

Editor's Note: This handout is to be used with Juanjuan Peng, "Twentieth-Century Chinese Entrepreneurs before 1949: Literature Excerpts for the Classroom" from the winter 2019 issue of *Education About Asia* beginning on p.11.

Handout B: Excerpt from The Pen and I: The Autobiography of a Shanghai Businesswomen by Tang Diyin

Introduction: In the early twentieth century, middle- and lower-class women in China were gradually offered more job opportunities. Many became cotton mill workers, schoolteachers at all-girls schools, salesgirls in modern department stores, and secretaries. Tang E, or Tang Diyin (1916-1988), in the following story was one of them. At age of fourteen, right after graduating from elementary school, she responded to a newspaper job advertisement and was then recruited by a big Shanghai stationery store, Yixin, as its salesgirl. In two years, due to her exceptional performance, she was promoted twice and put in charge of the purchasing department.

Then something else happened that shook me deeply.

The boss, already in his forties, suddenly started to have ideas about me, a teenager. He and his wife were in agreement about this, and both tried to talk me into becoming his concubine.

The mistress came first. She went to my mother and praised me to the skies . . .

A few days later the boss suddenly invited me to go to the movies with him. I had read reviews of a new movie from Mingxing Studios which I very much wanted to see, so I agreed. It was called *The Women's store*. It was about a girl from a poor family who, after many trials and tribulations, finally got a job as a salesgirl in a department store. There she was subjected to daily insults from her boss, jibes and provocations from idle youths, and cut-throat competitions from her associates. Finally she couldn't stand it any longer. She resigned from her job and decided to do the unheard-of: to open her own shop. With a great deal of difficulty, she finally got enough financing to open a women's store and became her own boss. It was just a movie story, but it struck a strong responsive chord in my heart.

After the movie the boss walked me home, and on the way he started to say: "Tang E, I want to talk to you about . . ." I knew what was coming and cut him off: "please don't continue. The movie has given you my answer. I'm going to take her as my example."

In the next breath I naively blurted out: "I want to be my own boss too."

The boss chuckled. "You, a boss? A girl with her own business? Listen, that was only a story on the screen! Stop dreaming!"

I did not answer; I just turned and walked away . . .

Later, my mother tactfully told the mistress of my refusal. From then on, my days at the shop were a torture. I hardly dared lift my eyes to the boss. I lived in constant dread of other plans they might be making, and decided I had to give up the job. But where could I go . . .

At that time, my brother and some friends had decided to set up some trade between Shanghai and Hong Kong. At some risk I agreed to lend him 500 dollars for capital. He took native products and medicinal herbs to Hong Kong and brought back Parker pens, ink, perfume, cosmetics and nylon stockings. The goods were sold at a good profit at the numerous stalls in Chenghuangmiao (City God Temple) Bazaar. He made several successful trips.

I finally made up my mind. With my aptitude for business, why couldn't I make as good a shop owner as I had a salesperson? I hung a sign before my door which read: "Modern Goods Company". I now had my own business, and my brother assisted me every way he could. I printed company stationery, bills, receipts, and made an office stamp; my living room was the wholesale office.

I copied a list of all Yixin suppliers from the purchasing department, as well as a directory of all retail outlets from the wholesale department. I printed a price list of the goods I meant to deal in: pens, stationery, drafting and copying instruments and materials, sporting goods, and so on, putting down slightly lower prices than Yixin's for the fast-selling items. I sent the price list to all the outlets in the country, telling them they could place mail orders, as I had arranged with the post offices to collect payments for me.

The response was heartening because of my competitive prices. Actually, I carried no inventory, and was what was called a “briefcase company”. When I received orders, I had my brother buy the goods from the wholesalers. If the orders were for Chinese goods, I bought them direct from the manufacturers.

I did all the packing at night after coming home from work, and my brother sent the packages off at the post office. Some packages went as far as Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. The customer would pay the local post office upon delivery of the goods, and it forwarded the money to me. I had learned this from Yixin, and had no trouble doing it on my own.

It didn’t take long for my “secret” to be unveiled. Three or four months later, the boss asked me icily: “Tang E, what have you been doing at home?”

“My brother is out of work, and I’ve been helping him start a little business.”

He took out a price list from my Modern Goods Co.

“You call this a little business?”

I was silent. He gave me an ultimatum: “ You can’t have it both ways. Either you work at home, or in this store. You better fold that one up. I expect an answer in three days.”

I answered without hesitation: “I don’t need three days. I resign right now.”

He was startled by my firmness. After a moment, he said: “You can’t expect to get off that easy. This store spent a lot of time teaching you all you know. You can’t leave until you’ve trained a replacement.”

As my business was doing well, I duly handed in my resignation. Out of fairness, I did stay to train my replacement. After dragging it out another month or so, I left. I left everything for my replacement neatly and in order. Then I went and said good-by to the mistress. I hated her for what she had done, but she had been ill treated too, and she was sick in bed. She held my hand and cried. I told her to take good care of herself and went down the stairs. When I said good-by to the boss before I left the shop, he softened for a moment and said: “Go home and think it over. A movie is just a movie, life is life. If your way doesn’t work, you’re always welcome back here.”

I thanked him and left. I had no regrets, and I was not coming back.

Discussion Questions:

1. Tang was only seventeen when she opened the Modern Goods Company. What characteristics made her a successful entrepreneur? What strategies did she adopt to start a new business?
2. How did being a woman in early twentieth-century China shape Tang’s entrepreneurial career path? In the story, Tang was forced to start her own business due to a marriage proposal and possibly sexual harassment from her boss. Would the story be any different if Tang was a young man? What can you find through reliable print or internet sources about the status of female business employees or managers, in the contemporary Chinese workforce relative to men? How does the status of women in the workplace in contemporary China compare to women in other East Asian nations such as Japan or South Korea? Or to the workplace status for contemporary women in Western Europe or the US?