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“Unqualified” and “Licentious” *Nü*  
*Xiaozhang* 女校長 in Republican China:  
Sexism toward Professional Women in  
School Leadership Positions\*

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Abstract

During the Republican Era, the emergence of female

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school principals at various school levels demonstrates the fact that well-educated women had begun to leave the domestic sphere to take up public roles as administrators in order to contribute to society. These women in school leadership positions also symbolize an absolute reversal of the traditional gender hierarchy in the educational field; that is, they were empowered to manage fellow teachers and staff who were largely male within the school confines. However, anxiety about these headmistresses was ubiquitous among male intellectuals, including students' guardians and local elites. In addition to criticizing headmistresses, some of these men even exercised their power to exclude women from school leadership positions. Focusing on the corruption case of Hu Lan 胡蘭, headmistress of Shanghai Wuben Girls' Secondary School (Wuben nüzhong 務本女中) in 1937, the present article explores the extreme sexism that lower-level female principals encountered even in education, a field that seemed to be open to women. This article argues that women's educational qualifications and their sexual morality as school principals were easily questioned in male-dominated Republican China: as found in legal archives and other historical sources, being "unqualified" and "licentious" were the most two common accusations leveled against them. This gender tension further reveals Chinese male intellectuals' territoriality of Chinese morality and traditions during China's modernization process.

Keywords: educational qualification, female principals, male anxiety, professional women, sexual morality

## Introduction

In 1937, Hu Lan 胡蘭 (?-?), the headmistress of Shanghai Wuben Girls' Secondary School (Wuben nüzhong 務本女中), suddenly left her position as the school principal. Some related historical materials, now preserved in the Shanghai Municipal Archives (Shanghaishi dang'anguan 上海市檔案館), reveal charges against her of embezzlement of school funds and her constant disputes with the teachers during her less-than-one-year tenure at Wuben. These archives clearly show that the students' guardians (*jiashang* 家長) of Wuben were furious at her and dissatisfied with her performance, worrying that what they saw as her limited knowledge and immoral sexual behavior would be a bad example for the young women.<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1902, Wuben was among the first public schools for girls and was the only municipal girls' secondary school in existence in Shanghai during the Nanjing Decade (1928-1937).<sup>2</sup> Because of Wuben's

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<sup>1</sup> “Shanghaishi zhengfu, Xu Dongyun deng ren guanyu shili Wuben nüzi zhongxue xiaozhang Hu Lan tanwu chengxing, bu weirenshibiao de han he diaocha baogao” 上海市政府、徐東雲等人關於市立務本女子中學校長胡蘭貪污成性、不為人師表的函和調查報告, Shanghaishi dang'anguan 上海市檔案館 (*Shanghai Municipal Archives*; hereafter, *SMA*), Q6-18-123-22.

<sup>2</sup> Wuben was first founded by Wu Xin 吳馨 (1873-1919), a male member of the Shanghai elite, as a home-based elementary school for girls. In 1913, Wu transferred his ownership of Wuben to the local county, at which time Wuben became a public school. In 1915, Wuben was developed into a secondary school for girls in Shanghai County and, after 1928, it was managed by the Shanghai Special Municipality. Wuben was the only

prestigious reputation and public school identity, it is reasonable to suppose that the Shanghai Bureau of Social Affairs would choose a well-qualified candidate as its school principal.<sup>3</sup> However, Hu Lan was accused by the students' guardians and teachers of being "unqualified" and "licentious," two common accusations leveled against female school principals in print media in Republican China. Hu Lan's corruption case is research-worthy because both charges converged in this case and thus reflect the sexist public attitude toward her and other female school principals, namely, professional women who had

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municipal secondary school for girls in Republican Shanghai until the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War when the Shanghai Bureau of Education took over Shanghai Municipal Council Girls' School (Shanghaishi gongbu ju nüzhong 上海市工部局女中) and renamed it Shanghai No. 1 Girls' High School (Shanghaishi diyi nüzi zhongxue 上海市第一中學). Shao Mingxiang 邵明祥, "Wu Xin yu guoren diyi nüxiaojiao" 吳馨與國人第一女校, *Xungen* 尋根 3 (June 2000), pp. 98-100; Shanghaishi jiaoyuju 上海市教育局, ed., *Shanghaishi zhongdeng jiaoyu gaikuang* 上海市中等教育概況 (Shanghai: Shanghaishi jiaoyuju, 1948), p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> In August 1928, the Shanghai Special Municipality changed the former Shanghai Trade and Industry Bureau into the Shanghai Bureau of Social Affairs. The responsibilities of the Bureau of Social Affairs included managing industrial and commercial administration, food and grain trade, social welfare, civil society, trade union organization, and labor disputes. Because, in September 1936, the Shanghai Bureau of Education was affiliated with the Bureau of Social Affairs, it was easy to understand that from then on, Pan Gongzhan 潘公展 (1895-1975), head of the Bureau of Social Affairs, took charge of the appointment and removal of all public school principals in Shanghai. See Shanghaishi difangzhi bangongshi 上海市地方誌辦公室, [http://www.shtong.gov.cn/dfz\\_web/DFZ/Info?idnode=67640&tableName=userobject1a&id=64705](http://www.shtong.gov.cn/dfz_web/DFZ/Info?idnod e=67640&tableName=userobject1a&id=64705) (Accessed Jan. 11, 2022).

authority over men during the Republican Era.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the establishment of girls' schools and the traditional notion of gender segregation made female school principals a necessity for girls' schools at all levels. In the late nineteenth century, some pioneer Chinese women, such as Ding Yuexin 丁月心 (1867-1953) in Songjiang and Huixing 惠興 (1871-1905) in Hangzhou, launched and oversaw girls' schools like their male counterparts did, hoping to address the “illiteracy” of Chinese women.<sup>4</sup> However, the Qing government had not yet approved public schooling for girls at that time, and thus, these women's efforts in promoting women's education were not officially recognized by the government.<sup>5</sup> When the central government officially endorsed women's public schooling in 1907, the newly established lower-level schools started to recruit female teachers and administrators to create a protective environment for female students. Unlike in

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<sup>4</sup> For more details of Ding Yuexin's and Huixing's practices in establishing girls' schools, see Author unknown, “Hui jia xing nüxue de xiansheng: Ding Yuexin zhuanlüe” 毀家興女學的先聲：丁月心傳略, *Shanghai jiaoyu (zhongxueban)* 上海教育 (中學版) 10 (1992), pp. 36-37; Xia Xiaohong 夏曉虹, *Wanqing nüxing yu jindai Zhongguo* 晚清女性與近代中國 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2004), pp. 223-246.

<sup>5</sup> This conclusion can be inferred from the imperial testimonial of merit (*jingbiao* 旌表) that Huixing received from the Qing government in 1906, which, rather than mentioning her contribution to the sustaining of a local girls' school, officially praised only her chastity and her adherence to traditional female morality. See Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 35-37.

the fields of medicine and government that men had dominated for centuries, female principals, along with their male colleagues, actively participated in the creation and development of modern educational institutions. However, even in the field of education, which needed women's contributions, leadership positions were still considered a man's domain due to the influence of the traditional Chinese norm of "men being superior to women" (*nanzun nübei* 男尊女卑). In the early twentieth century, knowledgeable and capable women were only welcomed to work as administrators in lower-rank schools, mainly kindergartens and elementary schools. It wasn't until 1924, when Yang Yinyu 楊蔭榆 (1884-1938) was appointed chancellor of Beijing Women's Normal University, that Chinese women first took up leadership positions in higher education.

Although the history of Chinese women's education has proved fruitful in scholarship, female principals, especially lower-level (elementary and secondary) local headmistresses, have received the least attention among women in this field compared to female students and teachers.<sup>6</sup> In the extant

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<sup>6</sup> Scholars mainly discuss how the public visibility of female students aroused men's hidden voyeuristic desires and was seen as a threat to social morality. See Qin Fang 秦方, "*Nüjie*" *zhi xingqi: wan Qing Tianjin nüzi jiaoyu yu nüxing xingxiang jiangou* 「女界」之興起：晚清天津女子教育與女性形象建構 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2019); Chen Pingyuan, "Male Gaze/Female Students: Late Qing Education for Women as Portrayed in Beijing Pictorials, 1902-08," in Nanxiu Qian, Grace Fong, and Richard Smith eds., *Different Worlds of Discourse: Transformation of Gender and Genre in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Leiden:

scholarship, they have been simply categorized as female teachers. Indeed, these local headmistresses were in socially unusual positions. They were public figures in Republican society who, in addition to administering schools, undertook more social responsibilities, such as attending various gatherings, witnessing the inauguration ceremonies of local officials, and delivering speeches at political events.<sup>7</sup> Their identity as school

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Brill, 2008), pp. 315-347; Zhang Yun, “The Emerging Modern Woman: Representations of the ‘Girl Student’ in Early Twentieth Century Urban China,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 16:3 (Fall 2014), pp. 50-59; Paul J. Bailey, “‘Unharnessed Fillies’: Discourse on the ‘Modern’ Female Student in Early Twentieth Century China,” in Lo Jiu-jung 羅久蓉 and Lu Miaw-fen 呂妙芬 eds., *Wusheng zhi sheng (III): jindai Zhongguo de funü yu wenhua (1600-1950)* 無聲之聲 (III)：近代中國的婦女與文化 (1600-1950) (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 2003), pp. 327-357. However, famous female chancellors at the college level have attracted widespread scholarly attention in historical and educational studies in Chinese academia. These studies mostly praise these women for their pioneer roles as educators. See Lou Aofei 婁喬菲, “Zai lun Yang Yinyu yu nüshida fengchao” 再論楊蔭榆與女師大風潮, *Jiaoyu xuebao* 教育學報 11:2 (April 2015), pp. 104-115; He Wei 何瑋, “‘Xin nüxing’ yu jindai Zhongguo nüzi jiaoyu: Wu Yifang ge’an yanjiu” 「新女性」與近代中國女子教育：吳貽芳個案研究, *Suzhou daxue xuebao (Jiaoyu kexue ban)* 蘇州大學學報 (教育科學版) 3 (October 2016), pp. 107-116.

<sup>7</sup> During Shao Menglan’s 邵夢蘭 (1909-2000) tenure as headmistress of Zhejiang Shixin Elementary Girls’ School (Shixin nüzi xiaoxue 始新女子小學), she was invited to attend the inauguration ceremony of local officials and deliver a speech. See Yu Chien-ming 游鑑明, *Chuncan dao si si fang jin: Shao Menglan nüshi fangwen jilu* 春蠶到死絲方盡：邵夢蘭女士訪問紀錄, recorded by Huang Ming-ming 黃銘明 and Cheng Li-jung 鄭麗榕 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 2005), pp. 61-62.

principals granted them opportunities to display their knowledge and capabilities and to rationalize their presence in a patriarchal society. Additionally, the position of school principal granted women authority over men in the Republican Era, when few jobs with paths toward promotion were available to women. Their education empowered headmistresses to appoint or dismiss male employees in schools, challenging and even threatening the Chinese gender tradition of *nanzun nübei*.<sup>8</sup>

Female principals represented the “new woman” (*xin nüxing* 新女性) of the Republican Era; that is, they were cultivated, had respectable jobs, and were economically independent of men. They should have been signifiers of the positive aspects of modernity and should have been acclaimed as emblematic of the success of women’s education.<sup>9</sup> However, accusations of corruption, self-interest, and selfish behavior placed them more squarely into the category of the “modern girl” (*modeng nülang* 摩登女郎), a classification that was more often associated with the negative connotations of modernity.

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<sup>8</sup> I did an oral interview with two alumnae from Songjiang Girls’ School (Songjiang nüzhong 松江女中), and they recalled that because Jiang Xuezhū 江學珠 (1901-1988), the female principal, strictly prohibited teacher-student love relationships, once a male teacher got a little bit too close to a female student, she would talk to that teacher and even fire him. Accordingly, male teachers feared her authority.

<sup>9</sup> Kristine Harris, “The New Woman: Image, Subject, and Dissent in 1930s Shanghai Film Culture,” *Republican China* 20:2 (April 1995), p. 72; Sarah Stevens, “Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China,” *NWSA Journal* 15:3 (Autumn 2003), p. 86.



Historian Louise Edwards argues that the debate over the “new woman” and the “modern girl” was primarily a trope for male intellectual anxiety in a rapidly changing Republican society.<sup>10</sup> They hoped to defend Chinese morality and tradition against China’s modernization under Western influence, especially in the 1930s and 40s when conservatism in the country was at its height.<sup>11</sup>

Chinese women have been the objects of the state and intellectual reforms since the late Qing period; however, Hu Lan’s case occurred during the New Life Movement when the identity of the Chinese “modern girl” was finally consolidated.<sup>12</sup> Launched by Chiang Kai-shek 蔣中正 (1887-1975) in Jiangxi Province in February 1934, the state-run New Life Movement advocated the theoretical importance of Confucian values, aiming to shape the Chinese people into qualified citizens to save China from material and moral degeneration. In this context, the Chinese “modern girl” became the New Life Movement’s main

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<sup>10</sup> Louise Edwards, “Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China,” *Modern China* 26:2 (April 2000), pp. 123-125.

<sup>11</sup> Louise Edwards’s research on *Linglong* 玲瓏 produced in the 1930s shows that the editors presented America as a land devoid of morality in order to convincingly present a hybrid “moderate Chinese modernity” to readers as suitable for a modest Chinese woman. See Louise Edwards, “The Shanghai Modern Woman’s American Dreams: Imagining America’s Depravity to Produce China’s ‘Moderate Modernity,’” *Pacific Historical Review* 81:4 (2012), pp. 567-601.

<sup>12</sup> Hsiao-pei Yen, “Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation: The Modern Girl and the New Life Movement,” *Asian Studies Review* 29:2 (June 2005), p. 166.

target.<sup>13</sup> Conservative male intellectuals who strongly promoted traditional Chinese feminine virtues heavily attacked the self-indulgent consumerism and leisurely lifestyles *modeng*-style women were supposed to enjoy.<sup>14</sup> In the present article, the social images and representations of female principals, including Hu Lan, fall somewhere between “new woman” and “modern girl,” which not only reveals the sexism that these professional women encountered but also demonstrates male intellectual reformists’ efforts in policing modern-style Chinese women in the male-dominated conservative Republican Era.

Focusing on Hu Lan’s case, this article explores the sexism exhibited toward female principals at elementary and secondary schools during the Republican Era.<sup>15</sup> Studying the sexism they encountered can provide a way of understanding the broader gender discrimination against professional women in various fields, which is not only historically significant but has also had an impact on today’s global gender landscape.<sup>16</sup> This is a topic

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<sup>13</sup> In 1934, the New Life Headquarters in Jiangxi issued the first ban on strange and outlandish women’s clothes. See Hsiao-pei Yen, “Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation: The Modern Girl and the New Life Movement,” *Asian Studies Review* 29:2, p. 173.

<sup>14</sup> Louise Edwards, “Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China,” *Modern China* 26:2, pp. 119-120.

<sup>15</sup> The schools investigated in this study are mainly Chinese-founded schools. Western missionary schools are excluded since Catholic or Christian ideologies would complicate Confucian gender traditions in Chinese society.

<sup>16</sup> Scholars have explored the sexism toward professional women in the nursing and law fields. Nicole Elizabeth Barnes uses the example of Nie

that has not been fully studied in the field of Chinese history due to the lack of firsthand documents; but fortunately, litigation files, newspapers and tabloids, as well as oral interviews contain valuable information about lower-level headmistresses that provide opportunities for studying public representations of these emerging female professionals. This article argues that concerning female school principals and the sexism they encountered in the male-dominated Republican China, their educational and working credentials and their sexual morality were easily called into question, and thus being “unqualified” and “licentious” were two common charges that were brought against these headmistresses. Many of these accusations against female principals were unfounded, which further reveals the male anxiety and gender tension in constructing Chinese modernity in the Republican Era.

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Yuchan 聶毓禪 (1903-1998), female head of the School of Nursing of the relocated Peking Union Medical College and its first Chinese dean, to discuss the gender difficulties female doctors and nurses faced in the field of medicine in China during the Second World War. See Nicole Elizabeth Barnes, *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937-1945* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), pp. 149-155. In addition, Chinese scholar Wang Ruichao 王瑞超 works on female lawyers in Republican China, and her work reveals the sexism toward women in the legal profession. See Wang Ruichao 王瑞超, “Minguo Shanghai nǚ lǚshī de zhīyè kǔnjìng yǔ zìwǒ chéngjiù” 民國上海女律師的執業困境與自我成就, *Jiaoda faxue* 交大法學 1 (2021), pp. 76-90; Wang Ruichao 王瑞超, “Dang xingbie chengwei jinji: Minguo shiqi Shanghai nǚ lǚshī de zhīyè chujing” 當性別成為禁忌——民國時期上海女律師的執業處境, *Suzhou daxue xuebao: faxue ban* 蘇州大學學報：法學版 3 (2019), pp. 67-76.

## Hu Lan's Story: Facts and Allegations

In August 1936, Hu Lan was appointed headmistress of Shanghai Wuben Girls' Secondary School. Although Hu Lan signed a ten-year contract with the Shanghai Bureau of Social Affairs, she worked there for less than a year before being sued and leaving the position in July 1937.<sup>17</sup> Newspapers of the time reveal that, as a school principal, Hu Lan's corruption and misconduct provoked strong dissatisfaction among the teachers and guardians, ultimately irritating the Bureau of Social Affairs, which led to her sudden departure from the position.

In November 1936, less than three months after Hu Lan had become the head of Wuben, there appeared adverse newspaper coverage of her financial dispute with the teachers. According to *Shi bao* 時報, Hu Lan, without providing any valid reason, fired eight qualified teachers whose contracts had not yet expired. Losing their source of income, the eight teachers, led by Peng Junshi 彭君實, sued Headmistress Hu Lan for violating the regulations for dismissing teachers as stated in the *Shanghai Secondary School Teacher Appointment Statute*.<sup>18</sup> The court set up several private mediation meetings to address this issue, but Hu Lan's failure to attend these meetings, and her refusal to

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<sup>17</sup> “Shanghaishi shehui ju guanyu shili zhongxiaoxue xiaozhang mingce” 上海市社會局關於市立中小學校長名冊, SMA, Q6-18-1071.

<sup>18</sup> “Peng Junshi deng xiang fayuan kongsu Wuben nü xiaozhang weiyue” 彭君實等向法院控訴務本女校長違約, *Shi bao* 時報 (Shanghai), November 24, 1936, p. 3.

compensate the teachers, further intensified the dispute.<sup>19</sup> Later in the same month, Cheng Qingyan 程勤岩, a female teacher at Wuben, sued Hu Lan for breach of contract and asked for a salary compensation of 2,262.60 yuan.<sup>20</sup> Due to a dearth of sources, the exact reason and results of Hu Lan’s disputes with these Wuben teachers are unknown.

It is certain that the negative public coverage of the disputes between Hu Lan and the Wuben teachers influenced the student guardians’ comments on this new female principal, as the accusations of misconduct did not stop there. On July 14, 1937, Lu Haoran (陸浩然) and others filed suit with the Shanghai Municipal Government against Hu Lan for corruption and embezzlement.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, on July 24, 1937, Xu Dongyun 徐東雲, Wang Dazhong 王大中, and Sun Linzhan 孫林柵, the male guardians of three students, filed charges of seven crimes of embezzlement against Hu Lan with the Shanghai Bureau of Social Affairs.<sup>22</sup> The Wuben guardians listed each instance of

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<sup>19</sup> “Wuben nü xiaozhang bei kong kai shen” 務本女校長被控開審, *Shi bao*, December 10, 1936, p. 3; “Wuben xiaozhang tan bei kong an zhenxiang” 務本校長談被控案真相, *Shi bao*, December 12, 1936, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> “Wuben nüzhong xiaozhang you bei jiaoyuan kong weiyue” 務本女中校長又被教員控違約, *Dagong bao* 大公報 (Shanghai), December 24, 1936, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> “Shanghaishi zhengfu, Xu Dongyun deng ren guanyu shili Wuben nüzi zhongxue xiaozhang Hu Lan tanwu chengxing, bu weirenshibiao de han he diaocha baogao,” *SMA*, Q6-18-123-22. pp. 1-8.

<sup>22</sup> The seven counts of misconduct and crime were as follows: sympathizing with the Communist Party; paying full-time personnel with part-time salaries; organizing gambling to collect money; breaking contracts with

Hu Lan's corruption and the approximate amount she had embezzled. According to their accusations, they were also angry about Hu Lan's discharging of teachers whom they felt were qualified. Hu Lan, however, refused to acknowledge all these "slanderous and defamatory words" and insisted that her past year of work deserved praise.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to her financial corruption, the Wuben guardians questioned Hu Lan's qualifications as a teacher and a school principal, as well as her sexual morality as a female role model. Hu Lan was alleged to be inadequately educated (*xueshi qianbo* 學識淺薄, lit. "of shallow learning") because, as principal, she did not fulfill the minimum teaching requirement of six hours per week.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the guardians firmly believed that

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good teachers; delaying the payment of employees' salaries in order to earn interest; having an inadequate education and not teaching classes; and being expelled by students in Jiangxi for sexual immorality. "Shanghaishi zhengfu, Xu Dongyun deng ren guanyu shili Wuben nüzi zhongxue xiaozhang Hu Lan tanwu chengxing, bu weirenshibiao de han he diaocha baogao," *SMA*, Q6-18-123-22, pp. 9-15. Additionally, although the students' guardians were not always male, in 1930s China, it is most likely that the guardians who had connections with schools were the students' fathers or other male family members.

<sup>23</sup> "Shili Wuben nüzi zhongxue xiaozhang Hu Lan zhi Shanghaishi shehui ju guanyu chengqing zishen qingbai bing qing chaming niezao shishi zhi ren de han he xinjian" 市立務本女子中學校長胡蘭致上海市社會局關於澄清自身清白並請查明捏造事實之人的函和信件, *SMA*, Q6-18-123-52, pp. 3-6.

<sup>24</sup> "Shanghaishi zhengfu, Xu Dongyun deng ren guanyu shili Wuben nüzi zhongxue xiaozhang Hu Lan tanwu chengxing, bu weirenshibiao de han he diaocha baogao," *SMA*, Q6-18-123-22, p. 13.

she was unqualified, even though Hu Lan's satisfactory education credentials had already been made public in newspapers. Furthermore, the male guardians seemed to be even more concerned that Hu Lan's romances and casual sexual behavior would erode the virtue of the girl students. They brought up Hu Lan's immoral, and, in some cases, unethical sexual relationships with both women and men. To be specific, the students' guardians believed Ms. He 何, a teacher who they thought was unqualified as an educator, was Hu Lan's same-sex lover. To exact revenge for Ms. He, Hu Lan even abused her authority to force a qualified physics teacher to resign. The Wuben guardians further revealed that they had heard that Hu Lan had been caught kissing a man in the principal's office within fifteen days of her becoming principal in a girls' school in Jiangxi Province and had been subsequently forced by the students to leave her position. They believed that her open sexual relationship resulted in this expulsion and criticized her poor management skills because she incorrectly regarded the principal's office as her private living space.<sup>25</sup>

Released on August 10, 1937, the investigation report from the Bureau of Social Affairs responded to the accusations made by the guardians regarding Hu Lan's corruption and misconducts, her inadequate teaching and educational

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<sup>25</sup> “Shanghaishi zhengfu, Xu Dongyun deng ren guanyu shili Wuben nüzi zhongxue xiaozhang Hu Lan tanwu chengxing, bu weirenshibiao de han he diaocha baogao,” *SMA*, Q6-18-123-22, p. 14.

credentials, as well as her immorality.<sup>26</sup> It is apparent that the Bureau conducted its own investigation into Hu Lan, rather than taking the guardians' allegations as fact, because the details of her misconduct in the investigation files differed from those in the Wuben guardians' complaints. Specifically, the investigators found evidence of some of Hu Lan's transgressions, such as setting up a store on campus and not teaching classes, but rejected most of the corruption Hu Lan stood accused of. Furthermore, unlike the male guardians, the investigators did not acknowledge that Hu Lan's failure to take on her teaching responsibilities was because of her illiteracy.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the investigators did not reveal that Hu Lan was homosexual or sexually immoral. Instead, the Bureau concluded that Ms. He, Hu Lan's alleged same-sex lover and Wuben's Section Chief of Student Activities (*xunyu zhuren* 訓育主任), had the requisite teaching credentials.<sup>28</sup> The silence on Hu Lan's alleged affairs with men and women in either Jiangxi or Shanghai does not necessarily imply the authorities' denial of her romances, but

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<sup>26</sup> According to the archives, the investigators came to Wuben twice for inspection in early August: one was on August 3 (only Hu Lan was present at the school, whereas the accounting staff was absent), and the other was on August 8.

<sup>27</sup> "Shanghaishi zhengfu, Xu Dongyun deng ren guanyu shili Wuben nüzi zhongxue xiaozhang Hu Lan tanwu chengxing, bu weirenshibiao de han he diaocha baogao," *SMA*, Q6-18-123-22, pp. 39-40.

<sup>28</sup> "Shanghaishi zhengfu, Xu Dongyun deng ren guanyu shili Wuben nüzi zhongxue xiaozhang Hu Lan tanwu chengxing, bu weirenshibiao de han he diaocha baogao," *SMA*, Q6-18-123-22, pp. 37-38.



rather suggests that the sexual rumors were not powerful enough to convict her. More importantly, because they appended a note stating that they could not verify the address of Xu Dongyun, one of the accusing Wuben guardians, it seems that these investigators believed some of the guardians' charges were, in fact, groundless.

A complete picture of Hu Lan's case cannot be constructed from the available sources, but the comparison between the guardians' allegations and the official report reveals the difference between the focus of the authorities and that of the public accounts. The Wuben guardians were more concerned about her qualifications and sexual morality as a school principal than the Bureau of Social Affairs was. This discrepancy provides a space in which to explore the way Republican-Era Chinese viewed professional women in leadership positions. The guardians' allegations that Hu Lan was “licentious” and “unqualified” reveal the public's suspicions about female principals' credentials and morality. These allegations were also commonly seen in contemporary print media, even though the authors of such articles did not always have solid evidence to back up their charges.

## Male Principals: Lawsuits and Newspaper Coverage

During the Republican Era, various legal charges brought against principals, including embezzlement, were often exposed

by local newspapers. Public representation of these allegations differed based on the sex of these principals. In patriarchal Republican China, the public used different gender lenses to look at the principals who were alleged to have committed crimes. Legal cases involving male principals reveal that the public seldom questioned the qualifications of male principals the way it questioned those of female principals, even if they were accused of committing similar crimes.

Hu Lan is not the only principal in Wuben's school history to have been charged with corruption and embezzlement. In early November 1928, Jia Guanren 賈觀仁, a male principal, was accused of "overcharging various fees" (*fushou jingfei* 浮收經費), but, after only a short suspension, he was reinstated as Wuben's principal on November 18 of the same year.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to fully reconstruct Jia's case from the extant sources, and determining whether he was guilty of corruption is thus impossible. However, Jia's corruption scandal persisted and escalated enough that, by July 1929, the Bureau of Education had to force him to leave his position at Wuben.<sup>30</sup> Jia himself published an announcement in *Xinwen bao* 新聞報 that stated

<sup>29</sup> The style name (*zi* 字) of Jia Guanren was Foru 佛如. Men's style names provided outsiders with a respectful way to address them. "Shili Wuben xiaozhang Jia Foru cizhi" 市立務本校長賈佛如辭職, *Xinwen bao* 新聞報 (Shanghai), November 15, 1928, p. 11; "Wuben nüxiao xiaozhang Jia Foru jun xian yi fuzhi" 務本女校校長賈佛如君現已復職, *Xiaori bao* 小日報 (Shanghai), November 18, 1928, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> "Shifu ling chehuan Wuben xiaozhang Jia Guanren" 市府令撤換務本校長賈觀仁, *Xinwen bao*, July 11, 1929, p. 14.

that he had not charged extra, and he left it up to the public to determine his guilt.<sup>31</sup> Before being appointed as the school principal, Jia had taught physics and science at Wuben for several years. He must have been admired and respected by the girl students because they broke out in protest of the Bureau of Education, asking that Jia be retained as Wuben’s principal. The clash between the students and the authorities lasted nearly two months until Wang Xiaoying 王孝英 (1899-1990), an educated female, was appointed as Wuben’s new principal.<sup>32</sup>

The case of Jia has a very different ending from that of Hu Lan. The corruption charge did not negatively affect Jia’s educational career and the public attitude toward him. He still contributed to the development of Chinese vocational education in the following decades and took up the position of principal of China Vocational School (*Zhonghua zhiye xuexiao* 中華職業學校) in 1931. Hu Lan’s name, however, disappeared from historical archives and contemporary newspapers after she lost her job in the corruption case. According to the archives, Pan Gongzhan 潘公展 (1895-1975) appointed Gu Fengcheng 顧鳳城 as the acting principal of Wuben Girls’ Secondary School on November 10, 1937.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Jia Guanren qishi” 賈觀仁啟示, *Xinwen bao*, July 20, 1929, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Shanghai tebieshi shizhengfu shizheng gongbao* 上海特別市市政府市政公報 (Shanghai) 25 (July 1929), pp. 24-25; *Qiong bao* 瓊報 (Shanghai), July 25, 1929, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> “Shanghaishi zhengfu, Xu Dongyun deng ren guanyu shili Wuben nüzi zhongxue xiaozhang Hu Lan tanwu chengxing, bu weirenshibiao de han

In corruption cases, the qualifications and sexual morality of male principals were seldom questioned. In August 1948, the guardians of the students of the Kongyi National School (Kongyi guomin xuexiao 孔遺國民學校) charged Liu Zhongde 劉鐘德, the male principal, with corruption and embezzlement.<sup>34</sup> In late 1948 and early 1949, local Shanghai elites and student guardians also charged Ling Yaohan 凌耀漢, the male principal of the Donggou National School (Donggou guomin xuexiao 東溝國民學校), with corruption.<sup>35</sup> In addition to embezzlement, they pointed out other kinds of misconduct—such as falsifying meeting minutes—engaged in by these two male principals. However, not a single word in the charges made by the elites or guardians questioned these two male principals' educational or working credentials, nor did the charges include any details of their private affairs. The authorities verified their crimes and misconduct, but the punishment Ling Yaohan received was merely “transferring his position elsewhere” (*tadio* 他調).<sup>36</sup> In

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he diaocha baogao,” *SMA*, Q6-18-123-22, pp. 20-22.

<sup>34</sup> “Shanghaishi zhengfu renshichu guanyu Kongyi guomin xuexiao xiaozhang Liu Zhongde bei kong tanwu duzhi an de laiwang gonghan ji chuli yijian” 上海市政府人事處關於孔遺國民學校校長劉鐘德被控貪污瀆職案的來往公函及處理意見, *SMA*, Q1-3-47-1, pp. 16-18.

<sup>35</sup> “Shanghaishi zhengfu renshichu guanyu Tao Weibing deng ren cheng kong Donggou guomin xuexiao xiaozhang Ling Yaohan tanwu duzhi an de laiwang gonghan ji diaocha chuli yijian” 上海市政府人事處關於陶渭濱等人呈控東溝國民學校校長凌耀漢貪污瀆職案的來往公函及調查處理意見, *SMA*, Q1-3-46-22, pp. 15-18.

<sup>36</sup> “Shanghaishi zhengfu renshichu guanyu Tao Weibing deng ren cheng kong Donggou guomin xuexiao xiaozhang Ling Yaohan tanwu duzhi an de

Liu Zhongde's case, after he was harshly blamed (*yanjia shenjie* 嚴加申戒) by the authorities several times and still did not show any improvement, the authorities removed him from his position.<sup>37</sup>

It is possible that the official record of these male principals only concerns itself with the details of their proven corruption, but even print media downplayed the questioning of these male principals' qualifications and morality when they committed sex crimes. It is noteworthy that, regarding the sex crimes involving male principals, the emphasis of the coverage was not on criticizing their sexual indecency, but on alerting the public that schools were places that put women's virtue at risk. A rape case occurred in 1934 at an elementary school in Chongmin County, Jiangsu Province, in which Chen Zhaofeng 陳兆豐, a male principal, forced Gong Pinfang 龔品芳, a female student, to have sex with him. Although the news did not reveal Gong's specific age, it did report that Chen's sexual violence toward Gong had occurred repeatedly over a long period. In the news report, the headline portion “A Lady Was Raped” (“*Jianwu nüshi*” 姦污女士) was enlarged on purpose. If the readers did not read the content carefully, they could easily consider it a common rape case and not recognize that this sex crime had

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laiwang gonghan ji diaocha chuli yijian,” *SMA*, Q1-3-46-22, pp. 23-25, 27.

<sup>37</sup> “Shanghaishi zhengfu renshichu guanyu Kongyi guomin xuexiao xiaozhang Liu Zhongde bei kong tanwu duzhi an de laiwang gonghan ji chuli yijian,” *SMA*, Q1-3-47-1, pp. 2, 13, 33.

been done in a school setting by a male principal to his young student.<sup>38</sup> In another rape case in 1946 in Shanghai, Xiao Zhenpei 蕭振佩, a male principal, raped Wang Qingying 王清影, a female student, at school. The coverage highlighted the fact that Wang was living in the school dorm when the rape occurred, which hinted to the public that schools could be sexually dangerous places for female students.<sup>39</sup> Remarkably, neither story criticized the sexually violent or coercive behavior of the male principals. The newspapermen did not blame or question these male principals' morality or qualifications, but presented school as a public sphere fraught with sexual danger. In addition, ongoing newspaper reports about mixed-gender love and socialization on middle and high school campuses reinforced the public opinion that a woman's virtue would be stained at the schools, which would further dissuade guardians from sending their girls to school, especially co-ed schools.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Limin xiaozhang bei kong jianwu nüshi” 利民校長被控姦污女士, *Chongmin bao* 崇民報 (Shanghai), February 1, 1934, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> “Xiaozhang bei kong wu shaonü” 校長被控污少女, *Shen bao* 申報 (Shanghai), May 4, 1946, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Paul J. Bailey, *Gender and Education in China: Gender Discourses and Women's Schooling in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 115-118; Ni Haoran 倪浩然, “Xiaoyuan lian yu jiemei qing: richang shenghuo shijiao xia de Minguo nü xuesheng” 校園戀與姐妹情：日常生活視角下的民國女學生, *Funü yu xingbieshi yanjiu* 婦女與性別史研究 5 (July 2021), pp. 103-116.

## Discrimination Against Women as School Principals

The above examples show that even when male principals were shown to be corrupt or to have committed sex crimes, their credentials and morality, unlike Hu Lan's, would not receive much attention. The deep-rooted gender discrimination in the field of education is the reason behind this situation. Even though education was one of the first industries that welcomed women, the statistics reveal that Chinese women still had many fewer employment opportunities than their male counterparts.<sup>41</sup> A 1929 survey conducted by Zhejiang University shows that in Republican China, opportunities for women to work as teachers were still limited: only 1,186 elementary school teachers in Zhejiang Province were female, accounting for 5 percent of the total; whereas male elementary school teachers numbered 21,000, 95 percent of the total.<sup>42</sup> This sharp contrast demonstrates that there were more men than women employed in the teaching field, and it is thus reasonable to assume that there would be many fewer female principals than male principals.

Regional data has confirmed that women made up a small

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<sup>41</sup> Weikun Cheng, “Going Public through Education: Female Reformers and Girls’ Schools in Late Qing Beijing,” *Late Imperial China* 21:1 (June 2000), p. 109.

<sup>42</sup> “Yidian'er tongji” 一點兒統計, *Shenghuo* (Shanghai 1925A) 生活 (Shanghai) 5:18 (1930), p. 278.

percentage of school principals in Republican China.<sup>43</sup> For example, in 1928 in Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang Province, 20.97 percent, or thirteen females out of 62 elementary-level public school principals, were women.<sup>44</sup> Although the percentage in Hangzhou was still low, the situation for women in these big cities was much better than in rural areas. In 1929 in Jinshan, a rural county in Jiangsu Province, only nine out of 94 local public-school principals were women (9.6 percent). All nine of these females were headmistresses of either kindergartens or elementary schools. There was only one secondary school in Jinshan, and the principal was male.<sup>45</sup> Thus, it can be inferred that opportunities for women to become school principals were rare in Republican China, and the vast majority of them only headed lower-level schools. Indeed, Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces are geographically located in the center of the wealthy Jiangnan area where women's schooling was the most advanced. Since the percentages of female teachers and

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<sup>43</sup> Chinese scholar Ma Fangfang 馬方方 uses the statistics from Tianjin and Beijing to show that women had much fewer chances than men did to take up school leadership positions. See Ma Fangfang 馬方方, "Minguo shiqi nü jiaoshi de jingji diwei zhuangkuang yanjiu (1912-1937)" 民國時期女教師的經濟地位狀況研究(1912-1937), *Funü yanjiu luncong* 婦女研究論叢 1 (2009), p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> "Hangzhoushi shili ge xiaoxue xianren xiaozhang zige tongji biao" 杭州市市立各小學現任校長資格統計表, *Shizheng yuekan* 市政月刊 (Hangzhou) 2:10 (1929), p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> "Jinshanxian zhongxiaoxue xiaozhang lüli yilan biao" 金山縣中小學校長履歷一覽表, *Jinshanxian jiaoyu yuekan* 金山縣教育月刊 (Jinshan) 5:11 (1929), pp. 71-78.



school principals were low in these two provinces, it is conceivable that the percentage of female principals, even at the lower-level schools, could have been much lower nationwide.

Even with the number of female principals so low, men in power still manipulated their authority to exclude professional women from leadership positions, without taking their qualifications and capabilities into serious consideration. In 1948 in Chongqing, the policy of “integration of politics and education” (*zhengjiao heyi* 政教合一) required local school principals to take up some self-governance responsibilities, such as managing the neighborhood administration (*baojia* 保甲) as the head (*baozhang* 保長). However, City Mayor Zhang Dulun 張篤倫 (1894-1958) suggested to the Chongqing Bureau of Education that women should not be permitted to serve as principals of national schools in Chongqing because he believed that women could not handle both school affairs and their *baozhang* duties at the same time. Zhang’s prejudice against women’s abilities sparked strong protests among local educated women. Newspaper agencies also produced articles to support women’s gatherings to resist Zhang’s policy, one which can be understood as a strategy to evict women from leadership positions to prevent them from taking away men’s privileges and dominance in the field of education.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to their educational credentials, gaining the

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<sup>46</sup> Ming 鳴, “Xiaoxue xiaozhang xian yong nanxing !?” 小學校長限用男性!?, *Lü xun* 綠訊 (Shanghai) 2 (March 1948), p. 2.

support of elite men was an important way for women to procure leadership positions in schools.<sup>47</sup> Oral interviews provide crucial evidence that shows how the power and prestige of their male families and friends helped young women to become local school principals. Shortly after she graduated from middle school, Shao Menglan 邵夢蘭 (1909-2000) was invited to lead Shixin Elementary Girls' School (Shixin nūzi xiaoxue 始新女子小學) in her hometown in Chunan County, Zhejiang Province. One reason for her appointment was that the Shao family had a fine reputation, and Shao Menglan's father belonged to the local gentry of that county. Later, Shao, as a graduate of Fudan University, was invited by male alumni of that institution six times in a row to teach Chinese at secondary schools in Zhejiang.<sup>48</sup> These teaching and administration experiences helped Shao become an outstanding female school principal later in Taiwan. As can be seen, the support of male elites not only helped female principals attain leadership positions, but also helped them secure the resources they needed to sustain their careers.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> This situation pertained in other fields, such as acting, in which Republican women wanted to move up the social ladder: in return for male patronage and connections, actresses provided companionship or sexual favors. Weikun Cheng, "The Challenge of the Actresses: Female Performers and Cultural Alternatives in Early Twentieth Century Beijing and Tianjin," *Modern China* 22:2 (April 1996), pp. 204-208.

<sup>48</sup> Yu Chien-ming, *Chuncan dao si si fang jin*, pp. 111-139.

<sup>49</sup> Although missionary schools are excluded from this research, the example of Zhang Rongzhen 張蓉珍 (1892-1962) exemplifies male

Although male patronage helped women procure leadership jobs, it also subjected them to public suspicion of their qualifications and morality. Historian Kristin Stapleton argues that “hostility toward women who held jobs in public life could take the form of rumors and character assassination.”<sup>50</sup> In Stapleton’s book, *Hu Lanqi* 胡蘭畦 (1901–1994), a famous Sichuan female writer and military leader, recalls a sexual rumor about a Chengdu girls’ school principal attacked in this way in the 1910s. According to Hu’s account, the headmistress’s husband worked for the provincial education bureau. A story was spread that this woman was a fortune teller and she had foreseen that one of her male clients had the potential to become a high official. As a result, she seduced him, got him to marry her, and was later appointed as a local female principal.<sup>51</sup> This story implies that public suspicion about female principals’ credentials and capacities in running a school existed; this woman became a

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patronage to these female principals at that time. Zhang was the first headmistress of Mary Farnham Girls’ School (Qingxin nüzhong 清心女中) and she remained in this position for more than thirty years. According to an alumna of the school, Zhang’s appointment as the school principal was in part due to her father’s significant standing in the business community and the church. Headmistress Zhang even donated her inheritance from her father, worth 50,000 yuan, to build a laboratory for the school. See Li Xiaojiang 李小江, ed., *Rang nüren ziji shuohua: duli de licheng* 讓女人自己說話：獨立的歷程 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2003), pp. 54, 67.

<sup>50</sup> Kristin Stapleton, *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin’s Family* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 180.

<sup>51</sup> Kristin Stapleton, *Fact in Fiction*, p. 180.

school principal and abandoned her low-class occupation because of her husband's important position in government, not because of her abilities and qualifications.

Gossiping about female principals became an outlet that the public used to express its skepticism about the wisdom of having women in school leadership positions. Lu Lihua 陸禮華 (1900-1997) was the victim of this kind of sexualized rumor when she founded Liangjiang Women's Physical Education Normal School (Liangjiang nüzi tiyu shifan xuexiao 兩江女子體育師範學校). Because she invited powerful and wealthy men to sit on the board of her school, there were rumors that Lu danced with men in order to get funding for her school, that she slept with two other men before her marriage, and that her relationship with other men before her marriage caused such distress to her husband that he died not long after they had married.<sup>52</sup> The rumormongers undervalued professional women's abilities and believed that they had acquired their principalships in exchange for sexual favors. Scholar Wang Zheng, who interviewed Lu, argues that "[t]he agony Lu experienced shows vividly the dilemma of the new women. They wanted to be independent,

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<sup>52</sup> The powerful and wealthy men on the board of Liangjiang included Pan Gongzhan, director of Kuomintang headquarters in Shanghai, as well as Zhang Gongquan 張公權 (1889-1979), Qian Xinzhi 錢新之 (1885-1958), and Chen Guangfu 陳光甫 (1881-1976), three rich bankers in Shanghai. See Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 183-184.

but they faced a cultural norm that was unprepared to accept independent women in public.”<sup>53</sup>

### “Unqualified” Headmistresses: Social Scrutiny of Women’s Credentials

Gender discrimination caused the public to mistrust the qualifications and capabilities of these headmistresses. The criticism that they were “unqualified” for these leadership positions was ubiquitous, especially when they made mistakes. In Hu Lan’s corruption case, although the students’ guardians doubted her ability to teach, Shanghai-based newspapers had published recaps of Hu Lan’s educational and working experiences before she came to Wuben to demonstrate to the public how knowledgeable this new female principal was. In August 1936, *Li bao* 立報, a prestigious local newspaper, provided a rundown of Hu Lan’s earlier academic experiences:

[She] graduated from Beijing Women’s Normal University, worked as a high school teacher in Shandong and Henan, and served as the principal of Jiangxi Provincial Girls’ Secondary School. Hu Lan was dispatched [by the Department of Education of Jiangxi Province] to study in France in 1930. She was awarded a doctoral degree in literature by the University of Paris.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, p. 183.

<sup>54</sup> “Wuben nüzhong xiaozhang yi ren” 務本女中校長易人, *Li bao* 立報

It is noteworthy that Hu Lan's French education background did not exempt her from public questioning about her limited knowledge in the corruption case. Additionally, it was recorded that, in September 1936, one month after she started working at Wuben, Hu Lan delivered a speech at the Shanghai Women's Education Center (Funü jiaoyu guan 婦女教育館) on the living conditions of French women, which gained her fame for her erudition.<sup>55</sup> As a result of print media coverage, Hu Lan's qualifications for the position of Wuben's new principal were already publicly known.

Moreover, contemporary newspaper accounts also reveal that Hu Lan had been handpicked by Pan Gongzhan, head of the Bureau of Social Affairs, to be the principal of Wuben in order to address the issue of student protests. Between 1927 and 1937, five principals had led Wuben and two large-scale student strikes had been staged, one in 1929 and another in 1933. "Temporary suspension of classes" (*zanxing tingke* 暫行停課) had become a regular approach to dealing with these affairs, which greatly affected the school's reputation and disrupted its management.<sup>56</sup> The turbulent school environment made the

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(Shanghai), August 24, 1936, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> "Wuben nüzhong xiaozhang Hu Lan nüshi zuori zai funü jiaoyu guan yanjiang" 務本女中校長胡蘭女士昨日在婦女教育館演講, *Dagong bao*, September 6, 1936, p. 14; "Yaoqing Hu Lan nüshi yanjiang" 邀請胡蘭女士演講, *Funü yuebao* 婦女月報 (Shanghai) 2:8 (September 1936), p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Bao'en 寶恩, "Wuben nüxue zhi xiaozhang wenti" 務本女學之校長問題, *Zhongguo sheying xuehui huabao* 中國攝影學會畫報 (Shanghai)

authorities suspect that there might be undercover communists inciting these strikes at the public school. In this context, Pan appointed someone he considered to be competent and trustworthy as Wuben’s principal. According to *Min bao* 民報, a newspaper of the Nationalist Party, Hu Lan had been offered and had accepted a professorship in education at Henan University. The personal and earnest invitation of Pan changed her mind, and she chose Wuben instead.<sup>57</sup>

The Bureau of Social Affairs must have had high expectations and great confidence in Hu Lan; it defended her reputation even after her disputes with Wuben teachers became public in late December 1936. *Shen bao*, *Dagong bao*, and *Xinwen bao*, the most influential and powerful Shanghai-based newspapers, continued to portray her as a steadfast patriot. In late 1936 and early 1937, when China was engaged in battle against Japan during the Second Sino-Japanese War, Hu Lan publicly participated in the fund-raising activities for the Suiyuan frontline. She also delivered a public speech titled “Promoting Domestic Products and Reviving the Nation” (“Tichang guohuo yu fuxing minzu” 提倡國貨與復興民族) to demonstrate her patriotism.<sup>58</sup> As with Shao Menglan, Hu Lan’s appointment was

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3:107 (September 1927), p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> “Wuben nüzhong yi zhang” 務本女中易長, *Min bao* 民報 (Shanghai), August 24, 1936, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> “Funü jie zuo chengli Suiyuan jiaofei weilao hui” 婦女界昨成立綏遠剿匪慰勞會, *Shen bao*, December 3, 1936, p. 9; Lady Yixiao 逸霄女士, “Shanghai zhiye funü fangwen ji” 上海職業婦女訪問記, *Dagong bao*,

also supported by significant male figures. Despite all that, after the revelation of her misconduct, the public, as represented by the Wuben guardians, began to question her qualifications and abilities.

Hu Lan was not alone in being called “unqualified”: other female principals of primary and secondary schools faced the same accusation. According to historian Wan Qionghua’s 萬瓊華 research, in 1922, male elites in Hunan heavily denounced Tong Xizhen 童錫楨, headmistress of Hunan First Provincial Women’s Normal School (Hunan shengli diyi nüzi shifan xuexiao 湖南省立第一女子師範學校), as being “muddle-headed” (*hunkui* 昏聩) because they thought she did not make pedagogy classes a requirement for students studying to be teachers. They wrote: “Doesn’t Headmistress Tong, a graduate of the Tokyo Women’s College, have common sense?” These elite males did not consider that the unstable political environment had negatively influenced the curriculum or that the school had already been offering some pedagogy-related classes and training. These elites even blamed Tong’s Japan-based degree for her professional incompetence: they conceded that Tong had received a college education in the most advanced country of East Asia but criticized her as “lacking the basic knowledge” to make appropriate class arrangements. The dissatisfaction of these elite Hunan males with the schools’

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January 11, 1937, p. 7; “Tichang guohuo yu fuxing minzu” 提倡國貨與復興民族, *Xinwen bao*, February 3, 1937, p. 14.



educational performance resulted in Tong’s having to resign four times before she was allowed to leave, because Hunan Governor Zhao Hengti 趙恒惕 (1880-1971) and other authorities supported Tong and rejected her resignations.<sup>59</sup>

Another corruption case, that of Shan Chun 單淳 in 1949, shows that the social doubts about the educational qualifications of female principals persisted until the end of the Republican Era. Shan Chun was the headmistress of the Shanghai Thirty-first District Central National School (上海市第三十一區中心國民學校), before working there, she had completed her higher education at the Imperial Women’s Medical College in Japan and accumulated abundant teaching experience in Japan and Shanghai. In January 1949, Shan Chun, like Hu Lan before her, was accused of embezzlement by the school employees. According to the archives, in addition to corruption, teachers and staff criticized her for illiteracy because she often used the wrong Chinese characters.<sup>60</sup> These school employees further questioned her credentials as Shan’s degree had not been awarded by a normal school, which violated one of the

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<sup>59</sup> Wan Qionghua 萬瓊華, “Minguo shiqi nü xiaozhang de zhuti yanshuo yu wusheng kangyi: yi Hunan *Dagong bao* de baodao wei zhongxin” 民國時期女校長的主體言說與無聲抗議——以湖南《大公報》的報道為中心, *Jiangsu shehui kexue* 江蘇社會科學 6 (2016), pp. 232-233.

<sup>60</sup> Chinese is a language of homophones. Many characters, despite being written differently and having different meanings, have exactly the same sound. Here Shan is accused of writing characters with the wrong meanings but the same sounds as the ones that would have been correct in this context.

regulations in the *Organizational Rules for National Schools and Central National Schools*. During the Republican Era, there were very few women who received a university education or who studied and worked overseas. Shan Chun's overseas education along with her teaching experience should have convinced the teachers and staff at her school that she was qualified as a lower-level school principal. However, when these school employees charged her with embezzlement, her Japan-educated background was utilized as "proof" of her "ignorance and incompetence" (*buxue wushu* 不學無術).<sup>61</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, America became a model for China in the field of education, and the United States was called "the Chinese Mecca of Education" early in 1910.<sup>62</sup> John Dewey's (1859–1952) visit to China from 1919 to 1921 was the peak of the Chinese cult of American education, and his two years of lectures enjoyed extraordinary dissemination through New Culture journals and greatly influenced the successive educational reforms in Republican China.<sup>63</sup> Dewey's visit was

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<sup>61</sup> "Shanghaishi zhengfu youguan jiaoyuju Kongyi guomin xuexiao xiaozhang bei kong de wenjian" 上海市政府有關教育局孔遺國民學校校長被控的文件, *SMA*, Q1-3-47.

<sup>62</sup> R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee, eds. and trans., *Land Without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 98.

<sup>63</sup> Barry C. Keenan, "Educational Reform and Politics in Early Republican China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 33:2 (February 1974), pp. 226-229. For more analysis of John Dewey's visit to China, see Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn* (Albany, NY: State

about the same time of the May Fourth Movement, and the Versailles Peace Treaty intensified the Chinese population's hostility toward Japan. In this context, the American-modeled school system replaced the Japanese one and became exemplary in the Republican Era even after Dewey left China. However, none of Shan, Tong, and Hu had received their education and training in the United States, and Shan and Tong even studied in Japan. This was likely the reason why the public did not think highly of their overseas experiences, even doubting their educational and teaching qualifications, especially when they made mistakes or caused discontent in others.

### “Licentious” Headmistresses: Threats to Social Morality

According to the Wuben students' guardians, Hu Lan's flirtatious behavior with both male and female colleagues amplified her incompetence and further represented a complete breach of traditional female virtues. Beginning in 1930, the emergence of the “modern girl” provoked great anxiety among Chinese male conservatives, which was used mainly to refer to superficial, selfish, and reckless women with messy private lives, and most of them adopted a Westernized appearance along with an investment in useless vanity and material desires.<sup>64</sup> As Sarah

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University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> Hyun Jeong Min, “New Women and Modern Girls: Consuming Foreign

Stevens argues:

In addition to symbolizing the lure and desirability of the cosmopolitan lifestyle, the Modern Girl represents deep-rooted fears of modernity. In particular, the Modern Girl reveals (male) fears of women liberated by modernity and seeking to become the subject of their own lives. The Modern Girl also demonstrates (male) fears of the loss of individuality experienced in the increasingly cosmopolitan, industrialized, and urban landscape of modernity.<sup>65</sup>

Hu Lan's quest for romantic love and bodily pleasure, as described by the Wuben guardians, perfectly fulfilled the criteria of the "modern girl," namely, a trait that was considered both undesirable and unbecoming in female principals. Accusing Hu Lan and other professional women's "modern girl" behaviors was also an expression of male anxiety toward Chinese modernity.

Women in the educational field, whether teachers, students, or principals, were expected to be "new women." However, print media often equated their appearance with prostitutes and

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Goods in Colonial Seoul," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 5:4 (2013), pp. 495-497.

<sup>65</sup> Sarah Stevens, "Figuring Modernity," *NWSA Journal* 15:3 p. 92.

associated them with the idea of the “modern girl.”<sup>66</sup> In Joan Judge’s book, she cites two examples of this from the late Qing and early Republic period: one is an article in *Dagong bao* in which the editor, Ying 英, criticizes the “weird” and “seductive” appearance of teachers in Tianjin; and, in the other, published five years later in *Funü shibao* 婦女時報, the journalist disparages the female students’ outlandish and “eye-catching” clothing as characteristic of prostitutes.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, female principals were also criticized for being “modern girls” when they wore this type of clothing. For instance, in 1936, Shen Qingru 沈清如, headmistress of a private school in the Shanghai French Concession, was sued for being delinquent on her rent. Shen wore beautiful and expensive clothing and accessories in court, and was thus referred to in the newspaper as a “modern female principal” (*modeng nü xiaozhang* 摩登女校長).<sup>68</sup> The contemporary press highlighted the *modeng* characteristics of these professional women in the educational field, which precisely expressed male elites’ anxiety over and fear of women’s sexuality and morality.<sup>69</sup>

Modern-style headmistresses became the protagonists of

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<sup>66</sup> Zhang Yun, “The Emerging Modern Woman: Representations of the ‘Girl Student’ in Early Twentieth Century Urban China,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 16:3, pp. 53-58.

<sup>67</sup> Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History*, p. 76.

<sup>68</sup> “Modeng nü xiaozhang bei kong qian zu” 摩登女校長被控欠租, *Shidai bao* 時代報 (Shanghai), September 14, 1936, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History*, pp. 72-76.

salacious stories in contemporary tabloids and newspapers. The press used these stories as selling points to expand readership, and the papers' broad circulation provided numerous licentious images of female principals to its readers. In 1946, an anecdote about Headmistress Zhang 張, the principal of a prestigious girls' middle school on Jing'an Temple Road in Shanghai, was published in a Shanghai-based journal. Forty years old and never married, Zhang became famous not for her success as a principal, but for the scandal of seducing a male sports teacher who was only thirty years old.<sup>70</sup> Critics ridiculed Zhang as being like the "old man" of traditional China who, even in his advanced years, continued to pursue beautiful women and take them as concubines (*laotouzi tao yitaitai* 老頭子討姨太太). Even prestigious newspapers such as *Shi bao* often published stories about the decadent behavior of headmistresses.<sup>71</sup> It is likely that these anecdotes were fabricated because personal information about the particular headmistresses—especially the schools they ran and their full names—was not provided. However, even though the details of these scandals differed, the female principals involved were all lumped into the category of "half-old Lady Xu" (*Xuniang banlao* 徐娘半老), a Chinese

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<sup>70</sup> Huaizhen 懷珍, "Nü xiaozhang fengliu shi" 女校長風流史, *Daguang bao* 大光報 (Shanghai) 6 (April 1946), p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> In 1924, *Shi bao* published a story about a headmistress in Guangzhou who was caught having an affair with an old man in a hotel. See "Nü xiaozhang zhi fengliu xianyi" 女校長之風流嫌疑, *Shi bao*, July 5, 1924, p. 4.

idiom used to describe an aging beauty who remains sexually charming and appealing to men.<sup>72</sup> The print publications depicted these female principals more as licentious *modeng* women, rather than as the professional women of authority that they were.

These salacious stories also reflect the public perception of female principals in the male-dominated Republican society, a society in which these *modeng* headmistresses embodied the lure and desirability of the cosmopolitan lifestyle, as well as physical pleasure for women. For male conservatives, female principals were a product of women’s liberation and a challenge to traditional male authority. Through gossiping about these headmistresses, elite Chinese men expressed their anxiety about the emerging professional women of authority and the concomitant disruption of Chinese gender roles.<sup>73</sup>

Contemporary print media often published stories of fallen *modeng* headmistresses to illustrate and reinforce the public’s suspicion of female principals’ sexual morality and professionalism. In these stories, lower-level female principals, such as Zhang Yuzhen 張玉珍 (?-?), were depicted as materialists who craved fancy and extravagant lives and were not dedicated at all to education. Zhang had a respectable job as the acting principal of an elementary girls’ school in Qinglu District, Zhejiang Province. However, her monthly income was not

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<sup>72</sup> “Nü xiaozhang zhi fengliu xianyi,” *Shi bao*, July 5, 1924, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Sarah Stevens, “Figuring Modernity,” *NWSA Journal* 15:3, p. 100.

enough to cover her food and clothing expenses and she was jealous of the luxurious life of Zhuang Suzhen 莊素貞, her fellow villager, who had lied to Zhang and other villagers, telling them that she worked as a waitress in Shanghai, when she was, in fact, a prostitute. Under Zhuang's influence, Zhang gave up her respectable position and ventured out to Shanghai. Unfortunately, once there, she was raped and forced into prostitution because of Zhuang's deceit.<sup>74</sup> In Republican Shanghai, "new women" falling into prostitution was a common plot in popular films because the lure of extravagance and luxury was too strong.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, Zhang's identity as a school principal made her case more sensational because female educators' excessive desire for a life of luxury was a reflection of their unprofessionalism and lack of dedication to education. Zhang's materialistic behaviors were seen as bad examples to young female students. As a result, her fall into prostitution reinforced male conservatives' concern that the "publicness" of female principals would blur the boundary between them and prostitutes.

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<sup>74</sup> Wen 雯, "Cong nǚ xiǎozhǎng bei jiǎn shuōqǐ" 從女校長被奸說起, *Qianqiu* 千秋 (Shanghai) 15 (January 1934), p. 2; Yao Sun 姚蓀, "Nǚ xiǎozhǎng bei pò mǎiyīng" 女校長被迫賣淫, *Linglong* 玲瓏 (Shanghai) 4:2 (January 1934), pp. 111-112.

<sup>75</sup> The most famous character is Wei Ming 韋明, who was played by the famous actress Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉 (1910-1935), in the 1935 film *New Women* 新女性. Guo-Juin Hong, "Framing Time: New Women and the Cinematic Representation of Colonial Modernity in 1930s Shanghai," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 15:3 (Winter 2007), p. 575.



The press coverage highlighted Zhang's material cravings to the extent that this aspect overshadowed the fact that educators in Zhejiang, including elementary teachers and school principals, earned too little to support themselves. According to Xia Xueyuan's 夏雪源 research, during the Republican Era, the average salary of an elementary school teacher in Zhejiang fell in the middle of the country's salary spectrum, an amount which was not enough to sustain their lives in this area of Jiangnan where the cost of living was high. Furthermore, rural-based elementary school teachers and principals such as Zhang earned much less than those working in Hangzhou and other cities.<sup>76</sup> As a result, it could have been her low-paying job, not her vanity and craving for extravagance, that made her vulnerable to Zhuang's enticements and forced her to leave her respectable position. However, Zhang's critics did not mention the economic difficulties she, like other female principals, faced, rather choosing to focus on her vanity and strong materialistic desires as the cause of her defilement. The frequent appearance of these fallen headmistresses in print media served to reinforce the licentious image of lower-level female principals and to lead the public to question these women's sexual morality, capabilities, and qualifications.

Wang Zheng's interview with Lu Lihua is invaluable to the

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<sup>76</sup> Xia Xueyuan 夏雪源, “Minguo shiqi Zhejiang sheng xiaoxue jiaoshi daiyu yanjiu” 民國時期浙江省小學教師待遇研究 (Master's Thesis, Hangzhou Normal University, 2016).

understanding of how heavily female principals suffered from such sexual gossip. When Lu was hospitalized for a broken arm, her husband, who was also a teacher at Liangjiang, never visited her. In fact, he had already married another woman before seeking a divorce from Lu, and he had promised Lu that he would not announce their divorce publicly in order to protect her reputation as a public figure.<sup>77</sup> As Lu said, “Tabloids loved to print stories about people’s marriages, and I was a school principal, so I did not want stories printed about me.”<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Wu broke his promise several weeks later and even distorted the facts in the newspaper story, accusing Lu of having an affair that led to the eventual breakup of their marriage. This malicious framing caused Lu to suffer from long-term psychological torment over the following decades, a pain was still evident when Wang interviewed her in her old age.<sup>79</sup> Lu, as a school principal, reflected on how her biological sex as a female attracted gossip: “There was all kinds of gossip about me—‘She is capable, and she knows a lot of people who will help her,’—which implies that I had a [sexual] relationship with them. This is all because I was a woman all alone.”<sup>80</sup> Lu’s case exemplifies a male-dominated society that did not entirely welcome professional women, a society which did not care that

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<sup>77</sup> Ni Haoran, “Xiaoyuan lian yu jiemei qing,” *Funü yu xingbieshi yanjiu* 5, pp. 106-108.

<sup>78</sup> Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, p. 163.

<sup>79</sup> Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, pp. 162-163.

<sup>80</sup> Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, p. 167.

any attention paid to a woman’s marital status or personal affairs could cause significant harm to her reputation and psychological health.

## Conclusion

This article explores the hidden gender tension between emerging professional women and the male-dominated society of Republican China. The purpose is not to defend Hu Lan or any other headmistress’s unethical or corrupt behavior, if—indeed—any such misconduct occurred; instead, it aims to reveal the enormous sexism faced by professional women in leadership positions. Throughout the Republican Era, female school principals were often presented as “unqualified” or “licentious” women in archival materials, print media, and oral interviews, and these two negative images converge in the corruption case of a single headmistress, Hu Lan. These widely circulated images demonstrate that the sexism targeted at these emerging professional women was relatively constant in the patriarchal Republican society. Male intellectuals, including students’ guardians and local elites, had strong doubts about the female principals’ qualifications, abilities, and sexual morality. In the rapidly changing Republican society, male intellectuals’ criticism of these “unqualified” or “licentious” female principals further reveals male anxiety over losing their long-recognized social superiority over women and over losing their privilege or

duty to establish and maintain Chinese social morality.

Indeed, the sexism encountered by working women in Republican China was not only directed against a small number of professional women in leadership positions. The existing scholarship shows that in Republican China, women from all walks of life—waitresses, actresses, female lawyers, female clerks, and so on—all encountered similar sexism and gender discrimination. Respectable female principals, like their underclass sisters, also found that they were unlikely to be awarded the same working rights and opportunities as their male counterparts in China's Republican Era. This was especially true when they did something wrong, accusations of their being “unqualified” and “licentious” would be used to confirm their incompetence in these leadership positions.

It is noteworthy that male perspectives dominated the “unqualified” and “licentious” image production and representation of these headmistresses.<sup>81</sup> We do not know exactly how these female principals, as an elite group of women, perceived and resisted this sexism, since their own voice is largely missing in these historical documents. The scholarship about waitresses and hairdressers shows that they united to protest discrimination and defend their jobs.<sup>82</sup> However, there is

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<sup>81</sup> Madeleine Yue Dong, “Who Is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl ?” in The Modern Girl around the World Research Group ed., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 195.

<sup>82</sup> Angelina Chin, “Labor Stratification and Gendered Subjectivities in the

no information indicating that “powerful” headmistresses presented a united resistance to sexism. Their silence is likely because these headmistresses spent enormous effort to gain authority, power, and reputation as school principals, and they had too much to lose when men undervalued their labor. As Hu Lan and Jia Guanren’s cases show, unlike male principals, it was difficult for female principals to have leadership positions in other schools after they lost their previous jobs because of litigation against them. Thus, trying to avoid becoming the subject of sexual gossip and other news in tabloids and deciding not to protest in public were the only possible ways for them to protect their reputations and their jobs. However, the oral interview with Lu Lihua confirmed the fact that these female principals were hurt by and suffered from this ubiquitous sexism during their careers.<sup>83</sup> Even when they were innocent, the qualifications and sexual morality of these women who were already in leadership positions were questioned just because of their biological sex.

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Service Industries of South China in the 1920s and 1930s: The Case of *Nü Zhaodai* (女招待),” *Jindai Zhongguo funüshi yanjiu* 近代中國婦女史研究 14 (December 2006), pp. 158-175; Shiling McQuaide, “The Battle over the Employment of Waitresses in Beijing, China, during the 1930s,” *Histoire sociale / Social History* 43:85 (May 2010), pp. 65-95.

<sup>83</sup> Professor Wang Zheng records that “[i]n my interviews, Lu did not use explicit language to describe those sexual charges against her. Over half a century later it was still too painful to mention them.” See Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, p. 183.

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# 民國時期「無能」與「風流」的女校長：擔任學校領導崗位的職業女性所遭受的性別歧視

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## 摘要

民國時期，受過良好教育的女性開始在各學齡段的學校擔任校長。這些女校長的出現象徵著中國女性開始離開家庭，擔任行政職務，為社會做出貢獻。這些擔任學校管理者的女性也象徵著教育界傳統性別權力關係的絕對顛覆，即她們有權力管理學校範圍內的男性教職員。然而，對於這些女校長的擔憂在男性知識份子中普遍存在，包括學生家長和地方精英。除了批評女校長，一些男性政治家甚至使用行政權力將女性限制在學校領導崗位之外。本文聚焦於 1937 年上海務本女子中學女校長胡蘭的貪汙案，

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探討即使在看似對女性開放的教育界，基層中小學女校長們所遭遇的極端性別歧視。本文認為，在男權主導下的民國社會，女校長們的教育資質和性道德很容易受到質疑：正如法律檔和其他歷史資料中揭示的那樣，“無能”與“風流”是女校長們所面對的最常見的兩項指控。這種性別矛盾也進一步揭示出在中國現代化的過程中，中國男性知識份子對傳統中國道德的控制與捍衛。

**關鍵詞：**女校長、男性焦慮、性道德、教育資質、職業女性