WOMEN'S BREASTS AND BEYOND
—— A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF THE APPEALS FOR BREAST-UNBINDING: 1910s-1920s

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In Chinese history, for nearly two thousand years, Confucian moral and ethical teachings had been upheld as a guideline for gender hierarchy, honored as a norm for evaluating women's behavior, and employed as an instrument for gender separation. As a result, women, in general, became sufferers and victims of the patriarchal Confucian society.[1] To perpetuate male domination and female submission, some practices of bodily regulation were promoted and imposed on women apart from spiritual injunctions such as the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues."[2] Among those prescribed practices were foot-binding and breast-binding. Women's binding practices did not turn until the last dynasty—the Qing dynasty— was overthrown and Republican China established in 1912. During the early years of the Republican era, accompanying a surge of the anti-foot-binding movement, the anti-breast-binding fervor was under way, both of which influenced Chinese women's lives and changed their lifestyles. However, in contrast to the rich and diversified scholarly discussions of the former, the latter received less attention perhaps owing to its apparent inferiority in scale and impact. Moreover, when

[1] It has to be pointed out that this general pattern of male domination and female submission cannot deny the existence of women demonstrating subjectivity and agency, on which since 1990 scholars like Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann and Charlotte Furth have produced some works to challenge the paradigm in scholarship of victimizing dynastic Chinese women. Their challenging approach will be touched upon in the paper.

[2] The 'Three Obediences' dictated a woman's obedience to her father before marriage, her husband when married, and her sons in widowhood, while the 'Four Virtues' demanded a woman's morality, proper speech, proper comportment, and diligence.

addressing the anti-breast-binding topic, scholars tend to fall into a stereotype of treating men as leaders and women as followers, thus dismissing women's active role in the campaign. By exposing and comparing women's call for unbound breasts with men's, the paper intends to redress the insufficiency in scholarship and methodology; by examining the contested ideas around women's breast-binding as well as its involved implications, the paper attempts to uncover its multiple nature which denied a simplistic oppressed/oppressor interpretive model and points out that Chinese women's physical liberation depended more on its relation to national interests than on the need of female health care for its legitimacy and efficacy.

Breast-binding as a Tradition

The upsurge of breast-binding can be traced to the emergence of Neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty (960-1276). Based on Confucianism, but merging elements from Taoism and Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism was fully developed and espoused officially as a state ideology in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. Central to the orthodoxy were two tenets: to preserve the ultimate principle (i.e. the heavenly order) and to destroy human desire. The Neo-Confucians had seen human desire as opposite to the Heavenly order and claimed that human desire would destroy the natural order within ordinary people and further disrupt the cosmological principle. In this vein, all forms of human desire, including sexual desire, were discouraged. As breasts were regarded in Chinese traditional culture as a body part related and leading to sex because of its capability for sexual arousal, their plumpness

was deemed as an alluring temptation for men. Against this background, breast-binding was promoted so that men could maintain a calm, not sexually aroused mood.

Breast-binding reduced not only men's sexual desire but also that of women themselves which was particularly true on the part of faithful maidens or chaste widows. After swearing chastity upon the death of her fiancé or husband, a woman usually tightened her chest with bondage as a determination of suppressing sensual passion to realize the fidelity to her partner in engagement or marriage. Otherwise, she would bring reproach upon herself. Gu Hua, in his novel *Virgin Widows*, depicts how his heroine, Qingyu, a young lady living in the late Qing, performed this practice after her husband died: "The first thing she (Qingyu) did after taking her vow of chastity was bind her breasts….Although she used soft silk to bind her breasts, the pressure was so server it made her cry out. But if she did not bind them, then what? Who was there to love and shower her with affection?" (Gu 1996, 26). Qingyu knew well that viewed as improper, "arching and pointy breasts were unsightly to others and became the subject of gossip." Her breasts, if undone, would be reprehended as an immoral intention to seek love from other men, given the Neo-Confucian instruction that "as there is only one sun in the sky, so a woman serves only one man" (Gu 1996, 29). By rendering breasts less tempting to men, breast-binding at the same time impelled the practitioner to drop the desire to remarry, which means that she had to restrain her sexuality because she lost a legitimate channel to satisfy it. Not exclusively for maidens and widows, the Confucian womanhood also required a woman to be self-restrained, innocent, and without desire (Wu 2008, 75). Breast-binding undoubtedly helped shape women toward that expectation.

While regulating moral behavior, Neo-Confucianism influenced the ideal of feminine beauty in late imperial China, which facilitated the popularization of breast-binding: “By the time of the Song, the sickly, weak, languid, and fragile had become more and more ideal feminine beauty in contrast to the taste for masculine and healthy women in the age of mythology, the idea of simplicity and serenity during the Spring and Autumn Period, and the full-figured, graceful beauty of the Tang dynasty” (Wang 2000, 49). [3] The formation of this aesthetic standard cannot be separated from the Neo-Confucian linkage of women to *yin* by describing *yin* as weak, small, and passive, and men to *yang* by depicting *yang* as powerful, big, and active. Though the standard reflected male appreciation of the feminine beauty, women had to conform to it in order to survive in the male-dominated society. To cater to men’s taste, they bound their feet and breasts (Ai 2010, 139-140). Hence, it can be said that breast-binding like foot-binding was a way to construct the ideal femininity in a delicate, small, and compliant vein, which is confirmed by the well-known writer Eileen Zhang, who mentions in her “A Chronicle of Changing Clothes” that “an ideal beauty in late imperial China was petite and slender with flat chest” (Zhang 2003, 429).

On the other hand, the size of breasts functioned as a marker of social status. A woman, if she had white and small breasts, was valued as one from upper-class breeding; otherwise, she would be denigrated as coming from humble origins. The reason lies in the rooted belief that big hands, big feet, and big breasts were the typical features of laboring women, which were an accumulative result of their years of long hard work and, in turn, qualified them for any physical undertaking for family survival.

[3] For example, the well-rounded figure of Tang women is well reproduced by the movie *Curse of the Golden Flower* in which the female characters are impressive with their unbound plump breasts.

Although the physical largeness of working women revealed their health and strength, "as Chinese culture always looked down on manual labor, the robust body was the acceptable symbol of the unenvied and undesirable female coolie" (Fan 1997, 130). To avoid being disdained as coarse and rough, women tried to make their bosoms look smaller. For elite women, they did so in order to gain and maintain their class distinction; for commoners, the practice can be interpreted as an attempt to transcend the class boundary with the aim of upward social mobility just as they bound their feet.

Besides helping across class lines, breast-binding aided women in upsetting dictated gender roles and boundaries when they had to perform cross-dressing for some purposes: to escape arranged marriage, to attend school or handle business as men did and to take revenge for their family members, to name a few. Female cross-dressing had a long history in China, in which Hua Mulan's story was well-known.[4] Although discouraged or even condemned for behavioral impropriety, cross-dressing did not disappear with the rise of Neo-Confucian doctrine after the Tang dynasty. Well justified, like the case of Mulan who did so for the fulfillment of filial piety, it was tolerated. The tolerated cross-dressing reinforced Dorothy Ko's argument (1994) that the Confucian gender system was resilient; on the other hand, it destabilized the function and meaning Neo-Confucianism created for breast-binding, illustrating that breast-binding, while binding, enabled a woman to expand her role and participate in the outer sphere.

The irony disclosed a fact that women did not undergo a linear binding experience and their lives cannot be simply interpreted as emblematic of the ruthless

[4] Hua Mulan lived in the Northern Wei (386-534), a dynasty before the Tang, who got her fame for disguising herself as a man and joined an all-male army for military service instead of her aged father. Her behavior was acclaimed as filial piety.

oppression of a Confucian patriarchal order that crippled them. Women were still able to exert their subjectivity and construct identities for themselves in the male-centered world, which has already been unearthed by some scholars. For example, by focusing on the elite/learned women in the Jiangnan region in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, both Dorothy Ko (1994) and Susan Mann (1997, 2007) exposed the empowerment and agency these women gained and displayed from literary writing and their roles as good wife and wise mother; by examining the dynamics of gender in the field of medicine from the Song dynasty through to the Ming dynasty, Charlotte Furth (1999) revealed how healing activities that took placed primarily in the home enabled women to challenge a male doctor's authority, particularly in cases of gynecological and obstetrical disorders. These scholarly works make it clear that gender relationship in dynastic China was not fixed and unified along the line of gender oppression regardless of time and space; instead, it assumed multiple patterns of dynamic interaction. For cross-dressing, it destabilized breast-binding, which upset Confucian gender roles. At the end of the Qing dynasty, cross-dressing was favored prominently by some female revolutionaries and feminists who, however, invested breast-binding with more radical meanings, which will be discussed later.

Social Contexts for the Anti-Breast-binding Appeals

In the late Qing dynasty, there arose a crisis of confidence in the traditional social, political, and economic institutions and the consequent search for the sources of wealth and power seen to characterize the Western powers (Croll 1978, 45). Agonized by the Qing regime's weakness and incompetence in resisting foreign invasions and

encroachments, a small group of intellectual reformists led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao launched a campaign in 1898 to modernize China using advanced Western concepts and technology, which is known as the Hundred Days' Reform. In the reform, they explored women's issues as well and expounded the importance of women's liberation and gender equality.

In his *Da Tongshu* (The Book of Great Unity), Kang thought it unfair to put women in the position of slavery and let them suffer the pains of being restrained, controlled, and imprisoned. He argued that women's lives were given by Heaven, and they should be equal with men (Kang, 1956, 153-172). Liang expressed a similar idea, arguing that women's pains and subordination were rooted in the fact that "they cannot support themselves, but are supported by men" as well as women's enforced illiteracy (Liang, 2002, 88-97). These reformists set the abolition of foot-binding and establishment of schools for girls as their starting point to make women equal with men. Through their efforts, a handful of women began to unbind their feet and the first school for girls was built. Though the reform eventually ended in failure, its feminist statement reverberated and was enacted further in the Republican era.

After the Republican government took office, China did not, however, embark on an expected track toward a strong and democratic nation-state. Internationally, the country continued to be vulnerable to aggressive imperialist expansion; domestically, while persistently under the reign of traditional customs and mores, it fell into a mire of regional fragmentation.[5] Disillusioned with the status quo, some progressive intellectuals (most of them male) turned to a cultural solution to strengthen and revitalize

[5] The Republican government was just nominal. The real military power was in the hands of warlords who occupied different areas and set up their own spheres of influence by force of arms. They brought China into chaos and the chaotic situation lasted until the Nationalist Party unified most parts in China in 1927.

the nation. Exposed to Western democracy and science through their education abroad or at home in new-style schools following Western or Japanese models, they believed Chinese traditional culture in the final analysis was responsible for China's problems. In 1915, the intellectuals launched the New Culture Movement (roughly from 1915-1925) in which Confucianism was intensely attacked, coupled with their call for the creation of a new Chinese culture based on Western democracy and science. In their eyes, Confucianism stood for "the cruelty, irrationality, backwardness, and stupidity of the Chinese cultural tradition" (Wang, 1999, 12). Women were the major sufferers within the inhuman Confucian system in view of foot-binding, arranged marriage, female chastity, forced illiteracy, gender separation and so on. Therefore, women's emancipation was central to the establishment of the new culture for a modern nation state, which lends evidence to Tani Barlow's argument about women as an event of modernity that women were a primary vehicle of modernization (Barlow, 2004). In this way, the New Culturalists associated women with the fate of the nation. In other words, liberating the nation from weakness entailed liberating women from Confucian oppression.

What needs to be noted here is that in tandem with these social, political, and ideological changes feminism emerged as a new political and social force in society.[6] For one thing, feminists identified themselves with reformists on modernizing the nation by eliminating Confucian patriarchy and gender hierarchy and conferring freedom and education on women; for another, they distinguished themselves especially in their futile appeal for voting rights. They, together with their allies in the woman question,

[6] Feminist historians like Tani Barlow (2004), Wang Zheng (1999), Elizabeth Croll (1978) and Yuxin Ma (2010) address the emergence and development of feminism as an influential force in promoting women's rights and building a modern nation-state in Republic China.

contributed to the flourishing of women's liberation movement featuring anti-foot-binding and female education in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Continued and Reinforced Practice of Breast-binding in Early Republican China

In response to the call for women's emancipation movement, many urban educated women unbound their feet, went to school, and put on Western-inspired dress and hairstyle as a demonstration of their new identity as the Modern (or New) Woman breaking with the past. However, what was cacophonous with the new trend was their continued performance of constraining their breasts. What made them different from traditional women in breast-binding was their preference of "a little vest" (see Figure 1) over traditional bondage in a form of cloth/ brocade/satin strip or a sort of constraining apron (*doudu*) for upper body part, in spite of their shared function. Such a contradiction in women's fashion was reported in Li Yuyi's edited works *Essays on Male and Female Costumes in Big Cities in Late Qing and Early Republican Period* (*Qing mo min chu zhongguo ge da du hui nan nü zhuang shi lun ji*) which was published in the 1920s: "Recently, women have unbound their feet but bound their breasts, which is a bad habit. Using a type of vest, young women flatten their chests so as to prevent them from obtruding. They display an unseemly appearance" (Li, 1972, 12).

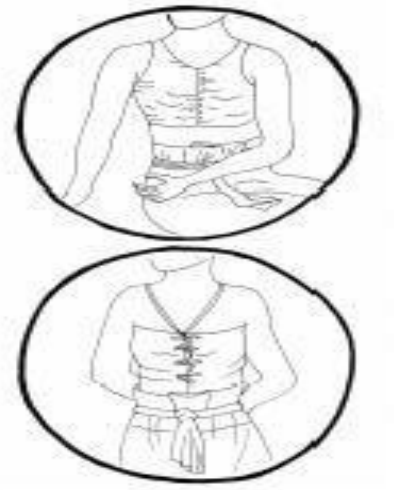

Figure 1[7]

These young educated women were regarded as trend-setters in fashion at that time, owing to their higher chances of obtaining new knowledge and learning about modern products. Their keenness for breast-binding, however, cemented its Confucian basis. There was no clear explanation for their motive to rely on the small vest to continue the old practice, just as a male contemporary commented: “nowadays the New Woman cry for gender equality and women’s liberation. They get rid of the bad custom of footbinding, but they make breast-binding increasingly a fashion. It is confusing that such an unsanitary and harmful practice can draw so many blind practitioners. What is more lamenting is that female students who are educated and rich in common sense also follow suit” (Wang 1928, 35).

Wu Hao, in his “Breast-Binding and Transvestism: The Other Side of Woman Fashion in Shanghai (1911-1930),” points out that the sustained passion for breast-binding was related to transvestism (*nüban nanzhuang*). At the turn of the twentieth century, some women, revolutionaries and feminists in particular like Qiu Jin (see Figure

[7] The two pictures are accessed on line at http://www.zxeee.com/Html/WebSite/html/10304.html.

2), preferred to dress up like men as a demonstration of defying prescribed gender norms and transcending the entrenched gender boundaries for their public pursuits and self-fulfillment. Their breasts, in this case, remained bound. As a revolutionary and feminist martyr for the cause of overthrowing the corrupt Manchu monarchy and establishing a new society, Qiu Jin had the greatest aspiration of transcending the identity of “women” by shocking her male compatriots and leaving a mark in national history, which was manifest in her highly self-conscious acts of cross-dressing (Judge 2008, 217). In 1904, she had herself photographed in Beijing in a Western man’s suit and in the photo (below) it is evident that her flat breasts are a boost to her aspired transcendence. Besides the Western suit, Qiu Jin liked to cross-dress herself in Japanese or Qing costume. Her cross-dressing naturally harkened back to the tradition represented by Mulan. But for her, cross-dressing also appeared to carry a more radically questioning of the very meaning of femininity and womanhood and “is often read as part of the iconoclastic package of being a revolutionary, though it is sometimes as being no more than idiosyncrasy” (Hu 2000, 141). Qiu Jin’s dramatic transformation was evoked by her nationalist and feminist consciousness fostered particularly during her study in Japan.

Figure 2[8]

As for the reason of the persistence of transvestism after Republic China was founded, Wu believes that "the contradictory gestures of these women reflected the political and cultural confusion of the times—the Nationalists, the Communists, the modernists, and the traditionalists all deployed cultural strategies for political reasons" (Wu 1995, 14).[9] However, Wu fails to note that it is these cross-dressing women who made their bound breasts no longer a sign of sexual oppression but a weapon empowering them to disrupt the spatial division of labor between the sexes, enter the public sphere, participate in male-monopolized activities, and carry out their radical pursuits.

Interestingly, Chinese women were not alone in tightly binding their chests in the early Republican period. In the United States, in 1913 Mary Phelps Jacob developed the first form of brassiere which was then adopted by American women as underwear.

[8] The picture is from Joan Judge's *The Precious Raft of History*, 218.

[9] As anarchism also contributed to the political confusion in early twentieth-century China, it played a part in the persistence of transvestism. Qiu Jin was attracted by anarchism.

Until the mid-1920s, it was designed as boneless to flatten the bust and push the bust downward. Put another way, it served precisely the same function as the little vest in China (Finnane 2008, 163). The appearance of flappers in the early 1920s undoubtedly lent additional support to women's adoption of this kind of tightening brassiere. With disdain for the Victorian image of womanhood, flappers created their own fashion which emphasized straight lines instead of curves. To that end, they bobbed their hair, fastened their chests, and dropped corsets and layers of clothing. Though flapper fashion began to decline toward the end of the 1920s and Ida Cohen Rosenthal invented the modern uplift bra, generally speaking, the flat-chested look was a fad among American women during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

It remains unknown whether American women's preference for flat bosoms influenced the prevalence of the "little vest" in China, but there existed the possibility of such an encounter between the Confucian heritage and Western fever for flattening, which might enforce the practice of breast-binding in Republican China. This hypothesis is based on two facts: firstly, in the early twentieth century, some women departed for the United States to receive education: "Most of them went with their fathers and brothers. Probably out of the consideration that 'when in Rome do as the Romans do,' they kept their clothing same with American students" (Liu 2005, 48). Thereupon they were more likely to learn about the flattening feature of American lingerie and brought the information back home. Second, Chinese female students were viewed as the native incarnation of the Western style. They pursued Western fashion: they bobbed their hair, wore high-heeled leather shoes and stockings, and donned Western-modeled clothing, which constituted the core of their New Woman image in appearance. Perhaps

influenced by the fashionable American flappers, the Chinese New Woman preserved the binding tradition due to its similarity to the prevailing practice abroad and made it part of her modern icon. More importantly, the favor for flattened breasts among the young women in the two countries disclosed a truth that they reinvented the usage of breast-binding as a means to blur conventional gender boundaries and embrace the public domain. In this light, breast-binding cannot be simply dismissed as a traditional oppressive device.

Women's Appeal for Breast-Unbinding

Regarding the anti-breast-binding in the early Republic of China, it is a scholarly tendency to treat male progressive intellectuals as its initiators. But from the sources available so far, the first article that lashed out at breast-binding and called on women to get rid of it was written by a female whose name is Lin Shuhua, an instructor at a girls' school. In her article published in the Ladies' Journal in 1915, Lin listed and examined four pernicious female habits which should be abandoned: footbinding, breast-binding, cosmetic application, and jewelry (earring) wearing.[10] According to her, women relied on these practices to please men at the cost of their own health (*jiankang*) because these practices, in essence, maimed women's bodies, and prevented them from independence (Lin 1915, 4). For breast-binding, Lin held that "fully developed breasts are the basis of health. Breast-binding damages the lungs and hinders natural breathing, which weakens women's bodies and triggers frequent outbreaks of diseases

[10] The Ladies' Journal started its monthly publication in 1915. It was the longest-running women's journal in Republican China. The editors consisted mainly of male intellectuals. Its keynote was progressive ideas on women's issues like gender equality, women's self-improvement, and women's participation in politics, except that sometimes forced by meager circulation or political thereat, it retreated to the introduction of less sensitive topics such as female students' campus lives and housewives' domestic arts and experiences.

and ailments. As a result, women's longevity cannot be ensured" (Lin 1915, 4). She exhorted women to value their health by quitting these bad habits because health was fundamental, from which thrived a sound mind and then a noble career. As breasts exerted a vital role in women's physical well-being, which, in turn, determined other forms of well-being, unbinding breasts was of utmost importance in improving women's lives, freeing their minds, and widening their choices.

In 1923, another woman Liang Zhuxin responded to Lin's call for breast-unbinding by contributing an essay entitled "My View on Female Hygiene (*weisheng*)" to the same journal *The Ladies' Journal*. Liang lamented that the four ill habits criticized by Lin were still popular among women, citing that it was distressing so see her female compatriots adhere to their foolish ways without awakening. She attributed this blind persistence to the fear that their rebellious behavior would be punished. As evidence, she reported that even those who wrote to dissuade women from binding their breasts and applying cosmetics did so themselves in their daily lives. The reason lay in that they were afraid of being derided for being incompatible with society. Liang felt deep regret for women's lack of independent thought and freedom owing to the stifling power of long-standing customs (Liang 1923, 33).

Furthermore, influenced by the diffusion of hygienic knowledge under the New Culturalists' rubric of science, Liang understandably saw chest-binding as an obstacle to women's hygiene. To help women be hygienic, she claimed that evil practices must be terminated. To achieve that goal, she recommended two solutions: one was that schools should take the responsibility for informing female students of the necessity of keeping good hygiene so that they could muster up bravery to stop breast-binding,

whereupon they could set a good example for their gender. The other is that "books and newspapers should be employed as a tool to spread the importance of women's hygiene so as to wake up those who are lost in the fond illusion of bad habits and prompt society to understand protruding breasts are not unpleasant to the eye" (Liang 1923, 34).

The two women's outcry against breast-binding, however, did not evoke widespread repercussions. Few women joined them until 1927. From 1927 to 1930, there occurred a hot debate on breast-binding in which male intellectuals played a dominant role. The female voice, though not so loud, still could be heard. Besides reaffirming their predecessors' viewpoint that breast-binding impaired health and violated hygiene, the women debaters stressed the necessity of adopting Western modern fashion in remedying deformation and restoring natural beauty. The reason was grounded on the notion that the Western brassieres were designed to support, not to press down, the breasts, thus revealing the attractive feminine curves. What is more, the design did not block breathing; it attached great importance to hygiene (Wang 1927). Both hygienic and highlighting the feminine natural curves, the Western brassieres were regarded as desirable for Chinese women.

The brassieres in question referred to an uplift style with two cups, a fashion which was replacing the old flattening style and gaining popularity in the Western world.[11] The suggested adoption of the Western undergarment corroborated Antonia Finanne's contention that the early republican fashion signalled some degree of rupture with the past as well as an orientation to a future in which China was definitely part of

[11] From August 30th, 1927, readers of *The Pei-yang Pictorial News* were exposed to a series of sketches and photos introducing different versions of Western uplift brassieres, their structures, and their supporting functions.

the modern world community (Finanne, 2008); more importantly, it revealed that Chinese women had become aware of how to employ modern hygienic products and technique to build their bodies and improve their health rather than blindly imitating fashions without giving any serious consideration to their possible impacts, both positive and negative. In addition, it showed the identification of a natural curved body line with feminine beauty, a revision of the Confucian feminine ascetics, which was equally promoted in the male intellectuals' appeal.

Men's Appeal for Breast-Unbinding

With reference to the male advocates for breast-unbinding, Zhang Jingsheng was one who can never be left out or ignored. After receiving a doctoral degree in philosophy in 1919 in France, he was recruited by the Beijing University as a professor of philosophy. Owing to his publication of *Sex Histories* (Xingshi), Zhang won his fame as the first sexologist in China. It was he who made women's breasts a site with multiple implications. Zhang's ideas against bound breasts were wide-ranging, covering and even going beyond his male peers' thoughts on the breast-binding subject. In this sense, he can be regarded as a representative of male discourses.

In June, 1927, the monthly journal *New Culture* carried his essay "To Restore Big Breasts," in which Zhang first traced the Confucian origin of breast-binding and then stated its detrimental manifestations. Like other intellectual reformers (male and female), he recognized the dangers breast-binding posed to health. On top of that, Zhang contended that breast-binding destroyed women's natural beauty by forcing their body shape into a straight form rather than leaving it naturally curved. He believed big

breasts differentiated female from male and they embodied the peculiar feminine aesthetics (Zhang 1998, 283). In this way, Zhang redefined the old concept of feminine physical beauty. His redefinition found both male and female supporters.

Zhang not only constructed a new notion of feminine aesthetics but also challenged the conventional irrational suppression of human sexuality. He maintained that sexual intensity was proportional to the size of women's breasts. Binding made breasts smaller, which directly reduced women's sexuality and indirectly men's. As sexual pleasure was a major component of life's pleasure, without it, life was hardly enjoyable. By imbuing sexuality with a positive meaning, he condemned bound breasts as the original murderer of a happy life.[12]

Actually, Zhang did not stand alone in discussing breast-binding relative to sex and sexuality. In the beginning of the 1920s, there emerged a male voice which linked the binding problem to the lack of essential sex knowledge. According to him, though the curricula offered at new-style schools included such science courses as zoology, botany, and physiological hygiene, no course was sex-oriented, which led to female students' ignorance of sex knowledge. As a result, they were neither able to understand that sexual differentiation was integral to the biological evolution, nor did they comprehend that the natural shape of their breasts was a reflection of that differentiation. He insisted that if female students learned that their breasts were an evolutionary outcome which defied any human profanation and intervention, they would have their own initiative to extricate themselves from breast-binding (Jian 1923, 20).

[12] Zhang's combination of sexuality and life happiness was far from new; it was a reverberation of Taoist belief that sexual joy was integral to desirable marital relations.

What merited special notice was that among Zhang's various articulations on breast-binding, his nationalist tone was the most appealing in the male intellectual circle, drawing many followers. Zhang argued that women's duty was to procreate superior offspring; however, women with bound breasts could not bring up strong children, considering the fact that breast-binding would stymie the proper development of the breasts and inhibit mammary secretions so that babies were not able to absorb sufficient milk vital to their healthy growth. In consequence, the Chinese race was greatly affected (Zhang 1926, 52-68). In Zhang's eyes, children's well-being determined the prospect and welfare of a race. And the condition of the race determined the condition of the nation. In doing so, he infused women's breasts with nationalism.

Echoing Zhang's argument, another intellectual, Liu Yulun, stated that "as an outcome of chest-binding, mothers' feeble physique and scarce supply of breast milk made proper feeding impossible, which hampered the growth of China's new lives—the future citizens, thus putting the whole nation in danger" (Liu 1967, 208). Hu Shi, one of the key sponsors of the New Culture, expressed a similar view that women's natural breasts were crucial to the Chinese race (Hu, 1927). Obviously, these male intellectuals built an intricate connection among breast-binding, eugenics, racial survival and national strength as they did in their castigation of foot-binding. And it was this building that amplified the voices for breast-unbinding and furthered the entangled relationship between nationalism and women's emancipation in republican China.

While female and male intellectuals were opposed to breast-binding, their concentrations differed from each other: the former addressed breast-binding mainly from the perspective of health and hygiene—from women's self-interest. To them,

women's bodily condition and well-being mattered most. In contrast, the latter talked about it mostly out of national interests. Though they admitted and denounced the physical injury breast-binding brought to women, what they were truly concerned about was the national and racial welfare which could be realized through women's role as qualified, nurturing mothers. Therefore, to protect women's breasts from bondage was not women's own business, but the whole nation's affair because it involved the fate of the nation and the race. Male elites' association of breast-binding with national crisis was fairly influential, pushing the government to take measures, which was evidenced by its edicts against breast-binding. The reasons provided in the edicts well reflected the male intellectuals' argument.

Official Response to Breast-binding

The heated discussion of breast-binding in the intellectual circle caught official attention. The Guangdong provincial government, the so-called "Origin of Revolution" and "Model Province of Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People," took a lead in response. In 1927, the Guangdong government passed a proposal by Zhu Jiahua, acting director of Civil Affairs department, and issued a decree to prohibit breast-binding: "from the date the decree was promulgated, within three months, women in the province must unfasten their breasts," and violators would be fined (*Republican Daily*, 1927). The decree further announced that as a bad habit, breast-binding should not be allowed under any circumstances: "The ban is not specifically for the benefit of women. Its actual motive is to fulfill the national spirits advanced by Premier Sun Yat-sen in order to strengthen our race and nation" (*Republican Daily*, 1927). Clearly, women's

bodily condition was not the government's main emphasis; and what it really cared about was whether the nation could profit from unfastening women's chests.

Following the step of the Guangdong province, the central government in 1929 gave an order demanding provincial and municipal administrations to take up measures to forbid breast-binding. According to the order, if the anti-breast-binding campaign were carried out nationwide, in return for it, women's physical weakness, a baleful outcome of practicing breast-binding, would be remedied and improved, which would ensure the delivery of healthy babies—the new lives of the race and the hope of the nation (*Shanghai News*, 1929). In the same vein, the central government, as Guangdong did, gave top priority to the relevance of unbinding to the nation rather than to the sound development of women's breasts. If the benefit of unbinding were just limited to women's health and nothing to do with the race and the nation, there would be a probability that the government would not be so active and so serious in freeing women's breasts. It is out of national and racial concerns that the government officially legitimatized the natural breast campaign.

The Practical Effect of the Anti-Breast-Binding Campaign on Women

To investigate the practical effects of intellectual discourses and governmental edicts on women in unbinding their breasts, visual print media provides a useful channel and insight into it: "Over the late 19th and early 20th century, China (or major parts) evolved from being a closed (or at best semi-closed) to an open economy" (Brandt 2000, 30). As a result, foreign factories and companies rushed in. While taking advantage of local cheap labor and relying on tax privilege extorted from the Chinese

government for huge profits, they, nonetheless, brought in new information and technology, noticeably in such areas as print, publishing, and advertising. China's print culture, thus, thrived rapidly. Numerous publications and printed advertisements sprang up and they provided a window into the social, political, economic, and cultural aspects of current society. Compared to the abstractness of textual presentation, pictorial materials could offer a direct and vivid reproduction of the reality. One of the prominent features of these commercial prints was their employment of female images. Despite their use for different purposes, the images constituted a valuable source for looking into women's lives at that time.

Figure 3

Figure 4

The two pictures above are both magazine covers: one is from *The Saturday* (*Li Bai Liu*) and the other from *The Young Companion* (*Liang You*).[138] In Figure 3, the woman presented is an image of the Modern Woman in the early 1920s, who usually distinguishes herself from traditional women by her bobbed hair, blouse with a shorter skirt, and high-heeled shoes. She spends her leisure time by walking a dog on a leash. Besides modern decorations, what characterize her body are her flat bosoms which identify her with an ordinary woman and in the meantime reveal the fact that breast-binding is still popular even though there is an appeal for breast-unbinding at this time. By comparison, with the anti-breast-binding campaign spreading widely, women began to keep their breasts unbound and to demonstrate their natural beauty, which can be seen in Figure 4. The woman in the picture is a famous swimmer called Yang Xiuqiong and her image of high-rising breasts is not uncommon in the 1930s. She stands for a new version of the Modern Woman in that apart from her more modern clothing, she leaves her breasts unbound, an action that responds to and substantiates the national call.

Conclusion

It can be seen that both male and female intellectuals during the early Republican period took an active part in calling for the termination of breast-binding. Unlike the anti-foot-binding activism which was initiated by men, women first called public attention to the harmful nature of breast-binding and appealed for its end, which

[13] Figure 3 is from *The Saturday* no. 120, 1921 and Figure 4 from *The Young Companion* no. 77, 1933. The two magazines were popular, enjoying a wide readership. Though employing different presenting techniques (the former is a paint gouache outlined with lines; the latter is a photo) to depict women, they reflected the trend of the times.

indicates women's awakened self-consciousness of their suffering situation in the setting of a surging emancipation movement inaugurated by the anti-foot-binding activism. This self-consciousness signals the transition of women's role from the object of emancipation to its agent and from a passive respondent to men's call to an active initiator of the public alert to the injurious effect of breast-binding.

While sharing much in common, breast-binding differed from foot-binding: compared to the latter which was designed to physically disable women from walking outside the home for the purpose of sexual seclusion and segregation, breast-binding, though equally to achieve its binding function for promoting Confucian womanhood, tended to impose more mental shackles on women for the expected domesticity and feminine virtues, given that it did not restrict the freedom of movement as foot-binding did. Moreover, as breast-binding reduced the feminine feature, it conduced to women's surpassing the gender dichotomy into their forbidden arena. So while constraining women's bodies, breast-binding empowered them to challenge the myth of gender distinctions, which troubled its original Confucian intention, thereupon repelling a reductionist analysis of breast-binding as oppressive. The troubled meaning of bound breasts was further complicated by the contested ideas articulated in the anti-breast-binding drive.

Even with an empowering potential, breast-binding as a Confucian vestige was castigated in the 1910s and 1920s. In attacking breast-binding, while converging on the harmful effects it brought to women as well as its misshaping feminine natural body line, female and male intellectuals diverged in their respectively perceived ultimate goal of breast-unbinding in spite of the fact that in the male discourse, the topic in question was

widely implicated. For female intellectuals, they made their appeal out of their care about women's bodily health and well-being; for male intellectuals, though they criticized the injuries caused by breast-binding, what they valued most was the contribution of women's natural breasts to the race and the nation. Just as they interpreted foot-binding as crippling the nation, they saw breast-binding as weakening the nation. Whether it was foot-binding or breast-binding, their logic was that as long as women were liberated physically, the Chinese nation would be strong. Apparently, they imagined the female body as the literal ground of the nation. Furthermore, in their appeal, male intellectuals emphasized women's maternal roles as an imperative to the anti-breast-binding campaign. Their emphasis won official endorsement and approval, which led to an increasing number of women unbinding their breasts in the 1930s. The case of anti-breast-binding confirmed a reality in China that women's physical liberation needed to be subordinate to the national interests for its legitimacy and efficacy.

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