp. 39–46.

91 Goodman, “The Vocational Woman,” p. 271.

not be lured by prostitutes. In contrast, “the contamination spread by actresses extended throughout society”; their victims included not only men, but also women and children.<sup>92</sup> The threats to public morality posed by Japanese café waitresses also came from their popularity. In comparison with traditional female entertainers like geishas and licensed prostitutes, the company of café waitresses during the 1920s and 1930s was much cheaper and required no introduction or prescribed code of behaviour. They thus catered to a large middle class emerging in a modernizing Japan.<sup>93</sup>

Similarly, Beijing waitresses were popular owing to the lower cost and easier access of their company and their better reputation in comparison to prostitutes. Frequenting brothels was treated as a serious breach of shop and store rules, and offenders who were caught would be fired immediately. Patronizing restaurants, in contrast, was a normal social activity tolerated by employers and society alike. Waitresses were also “in between” figures who symbolized the combination of modern mass consumer culture with traditional expectations of female submissiveness. As such, waitresses served a wide range of clients from many social walks of life, including well-to-do businessmen, established intellectuals, university students, and low-paid shop clerks and apprentices.<sup>94</sup> Beijing elites feared that waitresses contributed to the emergence of a growing mass culture that further undermined already declining traditional values. In China’s male-dominated, patriarchal society, unchaste women have historically — and conveniently — been blamed for causing all manner of national disasters and social chaos.<sup>95</sup> In 1932 they once again became the scapegoat for social problems as a heated debate developed over the question of waitressing in Beijing.

### **The Rhetoric of Intellectual Reformers**

Conservatives were not alone in lamenting what waitresses symbolized. On the other side of the political spectrum, reformist intellectuals also

92 Chen, “The Challenge of the Actresses,” p. 218.

93 Tipton, “Pink Collar Work.”

94 *Jing Bao*, April 18, 1932. The newspaper reported that a journalist had randomly investigated 11 restaurants. Of 87 customers, he found 19 university students, 8 university professors, 10 businessmen, 14 military men, and 14 government workers. The remaining 24 patrons did not reveal their occupations.

95 Lu Xun, one of the best-known writers of the May Fourth era, decried the repeated call of conservative moralists for “advocating women’s chastity.” He ironically argued that, in these moralists’ views, it seemed that China would be saved when all widows who vowed never to remarry and victims of rapists had committed suicide. Since governing state and society was men’s duty, Lu Xun asked, why should women be punished and admonished when things went wrong? Lu, Xun, “Wo zhi jielie guan [My Views on Chastity],” *New Youth*, vol. 5, no. 2 (August 1918), cited in *Zhonghua quanguo funu* and *Funu yundong*, eds., *Wusi shiqi funu*, pp. 115–123.

deplored the commercialization of Chinese new women.<sup>96</sup> Reformer critics had linked Chinese women's subordination to men to China's colonization by imperialist powers as early as in the late Qing period. They represented Chinese women's weakness as a sign of the illness of Chinese culture.<sup>97</sup> The close link between the "new womanhood" and "national liberation" gave the women's issue such crucial significance that male intellectuals not only created, but also firmly defended, the image of the Chinese "new woman."<sup>98</sup> Like their Shanghai counterparts who disparaged the "modern girls" in the city as "an immoral imitation" of the real modern woman,<sup>99</sup> many Beijing reformers dismissed the independent personhood of waitresses because of their subordination to capitalism. Understood as lacking "virtue and education," waitresses were not regarded as part of the women's liberation movement.

However, social reformers did not support an outright ban of waitressing because of their concerns for the livelihood of the city's poor. In the 1920s, more than 25 per cent of Beijing residents struggled under the poverty line.<sup>100</sup> Waitresses were mainly drawn from this cohort. The problem, in the opinion of reformers, was the merchants who used waitresses as "bait to lure customers." Lacking education or training and trying to earn fat tips, many waitresses internalized the popular notion shared among restaurant owners and male customers that service women were "acting vulgarly." Some viewed themselves as sex objects, "being willingly used by restaurant owners to play the game."<sup>101</sup> Although a number of reformist writers echoed conservatives, exaggerating and sensationalizing the immoral conduct of waitresses, many voiced support for their employment. Such views came out frequently in *Funu Jie* (Women's Circle), the supplement of *Shijie Ribao*.

96 Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman," pp. 124–125.

97 Hershatler, *Dangerous Pleasure*, pp. 245–250.

98 Christina K. Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 21.

99 Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman," p. 124. Barbara Hamill Sato also discusses the emergence of the "modern girl" as a representation of mass culture in Japan during the 1920s as well as Japanese intellectuals' criticism of her. See Barbara Hamill Sato, "The Moga Sensation: Perceptions of the Modern Garu in Japanese Intellectual Circles during the 1920s," *Gender & History*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1993), pp. 363–381.

100 Tao Menghe, "Beijing shenghuo fei zhi fenxi [Analysis of the Living Cost in Beijing]" (Shanghai, 1930), cited in Dai, Haibin, "Zhongyang gongyuan yu minchu Beijing shehui [The Central Park and Beijing Society in the Early Republican Era]," *Beijing shehui kexue* [Social Sciences of Beijing], vol. 2, (2005), p. 50.

101 *Beiping Chenbao*, March 2, 1932; *Shi Bao* [Reality News], February 17, 1932; *Minguo Ribao*, February 16 and March 2, 1932; *Beiping Wanbao*, January 25, 1932; *Shijie Ribao*, February 4, 17, 19, 21, 22, and 28, 1932.

One of the most influential newspapers in Northern China, *Shijie Ribao* began to publish in 1925; its owner Cheng Shewuo was an innovative newspaperman.<sup>102</sup> In 1931, to increase the paper's circulation, Cheng decided to issue a supplement entitled *Funu Jie* and invited a young female university graduate Jin Bingying to be its editor.<sup>103</sup> During the debate, Jin not only wrote on the topic herself and turned the supplement into a vehicle for intellectual observers to comment; she also allowed waitresses to express their protests in print.

Male commentator Sheng Ren recalled his personal experiences in restaurants in *Funu Jie* on February 4, 1932. In an effort to get good tips, waitresses "tried all means to keep the customers happy." Some, mostly former prostitutes and former dancers, displayed extraordinary skills at manipulating customers, but the majority were rookies from poor families who knew little about playing tricks. In competition with others, the naive and uneducated young girls were "quickly contaminated."<sup>104</sup> Unlike Sheng Ren, who looked at waitresses' monetary desires as their own "moral fall," male writer Wen Guangyao tended to censure restaurant owners and customers. Wen maintained that "customers should take 50% of the blame, and restaurant owners should take 30% . . . the waitress girls were forced to put up with insulting customers. If they had refused to play along, they would have been harshly rebuked and even laid-off." For Wen, waitresses were vulnerable victims who, "being afraid of the power of restaurant owners, have no choice but to swallow insults and endure obscenities from male customers." Yet, even for sympathetic writers like Wen, waitresses were guilty of not exercising stronger will power; they had instead given in to temptation, accepted fat tips, and abandoned prim and proper behaviour in favour of sexual flirtation. "Waitresses," Wen wrote, "have to take a certain responsibility for their bad reputation."<sup>105</sup> Gender and class bias restricted Wen, writing from the vantage point of a middle-class male, from seeing waitresses in a more positive light.

102 Liu Xuefei, "Cheng shewo Shijie Ribao chenggong jingyan ji qishi [Cheng Shewuo's World Daily and the Inspirations of its Success]," *Hubei daxue chengren jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Adult Education College of Hubei University], serial no. 24, vol. 2 (2006), p. 25; Bi Qun, "Cheng Shewo yu Shijie Ribao [Cheng Shewo and his World Daily]," retrieved November 11, 2009, from <http://www.cnki.com>. In the 1920s, *Shijie Ribao* perhaps was the only major newspaper in Beijing not sponsored by warlords. Cheng claimed to pursue the principle of news freedom. During the Anti-Japanese War years, the paper relocated to Chongqing, the temporary capital of China, receiving financial support from the Nationalist government. The paper moved to Taiwan after 1949.

103 Hou Jie and Fu Yi, "Jin Bingying he Shijie Ribao [Jin Bingying and World Daily]," May 14, 2009, retrieved October 29, 2009 from <http://www.rmzxb.com.cn/wh/ws/>.

104 Shen Ren, "Tan nu zhaodai [Chat about Waitresses]," *Shijie Ribao*, February 4, 1932.

105 *Shijie Ribao*, February 28, 1932.

Instead of pointing a finger at restaurant owners and customers, many female critics argued that male-dominated society itself was the underlying cause of immoral behaviour among waitresses. Jin Bingyin, the editor of *Funu Jie*, criticized society for failing to provide decent paying jobs for women: “Waitresses are looked down upon by society because of their improper behaviour ... but this is because other jobs do not enable them to lead a better life... The solution, therefore, is to create proper occupations for women, ... not to prohibit them from working as waitresses.”<sup>106</sup> Another female commentator, You Qing, also censured society for the miserable situation in which waitresses found themselves: “In order to secure the three elements of life: clothing, food, and shelter,” she wrote, “waitresses have to put up with being molested and harassed by men. The bad economic system forces them to swallow insults and to wait on tables with tears in their eyes.” You Qing defended waitresses as “hard-working and independent” women who were wrongly accused of “damaging public morality.” She called upon waitresses to continue to fight and to “strive for their right to employment!”<sup>107</sup> After publishing a tearful letter from a waitress who had lost her job, the editor for *Funu* (Women), the supplement of *Quanmin Bao* (Whole People News) went so far as to call for everyone to unite “to overthrow society and liberate all oppressed women.”<sup>108</sup>

The most straightforward and effective defence of waitressing was provided by Wang Zhuyu and Yi Ying, although they approached the issue from different angles. Wang looked at the waitress debate from the perspective of gender, focusing on anti-Confucianism, while Yi Ying concentrated on class oppression, defending waitresses on economic grounds. Wang was a reporter for *Shi Bao* (Reality), a tabloid press. His column “Zhuyu Chat” appeared on a daily basis, remarking on current affairs and gossiping about social celebrities. The paper had a fairly large readership among ordinary people. In 1946, when Wang was working for *Shijie Ribao*, he was the first to release news of the Shen Chong Incident in spite of government censorship. Beijing University student Shen Chong was reportedly raped by drunken American military men on the street on Christmas eve in 1946. The news triggered large student demonstrations in urban centres. Wang was held in custody by the police because of his report, and he lost his post at *Shijie Ribao*. Wang claimed that poisonous Confucianism lay behind the attack on waitressing. Point by point, he rebutted the accusations levelled by the moralists: “women don’t have to hold a waitressing job in order to be doomed to fall into immorality. Otherwise, why do wives and daughters of the rich take

106 *Shijie Ribao*, February 22, 1932.

107 *Yishi Bao* [Salvation News], February 22, 1932.

108 *Quanmin Bao* [Whole People News], February 20, 1932.

servants and drivers as lovers? Young men don't have to 'eat waitress' in order to fall into debauchery. There are enough prostitutes in Eight Lanes area.<sup>109</sup> As for doing harm to waiters, why should men monopolize all the jobs in a restaurant?"<sup>110</sup>

Yi Ying compared the leisure, luxury, and licentious lifestyle of merchants with the busy working day of waitresses and concluded that the wealthy merchants were the ones who offended public morality. "On the minds of these rich men," Yi Ying wrote, "there is no poor waitress who gets up very early in the morning... Once she arrives at the restaurant the waitress has to move quickly to serve customers... She has no power to say anything while being touched by rascals because if she does, she would be chided for 'failing to appreciate favours.'" Yi Ying drew a striking contrast between the rich merchants and the poor waitresses, arguing that the rich were able to act as moral defenders only because they had power and money.<sup>111</sup>

### **Waitresses and their Female Allies**

Although the support of intellectual reformers for waitressing was powerful, it focused largely on influencing public opinion. Most practical and efficient assistance was offered by two women's organizations in the city. The first group to forge links with waitresses was the Beijing Women's Association, a non-government organization connected with the left-wing faction of the Nationalist Party. Established in 1928, the Women's Association was led by a number of noted professional women. Its goal was to serve society through providing relief for women in desperate situations. The association acted as a charitable agency offering a comprehensive network of protection, education, relief, and training. Its main institutions included a Women's Shelter, a Common Women's Factory, and a Common Women's School. A wide variety of oppressed women ranging from servant girls, child daughters-in-law, abducted women, and tortured wives came to the shelter for temporary protection. They were sent to the Common Women's School for basic education and to the Women's Factory for skills training. The graduates could choose to work in the Common Women's Factory or apply for work elsewhere.<sup>112</sup>

Unlike many male reformers who excluded labouring women from the category of new women, the Women's Association concentrated on women in poverty, aiming to help them obtain the means for their own

109 Eight Lanes area was the most notorious red-light district in Republican Beijing.

110 *Shi Bao*, February 20, 1932.

111 *Shijie Ribao*, February 29, 1932.

112 Dong Dingyu, "1928-1937 nian Beijing funu jiuji yanjiu [On Women's Relief Work in Beijing from 1928 to 1937]," *Beijing keji daxue xuebao* [Journal of Beijing University of Science and Technology, Social Sciences Edition], vol. 24, no. 2 (June 2008), p. 130.

economic independence. In May 1930, it warmly welcomed waitressing as a new occupation for women, seeing it a sign that “Chinese women strove for independent personhood.” Meanwhile, it pressed the Department of Social Works to take down all advertisements and signboards that used obscene language to lure male customers into restaurants.<sup>113</sup> The department complied with this demand and forbade restaurants from posting such signs on the grounds of protecting women’s personhood.<sup>114</sup>

The Women’s Association sought to organize waitresses and help them protect their own interests collectively, and in June 1930 it contacted the Department of Social Works for the names of all registered waitresses. On August 17, the Women’s Shop Clerk Union was established under the guidance of the Women’s Association. The Union’s founding manifesto declared its goal as the defence of the waitressing occupation. It fought against humiliation by restaurant owners and customers and society’s discrimination.<sup>115</sup> These early organizational efforts allowed waitresses to mobilize quickly to fight the ban on waitressing that was proposed just over a year later. In February 1932, they established a “Temporary Waitress Alliance” and adopted a series of emergency measures to deal with the situation, including staging protests and holding press conferences as well as writing an open letter to the Chamber of Commerce. The letter rejected the ban on the grounds that it was “harmful to women’s occupations, trampled women’s rights, hindered women’s livelihoods, and discriminated against females.”<sup>116</sup> In contrast to the rhetoric used by many male intellectuals, the waitresses’ denunciation of patriarchal society and class oppression was angry, clear, and resounding.

On February 21, 1932, the Temporary Waitress Alliance, representing more than 500 Beijing waitresses, issued a declaration “pledging to fight against the Chamber of Commerce which is trying to ruin women’s careers.” The declaration stated that women waited on tables in an effort to secure an independent life, free from male dominance. They not only toiled from morning to night, but also had to put up with abuse and humiliation from rude and callous men. The waitresses declared indignantly,

We lead a decent and dignified life. Anyone with the slightest kindness should make an effort to help us survive. Brutal and unscrupulous merchants, wagging their tails like dogs to flatter daughters and daughters-in-law of the rich, accuse us poor girls of damaging social morality. . . . They try to cut off

113 *Beiping Ribao*, May 3, 1930.

114 *Jing Bao*, May 1, 1930.

115 *Beiping Ribao*, June 4, July 25, and August 4, 1930; *Jing Bao*, June 4, 1930; Zhang, “Beiping nu zhaodai,” pp. 24–26.

116 *Minguo Ribao*, February 20, 1932.

the means of our livelihood, so they are our common enemies. We are worthy members of society, the backbone of the business world.<sup>117</sup>

The declaration appeared in all the major newspapers in Beijing.

The campaign for fair employment practices found spokespersons in a few articulate and better-educated waitresses. At a press conference held by the Temporary Waitress Alliance on February 23, Huang Suying, a waitress and Alliance representative, delivered a speech referring to the decision to ban waitressing as “talk by rich people who have no idea what hunger and cold are.” To defend the moral integrity of waitresses, Huang questioned accusations made by the Chamber of Commerce: “Can you say that women outside of waitressing do not act immorally?” She went on to pour scorn on the Chamber of Commerce’s charge that women were taking jobs away from men. “Why should men monopolize restaurant work? . . . We are struggling to make ends meet under the iron heel of capitalism, we are struggling for respectability under male oppression . . . this is not merely an issue about waitressing. It symbolizes the oppression of women by the male dominated society.”<sup>118</sup>

Waitresses Ning Guizhen and Du Wang sent letters to the press. Ning, an activist in the campaign, was involved later in the Beijing Association to Promote Women’s Occupation, established in April 1932, when the attempted ban was dropped, as a permanent organization to defend waitresses’ right to employment. Du had been a middle-school student before working as a waitress. Her father died prematurely, leaving behind her mother, little brother, and herself. To support the family, Du quit school and walked into a restaurant. As she was the sole bread-winner, Du described in her letter, the attempted ban on waitressing “pushed her whole family into a desperate situation.” Both Ning and Du censured the Chamber of Commerce’s decision to ban waitressing as “unfair and absurd” and based on the double standard and hypocrisy of a male-dominated society. “When people blame waitresses for indiscretion they shouldn’t forget about those indiscreet men who use money to seduce waitresses. . . . In China, those who have money and power can blackmail, embezzle public funds, take bribes, and visit brothels every day. They are mean and vulgar and have no moral integrity or decency. How can such government officials defend the public morality?”<sup>119</sup> Theirs was one of the most incisive and trenchant criticisms of patriarchal capitalist society.

Aside from the better-educated waitresses, ordinary waitresses also actively participated in the battle. To garner public support, they either secretly distributed the Temporary Waitress Alliance’s declaration to

117 *Beiping Chenbao*, February 22, 1932; *Hebei Minbao* [Hebei People’s News], February 22, 1932.

118 *Minguo Ribao*, February 24, 1932.

119 *Minguo Ribao*, February 21, 1932; *Shijie Ribao*, February 21, 1932.

customers or publicly stated their opinions on the matter. One reporter published a conversation he had with a waitress while dining in a restaurant. The reporter's friend raised the question of the ban on waitressing and asked the waitress for her opinion. According to the reporter, the waitress became angry, saying: "in a society ruled by the rich, we poor people are oppressed everywhere ... they refer to our petition as 'making a fuss over a trivial matter.' Is cutting off our livelihood a trivial matter? Are we making a big fuss by begging for help?"<sup>120</sup>

During the threat to ban waitressing, the Women's Anti-Japanese Society, another female organization in the city, also offered firm and effective support for waitresses. The society was a left-wing organization with a strong communist tradition. Created in 1931 in response to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, it was led by a group of teachers and students based at Beijing Number One Girl's School, one of the most prestigious schools in the city. Many famous communists had taught in the school. Li Dazhao, the May Fourth reformer who first introduced Marxism into China, taught sociology and women's movement courses at the school at the turn of the 1920s. At the time that the waitress debate was escalating, Sun Xiangji, a female writer and former student of Li Dazhao at Beijing Normal University, was the school principal. Sun, likely an undercover communist party member, adopted Li's work *Historical Materialism* as a school textbook after Li had been executed by the warlord government. Sun lost her post as principal due to her active involvement in the anti-Japanese movement as president of the Women's Anti-Japanese Society.<sup>121</sup>

At a meeting chaired by Sun Xiangji on February 20, 1932, the executive of the society passed a resolution backing the waitresses in their struggle to remain employed.<sup>122</sup> The society sent open letters to the Beijing Chamber of Commerce, major newspapers, and restaurants, expressing strong support for the waitresses' cause. The letter to the Chamber of Commerce castigated its motion to ban waitresses as "trying to ruin poor women's livelihood ... not only goes against justice, but also against human feelings." In its letter to the press, the association pleaded with the media "to uphold justice for women in poverty." The letter to restaurant owners requested that they improve the working conditions of waitresses and stop using them to "allure customers." These open letters appeared in all major papers, evoking strong reactions.

120 *Shijie Ribao*, February 25, 1932; *Beiping Xinbao*, March 8, 1932. According to the reporter, when one waitress distributed the declaration, she "acted very cautiously, looking around carefully before passing [him] the declaration." Perhaps she was afraid that the restaurant owner might see her.

121 *Beijing Xicheng Bao* [Beijing Western District Paper], September 24, 2009, retrieved October 31, 2009, from <http://www.bjxch.gov.cn/pub/xch>.

122 *Beiping Chenbao*, February 21, 1932.

Likely out of concern for the city's economy, neither the municipal government nor the Department of Social Works openly endorsed the Chamber of Commerce's motion to ban waitressing. In the face of fierce protests from waitresses, the unyielding backing of the Anti-Japanese Society, and the sympathetic voices of people from many social walks of life, the conservative moralists gave up. In its reply to the Anti-Japanese Society, the Chamber of Commerce promised to suspend its original decision and to forward "the society's letter to the restaurant guild."<sup>123</sup>

After waitresses won their battle for employment, they realized the collective strength of solidarity. With the help of several female university students, the Beijing Association to Promote Women's Occupation was established as a permanent organization to protect waitresses' right to work and to defend their personhood. The opening ceremony of the association, held on April 20, 1932, was attended by nearly 100 waitresses and representatives from the Municipal Branch of the Nationalist Party as well as the Department of Social Works. Although it was an organization of waitresses, its main leaders were students, and a Beijing University student was elected as president. The press reported its main activities throughout the year, which included making plans to establish an occupation agency for unemployed women, to publish a newsletter entitled the *Occupational Women's Weekly*, and to investigate cases related to the immoral conduct of waitresses. Yet by the end of 1932, when the danger of losing employment had waned, the key leaders of the association had left. It remained active until the end of 1934 and was then disbanded by the Municipal Branch of the Nationalist Party on the grounds of internal conflict. The association attracted much public attention, but, as waitress Nin Guizhen, who was involved in the association, commented, "except for holding meetings to pass resolutions which were never carried through, we know little about its accomplishments."<sup>124</sup>

### Conclusion

Louise Edwards's insightful study of the intellectual debates on "new women" that occurred in China during the 1920s and 1930s argues that, in the face of a Nationalist government committed to commercial and military interests, male-dominated reformist intellectuals employed "new womanhood" as a symbol to express their anxiety. To these intellectuals, the "new women" with virtue and education became a metaphor of governance integrated with intellectual concerns.<sup>125</sup> Following the same line of thinking, I suggest that Beijing intellectuals' close attention to and

123 *Minguo Ribao*, February 29, 1932.

124 *Jing Bao*, March 24 and November 4, 1932; *Beiping Chenbao*, March 30, 1932; *Minguo Ribao*, April 27, 1932; *Shijie Ribao*, April 21, August 24, and December 13, 1932.

125 Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman," pp. 123–124.

harsh critique of waitresses arose partially out of their concern about an increasingly conservative and commercially oriented society. Their dismissal of waitresses as “new women” because of these women’s alleged desire for money, love for fashion, lack of education, and apathy to social movements symbolized reformist intellectuals’ despair about an urban scene that was becoming deprived of all attributes that they considered crucial.

Almost all dimensions of Beijing waitresses — the nature of their occupation, their working and personal lives, their relations with other parties, as well as representations of them — seem intricate and ambivalent, challenging a clear-cut definition. The rise of waitressing signified the entrance of women into a public sphere that had been the exclusive domain of men, yet the very act of waitressing, as designed by restaurant owners, reinforced traditional “gendered power relations.” Most waitresses earned minimal wages and small tips. Many were supporting families. Their economic independence allowed them the possibility of defying the Confucian family system, but the economic gain was obtained at the price of subordinating themselves to the ruthless oppression of capitalism, and at times even of prostituting themselves. The waitress was abused by customers, but nevertheless was sometimes able to manipulate her patrons. She was looked down upon by waiters as a “flower vase” — pretty but useless — yet solidarity and friendship existed between them. She rebelled against the traditional system of marriage or adopted an unorthodox lifestyle, but her actions were portrayed as driven by money. She claimed to lead a “decent and dignified life,” but was described by the press as “coquettish,”<sup>126</sup> “lascivious,”<sup>127</sup> “flirtatious,”<sup>128</sup> and “skittish.”<sup>129</sup>

This reconstruction of Beijing waitresses relies mainly on accounts appearing in the mosquito press and newspapers, as the voices of waitresses were largely muted. How representative are these accounts? When they stand in striking contrast to the statements of a few articulate waitresses, whom should we believe? In her brilliant study of the feminization of the textile industry in Germany from the mid-nineteenth century to World War I, Kathleen Canning discusses how mill girls were visualized as a threat to the social and moral order based on their reportedly “sexual

126 “Wanfujū nu zhāodai fēngliú shì [Life Story of Coquettish Waitress at Wanfujū Restaurant],” *Minguo Ribao*, April 8, 1931, cited in Xu, “Xunzheng shiqi,” p. 72.

127 “Shuixing yanghua: lihuen gaijia you pinqingren [Lascivious Waitress Suits for Divorce, Get Remarried and Find Herself a Lover],” *Shijie Ribao*, August 30, 1931, cited in Xu, “Xunzheng shiqi,” p. 72.

128 “Nu dianyuan xing ji langman yu fanzuo xieshou tongtao [Dissolute Waitress Ran Away with a Customer],” *Minguo Ribao*, January 25, 1933, cited in Xu, “Xunzheng shiqi,” p. 72.

129 “Saosao de mimi bei xiaogu kuipo: ahge qiji chidao kanshang jianfu yifu [Furious Man Attacks Adulterer and Adulteress with a Knife after his Sister Discovered the Secret Love Affair between his Wife and Another Man],” *Shijie Ribao*, May 30, 1931, cited in Xu, “Xunzheng shiqi,” p. 72.

licentiousness, their fascination with finery and luxury,” while married women workers were charged with “neglect of their families’ moral and physical well-being.”<sup>130</sup> In this discursive construction of women workers, their experience was deflected to serve a purpose — restraining women from the factory labour force. Produced in an increasingly commercialized and conservative social environment, newspaper coverage of waitresses in Beijing similarly deflected waitresses’ image to serve particular purposes — teaching moral lessons and expanding readership. When we contrast sensational tales of waitresses’ moral fall with scholarly investigations provided by contemporaries,<sup>131</sup> when we listen to the angry protests made by waitresses, and when we ponder on the fact that the overwhelming majority of waitresses struggled to support not only themselves but also their families,<sup>132</sup> we are able to see most of them as hard-working women who strove to lead decent and independent lives through all the intricacies and ambivalences of their jobs.

Beijing waitresses received the most vigorous support from two women’s organizations — the Beijing Women’s Association and the Women’s Anti-Japanese Society. The former, a middle-class philanthropic organization, rose to defend the personhood of waitresses out of concern for the oppressed women. With its mission to help desperate women improve their situation, it advocated women’s economic independence. The latter, a Nationalist organization with communist connections, strongly defended waitresses’ right to work based on political belief and a denunciation of capitalism as the cause of all social ills. As professional women defending labouring women, the members of these two organizations shared their gender with the waitresses, but not their class. Still, as social critics who viewed economic independence or liberation as the key to women’s emancipation, they were less bounded by class bias. They neither supported women’s returning home, nor obsessed about social purity by expressing pity for fallen sisters. Instead, hailing waitresses as independent bread-winners, they tried to change a society that put masses of working women in an awkward, untenable situation.

130 Kathleen Canning, *Languages of Labor and Gender: Female Factory Work in Germany, 1850–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 44–45.

131 For instance, Zhang Ruyi’s BA thesis on the topic is a well-documented investigation from the perspective of a sociologist (Zhang, “Beiping nu zhaodai”).

132 Zhang, “Beiping nu zhaodai,” pp. 18–24.