

# CHINA'S FEMINIST MOVEMENT: He-Yin Zhen's Embodiment of Genuine Feminism

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*This paper seeks to illustrate the problems associated with contemporary scholarship's generalizing approach to the inception of the Chinese feminist movement. The practice not only underscores genuine feminist advocacy of the time but also inappropriately validates intellectuals whose work contradicted the movements' foundational ideals. In refuting this historical approach, the paper utilizes a comparative analysis between He-Yin Zhen, Liang Qichao, and Jin Tianhe on education, traditions, and gender equality to demonstrate their contrasting intentions in advocating for the feminist movement. The results indicate that unlike Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe, whose advocacy was motivated by a nationalist agenda, He-Yin Zhen's espouse for the Chinese feminist movement was rooted in the genuine desire to improve women's lives.*

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## Introduction

The dissection of the Chinese feminist movement is a continuous process, with new scholarship seeking to illustrate the complex history the movement faced since its formal inception at the start of the 20th century. However, in this subsisting analysis, one dimension that seemingly fails to attract the attention of historians is the recognition of individuals who genuinely embodied feminist ideals during a time dominated by ultra-nationalist thought. While the works of intellectuals such as Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe present themselves as feminists, their advocacy for women was exclusively driven by the prevailing nationalistic rhetoric of the time. As Qichao and Tianhe saw it, the movement only mattered to provide an opportunity to project their nationalistic agenda to strengthen China's global prominence. There is no denying the importance of Chinese nationalism in the inception and advancements of its feminist movement. Yet, contemporary scholarship over-represents the influence of nationalism in the feminist movement by portraying any contributing intellectual as inherently feminist despite their underlying motives.

The practice of this historical perspective on the Chinese feminist movement is commonplace; such is the case with *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*. The work's editors—Dorothy Ko and Rebecca Karl—promote the contemporary approach in their reference to Jin Tianhe's work, *The Women's Bell*, as “what historians have commonly called a feminist manifesto.”<sup>1</sup> Ko and Karl reaffirm this perspective further

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<sup>1</sup>Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 1.

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with their assertion that *The Women's Bell* was the “first Chinese feminist manifesto.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite labeling *The Women's Bell* as feminist, the editors admit the work is rooted in a motivation that undermines any genuine attempt to advocate for women. Instead, the work primarily serves as an avenue for Tianhe to explain how women could fit into his plan of strengthening China's global prominence. However, despite acknowledging the contradictory nature presented in Tianhe's “feminist” work, the editors nevertheless credit Tianhe with promoting feminist ideals in China.

Despite the dominance of this approach in contemporary scholarship, these contradictions distort understanding of the Chinese feminist movement's inception. Not only does contemporary approach create a generalization that minimizes the efforts of those who sought genuine change, but it also implies no authors were seeking that genuine change. Moreover, the perspective inappropriately validates intellectuals whose work contradicted the movements' implicit goals. Additionally, since the feminist movement continuously built off itself, distorting its foundational history produces a false narrative of how it progressed in the following decades. Consequently, this fabricates inaccurate and generalizing scholarship on the Chinese feminist movement and threatens the historical integrity of the subject.

Given the problems associated with the contemporary perspective of the Chinese feminist movement, this paper seeks to counteract the practice. This argument is done through a comparative analysis of He-Yin Zhen, an intellectual embodying a genuine desire for the feminist movement, against Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe, nationalists who encouraged the movement as an advocacy of Chinese nationalism. The analysis explores three topics to further illustrate contemporary scholarship's inherently questionable nature and establish several arguments: the necessity of equality in education, the deconstruction of Chinese tradition, and the means of achieving gender equality.

### Background Information

Before delving into the comparative analysis between Zhen, Liang, and Tianhe, two topics paramount to this paper's forthcoming analysis and arguments must first be addressed: the historical and contemporary exposition on nationalism and feminism, and the themes of nationalism and feminism to late-Qing China (1840-1910).

Beginning with *nationalism*, German intellectual Johann Gottfried Herder formally coined the term in 1772 with his work, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*.<sup>3</sup> As Herder's work would explain, there was only one class in a nation, comprised of all who claim the same nationality and, therefore, are the nation.<sup>4</sup> This idea would reject the prevailing enlightenment ideals that suggested society was based upon a social contract between the state and an individual; instead, Herder advocated that there was no need for such theories because the people and the nation were already one.<sup>5</sup> These foundational ideas surrounding the term nationalism would remain fixed even in present academia, where the term still refers to “an ideology that emphasizes loyalty, devotion, or allegiance to a nation or nation-state and holds that such

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<sup>2</sup>Liu, Karl, and Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, 1.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Foster, “Johann Gottfried von Herder,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified May 19, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/herder/#Bib>.

<sup>4</sup>Johann Gottfried Herder, *Treatise Upon the Origin of Language* (London, 1827), 1-20, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Treatise\\_upon\\_the\\_origin\\_of\\_Language\\_Tra/1A1gA-AAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Treatise_upon_the_origin_of_Language_Tra/1A1gA-AAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0).

<sup>5</sup>Amd Bohm, Christoph Bultmann, and Ernest A. Menze, *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2009), 1-10.

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obligations outweigh other individual or group interests.”<sup>6</sup> However, it must be noted that the term nationalism bleeds into many cognate subjects, with interdisciplinary perspectives extending the scope of its applicability.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, in this paper, nationalism refers to one's devotion to their state through explicit intentions that always trump other responsibilities.

French philosopher Charles Fourier formally coined *feminism* (féminisme) and *feminist* (féministe) in 1837 in his commentary on French society.<sup>8</sup> Fourier outlined that these terms would promote a world where “women would live, love, and work with the same independence as men.”<sup>9</sup> The contemporary understanding of feminism echoes its foundational themes, as reinforced by Rosalind Delmar: “Women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change . . . in social, economic and political order.”<sup>10</sup> While the term feminism was not present in the late-Qing discussion of gender equality for women, it fluently embodies the prevailing ideas of the time. As He-Yin Zhen demonstrates: “The goal of equality cannot be achieved except through women’s liberation.”<sup>11</sup> As such, this paper will use the term feminism to encapsulate these ideas presented at the start of the Chinese feminist movement.

However, by comparing the ideas of nationalism and feminism, their inherent contradictions become self-evident. As noted, nationalism seeks devotion to the state over individual or group interests, positioning itself in complete opposition to the goals of feminism, which pursues action based on group interests that are not necessarily in the interest of the nation-state. Consequently, this comparison highlights how advocating for feminism with nationalistic intention would create a conflict of interest. In such an instance, the advocacy for women is centered around producing results that are best for the nation, not for women, regardless of whether they align with feminist values or not. Advocation in this manner would not only trivialize the issues raised by the feminist movement but also contradict its core principle: the betterment of women’s lives for the sake of women. Therefore, to genuinely represent feminist values, the intent must be rooted in the desire to better the well-being of women for their sake.

With the contradicting nature of nationalism and feminism, examining how these ideas would become intertwined despite their opposing themes is fundamental in understanding the Chinese feminist movement. Nationalism in China's late-Qing era (1840-1911) was a mounting sensation following numerous foreign and domestic conflicts. China's “century of humiliation” would be set in motion with the first and second Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-1860). China's defeat in the face of Western powers resulted in the expansion of foreign rights in China alongside humiliating concessions that reduced domestic economic production, control over social issues,

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<sup>6</sup>Hans Kohn, “Nationalism,” Britannica, last modified August 15, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nationalism>.

<sup>7</sup>John Hutchinson, and Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Oxford England: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1-8.

<sup>8</sup>Susan Grogan, “Charles Fourier and the Nature,” *French Socialism and Sexual Difference* (London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992): 20-25, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230372818\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230372818_2).

<sup>9</sup>Grogan, “Charles Fourier and the Nature,” 20-25.

<sup>10</sup>Rosalind Delmar, “What is Feminism?,” in *Theorizing Feminism* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2018), 5-10.

<sup>11</sup>He-Yin Zhen, “Question of Women’s Liberation,” in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, ed. Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 53.

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and continental influence.<sup>12</sup> These problems would only be exasperated as China suffered defeat in the Sino-French War (1883-1885) and the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), positioning China to lose its influence over the regions of Vietnam and Korea while also losing their regional superiority to Japan.<sup>13</sup> These foreign defeats were only worsened by domestic conflicts, such as Taiping (1850-1864) and Boxer Rebellions (1899-1901), illustrating the growing Chinese resentment of the Qing government and foreign presence in the country. Moreover, famines often accompanied these foreign and domestic conflicts, such as the Northern Chinese Famine (1876-1879), resulting in the deaths of tens of millions which only furthered the growing social unrest.<sup>14</sup>

From these compounding foreign and domestic problems, an explosive growth of Chinese nationalism would occur in the late-Qing era. There was mounting dissatisfaction toward the Qing government by its citizens, as each foreign defeat reinforced prevailing Chinese sentiments that the nation was losing global prominence. This discontent would continue to grow as concessions illustrated China's declining legitimacy as a state in the eyes of foreign powers and citizens alike. Moreover, China's inability to efficiently resolve the growing number of domestic problems was another metric of the nation's deteriorating capacity to exert power. The Qing government became increasingly unequipped to resolve these domestic conflicts as resource shortages grew, a problem intensified by concurring conflicts and prior concessions. Ultimately, these issues influenced the development of a unique sense of nationalism in China towards the end of the 19th century. As historian Maurice Meisner explains, "the overriding concern was not to preserve a particular Chinese culture or a particular Chinese social order but rather to build a strong Chinese state and society that could survive and prosper in a hostile international arena."<sup>15</sup> The growing nationalistic movement sought to reinvent China to regain its global prominence. With the desire to reform its societal structure and newfound Western ideology made accessible through concessions, China was capable and willing to embrace new ideas.

China's desire to reinvent itself created an environment willing to embrace new ideas to restore its national prosperity, discarding its traditional values as "unsuitable for China's survival, and later condemn them as the source of China's problems."<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the Western idea of gender equality began to receive attention as it challenged traditional Chinese cultures' reliance "on the socially constructed categories of 'man' and 'woman.'"<sup>17</sup> The hope was that if China welcomed a greater degree of gender equality into its society, it could usher the nation amongst the likes of its global peers. Thus, since its inception, the feminist movement in the country has been centered around the value it would bring China with little regard to the value it would bring women. As explained by historian Wendy Larson,

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<sup>12</sup>Gail Hershatter, "Disturbances, 1840-1900," in *Women and China's Revolutions* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowland & Littlefield, 2018), 26.

<sup>13</sup>Sarah Crosby Mallory Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-10.

<sup>14</sup>Madeline Zeline, and Maxwell K. Hearn, "Qing China's Internal Crisis: Land Shortage, Famine, Rural Poverty," Weatherhead East Asian Institute: Columbia University, last modified 2022, [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1750\\_demographic.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1750_demographic.htm).

<sup>15</sup>Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (Manhattan, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 12.

<sup>16</sup>Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 12.

<sup>17</sup>Susan Brownell, Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, 4th ed., (Berkeley California, University of California Press, 2002), 166-170.

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this perspective “positioned women as symbolic of China's lack of power, authority, and prestige as a modern nation-state.”<sup>18</sup> While most intellectuals reflected China’s prominent nationalist attitude in their approach to the feminist movement, the two most prominent were Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe.

Yet, despite this, not every intellectual approached the new feminist movement from a nationalist perspective. In opposition to the dominant attitude of the time, He-Yin Zhen viewed the emerging feminist movement as a pivotal first step in the long road to gender equality in China. As Zhen explains, she saw the new movement as an opportunity to dismantle the traditional understanding of “gender as a structural force that deploys and displays power.”<sup>19</sup>

The deconstruction of this structural force introduces “equality among human beings,” bringing about a world that belongs equally to both men and women.<sup>20</sup> Zhen's perspective on the feminist movement reveals a genuine desire to implement change for the sake of gender equality, highlighting the opposing view of Qichao and Tianhe.

In the pursuit to refute the contemporary perspective of the Chinese feminist movement, the topics of nationalism, feminism, and Qing China were explored as they played a critical role in establishing the impending analysis and arguments. This background information is foundational in the arguments posed by Zhen, Qichao, and Tianhe regarding some of the largest topics contained in the Chinese feminist movement. The biggest of these debates would be about the necessity of equality in education.

### The Necessity of Equality in Education

The necessity of equality in women’s education was a significant topic in China’s feminist movement. A decentralized system characterized education in late-Qing China. While there were elite exams and private academies for the affluent, most of the population's education varied significantly. While this decentralized process inherently created inequality in education, these issues were further exacerbated by China's practice of gendered education. In adherence to traditional Chinese culture, women were not entitled to as many educational opportunities as men, nor the same quality. While men were taught mathematics, literature, or the sciences, women were taught skills reflecting traditional gender roles: basket weaving, cooking, and basic literature. The inequality of women's educational accessibility became integral to the feminist movement.

Zhen’s approach to equality in education does not waver from her overarching pursuit of improving women’s day-to-day lives. As she outlines in her work, *The Feminist Manifesto*, “Heaven endows natural rights equally to men and women. Since men and women are both human, the lack of equality is unjust and contradicts the principles of nature.”<sup>21</sup> These notions serve as the basis for which Zhen claims that as men and women grow, “they should receive equal education.”<sup>22</sup> With these assertions, Zhen acknowledges China’s historically unequal education based on gender, recognizing that most education provided to women “uniformly emphasizes the field

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<sup>18</sup>Wendy Larson, *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Redwood City, California: Standard University Press, 2022), 26, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804764001>.

<sup>19</sup>Abosede George, "He-Yin Zhen, Oyewumi, and Geographies of Anti-Universalism," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 35, no. 11 (2015): 83.

<sup>20</sup>Zhen, “Question of Women’s Liberation,” 53.

<sup>21</sup>He-Yin Zhen, “The Feminist Manifesto,” in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, ed. Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 183.

<sup>22</sup>Zhen, “The Feminist Manifesto,” 182.

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of household management.”<sup>23</sup> Not only do these assertions illustrate that Zhen sees education equality as a means to rectify the past inequalities, but they also ground her motivation in the central feminist principles of women being entitled to the same opportunities as men.

Conversely, Qichao and Tianhe fail to adequately address China's historical gender-based education, demonstrating their perspective does not lie in rectifying the inequalities of the past, but, instead, in a nationalistic future. From Qichao's perspective, Chinese women have never been educated: “. . . there are also nearly two hundred million who have round heads but bent toes . . . they have never been educated.”<sup>24</sup> This remark not only establishes a gendered metric of education based upon men but completely rejects the idea of there being educated women in China altogether. Echoing these sentiments, Tianhe fails to address the unequal history of education for women and instead makes broad assertions such as “the barbaric education in China in days past suffered from all kinds of viciousness and corruption.”<sup>25</sup> Tianhe further rejects the idea of an unequal history of education for women by solely focusing on the outcome of such a system and not the cause, with assertions such as “Chinese women are infamous around the world for their lack of education.”<sup>26</sup> The failure to acknowledge the historically gender-based education system demonstrates that Qichao and Tianhe do not seek to examine and rectify systems that have created past inequalities, as their only desire is to advocate on issues they believe align with their nationalistic notions, such as why the education of women is essential.

From the perspective of Qichao and Tianhe, educating women is paramount in ensuring the next generation of children is educated, a tone rooted in inherently nationalistic sentiments. Their advocacy protects the traditional gendered education system and promotes the continuation of traditional gender roles of women being responsible for educating children, two societal structures that completely contradict the aims of the feminist movement. Qichao supports this claim by asserting that “children's education begins with the mother's teaching, which is itself rooted in women's education. Therefore women's education fundamentally determines whether a nation will survive or be destroyed and whether it will prosper or languish in weakness.”<sup>27</sup> This rhetoric demonstrates that, unlike Zhen, Qichao has no desire to pursue equality in education in any capacity, as he implies that a woman's education is different from a man's. This notion is further reinforced by statements of Qichao supporting traditional gender roles: “a small infant is naturally closer to the mother than to the father, [and] therefore only the mother can take advantage of this propensity to guide him.”<sup>28</sup> Tianhe takes Qichao's argument one step further, advocating for women to be in charge of the whole nation's education, concluding that “no child under the age of ten, boy or girl, should be placed in men's hands.”<sup>29</sup> While such a view is inherently traditionalist in its approach to gender roles, Tianhe

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<sup>23</sup>Zhen, “Question of Women's Liberation,” 61.

<sup>24</sup>Liang Qichao, “On Women's Education,” in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, ed. Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 189.

<sup>25</sup>Jin Tianhe, “The Women's Bell,” in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, ed. Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press), 236.

<sup>26</sup>Tianhe, “The Women's Bell,” 234.

<sup>27</sup>Qichao, “On Women's Education,” 194.

<sup>28</sup>Qichao, “On Women's Education,” 193.

<sup>29</sup>Tianhe, “The Women's Bell,” 237.

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continues: “First, women’s personalities are closer to those of children....Third, they will not unjustly beat children and can play well with them....Fifth, their minds are not ruined by absurd dreams of passing the examinations and taking official titles. Sixth, they are well suited to teaching basic, introductory aspects of such subjects as geometry and physics.”<sup>30</sup> These elaborations reinforce the gendered expectations of women being responsible for children’s education and imply women are incapable of certain educational feats seen as common for men, such as passing examinations to enter the government. The perspectives on the importance of education by both Qichao and Tianhe are fundamentally at odds with the core values of the feminist movement, as the movement sought to demolish traditional gender roles, not reinforce them.

However, Qichao and Tianhe’s nationalistic reasoning behind educating women is inappropriately validated by their desire to mimic Western. As Qichao states, “for Westerners, out of a hundred tasks involved in educating young children, over seventy are borne by the mother.”<sup>31</sup> Comparisons like this illustrate that Qichao has no regard for feminist values, as the notion he references inherently reinforces social structures that limit women, not free them. The real motivation for Qichao’s praising of Western powers is the nationalistic belief that if China reproduced Western standards, it would hold the same prominence as one. This notion is further supported by Qichao’s assertion that “If we were to have a small schoolboy from the West walk side by side with our majestic and aged official-scholars, the boy’s varied knowledge and ambitions would certainly exhibit features with which our scholars could not compete.”<sup>32</sup> Tianhe mirrors Qichao’s comparisons, asserting that “Westerners divide the education of children into a hundred different areas; 70 percent of these are taught by the mother.”<sup>33</sup> Through the desire to emulate the Western powers, Qichao and Tianhe once more demonstrate that their intentions are not rooted in improving women’s education but in pursuing China’s global longevity.

Conversely, Zhen is in complete disagreement with Qichao and Tianhe that mirroring Western society would be beneficial to garnering equality for women, as she addresses in the following:

Chinese men worship power and authority. They believe that Europeans, Americans, and the Japanese are civilized nations of the modern world who all grant their women some degree of freedom...these men think they will be applauded by the whole world for having joined the ranks of civilized nations. Not only would the man enjoy such a reputation, his entire family would as well, and he himself would be credited as a pioneer.<sup>34</sup>

As Zhen sees it, the desire to emulate Western powers is inherently nationalistic, as it leaves the concerns of women as nothing more than an afterthought. Gail Hershatter supports this assertion, stating that even if Western societal qualities were adopted, the problem of unequal education still prevails.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the perspective not only displays a desire for men to help themselves but also undermines the feminist desire to invoke genuine education equality.

The necessity of equality in women’s education reveals several contrasting aspects of intentions between Zhen, and her contemporaries, Qichao and Tianhe. Zhen approaches the idea of equality in women’s education to rectify the historical

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<sup>30</sup>Tianhe, “The Women’s Bell,” 237.

<sup>31</sup>Qichao, “On Women’s Education,” 193.

<sup>32</sup>Qichao, “On Women’s Education,” 194.

<sup>33</sup>Tianhe, “The Women’s Bell,” 216.

<sup>34</sup>Zhen, “Question of Women’s Liberation,” 60.

<sup>35</sup>Hershatter, *Women and China’s Revolutions*, 84.

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inequalities that plagued women's education, acknowledging the source of these inequalities to understand what needs to be accomplished to achieve genuine equality. In this pursuit, Zhen's motivation rests upon garnering genuine equality for women in education, representing both the historical and contemporary values of feminism. In contrast, Qichao and Tianhe fail to embody these themes of feminism, as their approaches to women's education lay in the pursuit of new nationalistic commitments, disregarding the pursuit of equality in education. Moreover, this failure is supported by the advocacy of traditionalist gender roles of women, with the expressed intention of fostering a more robust sense of nationalism in China, reinforced by a displayed desire to emulate Western powers to gain global prominence. These motivating factors contradict the values associated with genuine feminist beliefs. Therefore, these motivating factors illustrate that when examining the importance of women's education, Zhen is a true embodiment of feminist values while illustrating that Qichao and Tianhe are nothing more than nationalists. However, Zhen's genuine advocacy does not end at the necessity of women's education, as she also sought to deconstruct the oppressive nature of Chinese traditions on women.

### **Deconstruction of Chinese Traditions**

The Chinese feminist movement sought to revise any societal aspect that furthered the subjugation of women, with Chinese tradition, from its inception, being used as a social tool to enforce and influence the limited roles women had in society. While these traditions came in various mediums, one of the few consistencies among these was their universal discrimination towards women. This discrimination would be exasperated further by China's praise for traditional practices, inadvertently condoning the continued discrimination of women. Recognizing the intrinsic obstacle traditions were to gender equality, the feminist movement sought to dismantle the traditional practices that infringed upon women's equality. While the support for dismantling these oppressive practices was widely positive, the underlying reasoning for dismantling these traditions varied.

In the case of Qichao and Tianhe, their advocations to dismantle these oppressive traditions only lie in changing traditions that do not benefit their inherently nationalistic viewpoint. Such intentions can be best demonstrated by Qichao and Tianhe's perspectives on the traditions of footbinding and women's fixed role in the home. On footbinding, Qichao views the practice as a "means of torture her body is crippled merely for the pleasure of another."<sup>36</sup> While this inherently seems to embody feminist values, his dismay rests in nationalistic motivation: "As long as footbinding remains in practice, women's education can never flourish."<sup>37</sup> As discussed prior, Qichao's perspective on women's education serves as a tool to continue the traditional role of women staying home and educating the children as a means to strengthen China's next generation. Tianhe follows this same contradictory stance on Chinese tradition, invoking intense disapproval for footbinding with his desire to "bring the person who started this practice [footbinding] to justice, but I regret that I cannot summon Li Sheng from hell to hang him by his ribs from the ceiling as punishment."<sup>38</sup> Again, while this demonstrates a perspective that seemingly aligns with genuine Feminist values, it is undermined by Tianhe's true motivations that footbinding prevents exercise, which "makes the body strong...giving them more than enough

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<sup>36</sup>Qichao, "On Women's Education," 202.

<sup>37</sup>Qichao, "On Women's Education," 202.

<sup>38</sup>Tianhe, "The Women's Bell," 222.



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energy to go about their daily tasks.”<sup>39</sup> However, with footbinding, women “can barely accomplish what needs to be done in the home.”<sup>40</sup> Despite Tianhe’s advocations for removing Chinese traditions, the intellectual has no issue reinforcing the traditional role of women in the home. Qichao and Tianhe’s approaches to Chinese tradition illustrate that they are only concerned with traditions that do not serve the purpose of their nationalistic agenda, therefore undermining any genuine feminist beliefs, exhibiting their motivation lies not in creating an equal China but instead a more nationalistic China.

Furthermore, the nationalistic intentions when approaching Chinese traditions are once more exhibited by Qichao and Tianhe’s approach to Western influence. As Qichao states, “if we wish to make our nation strong, we must investigate extensively the methods followed by other nations in becoming independent.”<sup>41</sup> As then stated by Qichao, this means “renewing the people” by improving “what is original in the people and so renew it” while also “adopt what is originally lacking in the people and so make a new people.”<sup>42</sup> This outline is a justifying motivator for Qichao’s perspective on Chinese tradition. Qichao willingly embraces renewing the traditions of women being fixed in the home while adopting a Chinese society free from footbinding if that was what Western countries were doing. Tianhe echoes these desires to emulate Western powers, comparing exercise in the West as a means to reinforce his anti-footbinding perspective that is rooted in the desire to help the traditional role of women in the home: “European women have both gentle and strenuous forms of exercise,” with “their physical ability [seeming] stronger than the boys.”<sup>43</sup> Such comparisons help elaborate on the nationalistic desires carried by Qichao and Tianhe when addressing Chinese tradition. Instead of advocating for eliminating all Chinese traditions that promote gender inequality, they only address traditions they do not view as beneficial in their nationalistic perspective, utilizing Western comparisons to reinforce their desires.

He-Yin Zhen’s motivation for dismantling Chinese tradition contradicts that of her contemporaries. While Qichao and Tianhe seek to exclusively dismantle traditions that are advantageous to their nationalistic perspective, Zhen seeks to dismantle any that thwarts gender equality. As Gail Hershatter reinforces: “Unlike virtually all of her fellow activists, He-Yin was not interested in improving the position of women merely in order to strengthen China.”<sup>44</sup> This belief is reinforced by Zhen’s assertions the motivations presented by Qichao and Tianhe continue to let women “be instrumentalized and remain men’s appendages,” allowing women to be “liberated in name only and our rights could never really be our own.”<sup>45</sup> Such sentiments demonstrate that Zhen’s motivation rests in creating genuine equality in China, a motivator strengthened further by her dismissal of emulating Western powers: “When the tides turn in favor of Europeanization, they attempt to acquire distinction by promoting women’s liberation. This is what I call men’s pursuit of self-distinction in the name of women’s liberation.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Zhen’s dismissal of emulating Western powers is illustrated through her assertion that her fellow contemporaries use the idea of protecting the country “to lord over womanhood or

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<sup>39</sup>Tianhe, “The Women’s Bell,” 239.

<sup>40</sup>Tianhe, “The Women’s Bell,” 239.

<sup>41</sup>Liang Qichao, “Renewing The People,” *Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2 (2000): 3.

<sup>42</sup>Qichao, “Renewing The People,” 3.

<sup>43</sup>Tianhe, “The Women’s Bell,” 239.

<sup>44</sup>Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions*, 84.

<sup>45</sup>Zhen, “Question of Women’s Liberation,” 63.

<sup>46</sup>Zhen, “Question of Women’s Liberation,” 60.

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indulge in their own power to force women into submission.”<sup>47</sup> Through these dismissing retorts of nationalistic motivation, Zhen grounds herself in genuine feminist values, once more illustrating her motivation for empowering women when addressing the movement.

### The Means of Achieving Gender Equality

Gender equality was a Western ideal that captivated late-Qing China and spawned the Chinese feminist movement. How gender equality would be achieved in the feminist movement received conflicting ideas. Some contemporary intellectuals seeking to create genuine gender equality believed that if men intervened, they would provide gender equality in name only, undermining the mission at hand. Conversely, for most nationalists, there was an underlying implication that if gender equality were to be achieved in China, it could only be from the efforts of men, as women were incapable.

Qichao and Tianhe furthered this nationalistic belief, illustrating that, in their view, women were just too unintelligent. Consequently, the implementation of change for women would have to fall upon them. Qichao explains that almost two hundred million Chinese women who hold no positions, such as scholars, merchants, or even peasants, have never been educated.<sup>48</sup> While this establishes the tone that women are unintelligent, Qichao reinforces this sentiment by painting women complacently enduring these conditions: “but women who are not officials, scholars, peasants, artisans, or merchants and are almost like beasts feel no such shame! Not only is this so, but all of humanity simply takes this state of affairs to be the natural, fixed order of things. Alas! How painful it is! How painful it is!”<sup>49</sup> Such sentiments illustrate that the lack of education for women is a dormant state, something widely accepted, pushing the narrative that men like Qichao must advocate for Chinese women on their behalf as they are incapable of advocating for themselves. Tianhe builds upon these sentiments, noting that his sister compatriots “are still kept as ignorant as before...knowing nothing of the ideas of equality between men and women or ideas of women’s participation in politics that are held by free people in civilized nations.”<sup>50</sup> Tianhe establishes that it is up to men like himself to advocate for women. The introduction to Tianhe’s work, *The Women’s Bell*, reinforces this idea, where he declares, “I bathe and anoint myself three times, straighten my brush, and pay respect to Heaven. On a raft of benevolence, I will ferry the afflicted across the sea of suffering, light a lamp in a pitch-dark chamber, speak of the dharma with a humble and patient heart until my throat grows hoarse.”<sup>51</sup> From these declarations, Tianhe establishes that advocating for women is challenging, with the undertones suggesting that men can only pursue such a challenge because women are not capable, let alone educated, of advocating for themselves.

From the perspective of Tianhe and Qichao, the means of achieving gender equality for women depended on men because they viewed women as uneducated and complacent in their societal position. Moreover, neither Qichao nor Tianhe seek to formally address the root cause of Chinese women's lack of collective power. This reflection would be critical if they genuinely sought to create women's prosperity. Instead, by dismissing this unequal history, creating a narrative that women have no

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<sup>47</sup>He-Yin Zhen, “On Feminist Antimilitarism,” in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, ed. Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 178.

<sup>48</sup>Qichao, “On Women’s Education,” 189.

<sup>49</sup>Qichao, “On Women’s Education,” 191.

<sup>50</sup>Tianhe, “The Women’s Bell,” 208.

<sup>51</sup>Tianhe, “The Women’s Bell,” 208.

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desire for further equality, and taking the movement upon themselves. The authors seek to undermine genuine feminist advocations to allow men like themselves control of the direction of the Chinese feminist movement. In doing so, this thought process facilitates an environment for men such as Qichao and Tianhe to mold the movement in a way that reflects their nationalistic viewpoint, which has been demonstrated previously by this paper's analysis about equality in women's education and the deconstruction of Chinese traditions. Not only does Qichao and Tianhe's intent to control the movement perfectly capture their nationalistic motivations, but also demonstrates that their behavior is in complete opposition to genuine feminist values.

The nationalist intentions of Qichao and Tianhe explains why He-Yin Zhen is in complete opposition to allowing nationally influenced men to advocate for women in the pursuit of achieving gender equality in late-Qing China. Zhen approaches this idea from a genuine feminist perspective, contradicting the nationalistic approaches undertaken by Qichao and Tianhe, by first acknowledging why Chinese women have not been equal. She explains, "For thousands of years, the world has been dominated by the rule of man. This rule is marked by class distinctions over which men—and men only—exert proprietary rights [of women]."<sup>52</sup> Unlike Qichao and Tianhe, who viewed the root of gender inequality from a traditionalist view of women's complacency, Zhen addresses this point from a genuine feminist perspective, noting that the 'complacency' experienced by women came as a result of the rule of man. Addressing this rule as the barrier to gender equality for women, Zhen calls to "abolish the rule of men and introduce equality among human beings, which means that the world must belong equally to men and to women."<sup>53</sup> However, she notes that "the cause of women's rights must be won through women's own efforts. It must not be granted by men. If we allow women's rightful role to be imposed by men, we are renouncing our freedom."<sup>54</sup> With these remarks, Zhen addresses the need for equality to be achieved by those genuinely pursuing the goal, as an artificial change would not be enough. As historian Gail Hershatter elaborates, "For He-Yin, such superficial reforms would accomplish nothing as long as the bodies of all women were potentially treated as property."<sup>55</sup> Hershatter's analysis helps to further showcase Zhen's opposing beliefs to the nationalistic motivations driving men such as Qichao and Tianhe, who only seek to project their interpretation of gender equality onto women. Zhen's genuine attitude is further reinforced in Qichao's essay, *On Freedom*, where he defines freedom as an all-inclusive principle, a necessary condition of life, yet excludes women.<sup>56</sup> With Zhen explicitly acknowledging the nationalistic motivation of her contemporaries, she is separating herself as a means to illustrate that her motivations stem from a desire to better women's lives, demonstrating a genuine embodiment of feminist ideals. Zhen's stance on achieving gender equality showcases her genuine motivation for feminism while revealing Qichao and Tianhe seek to use feminist ideals in name, with nationalism being the underlying pursuit.

### Conclusion

In the ever-expanding field of Chinese feminist history, a growing contemporary practice is taking place that interjects generalizations that jeopardize the historical reality of the movement. By generalizing the motivations of the movement's authors

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<sup>52</sup>Zhen, "Question of Women's Liberation," 54.

<sup>53</sup>Zhen, "Question of Women's Liberation," 54.

<sup>54</sup>Zhen, "Question of Women's Liberation," 63.

<sup>55</sup>Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions*, 84.

<sup>56</sup>Liang Qichao, "On Freedom," in Theresea Man Ling Lee "Liang Qichao & The Meaning of Citizenship: Then and Now," *History of Political Thought* 28, no.2 (2007): 310-317.

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as explicitly nationalistic, current scholarship minimizes the contributions of authors such as He-Yin Zhen, who sought the movement as the starting point for genuine gender equality in China. Additionally, this scholarship minimizes authors like Zhen by grouping her contributions with authors such as Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe, who have been demonstrated to only care about the nationalistic potential of the movement. Consequently, the contemporary generalization of the feminist movement contributes to misrepresenting the more extensive discussion of gender equality at the movement's inception, portraying the climate as exclusively fueled by nationalistic rhetoric.

The generalizing attitude in contemporary scholarship supports China's present-day nationalistic approach to gender equality. While China offers more equality to women now than ever before, this equality is executed in alignment with what is best for the nation rather than what is best for women. This dynamic reflects a standard of gender quality that aligns more favorably with the early nationalistic intentions of Qichao and Tianhe than Zhen. As historical and contemporary intellectuals pursuing genuine feminist ideas—like Zhen—do not receive proper recognition, as their pursuit of authentic feminist goals seemingly put them in the minority in a society dominated by a nationalistic perspective. The attitudes of contemporary scholarship on the feminist movement further reinforce this dynamic in present-day China.

The original contributions of this paper sought to illustrate the inherently problematic nature of the contemporary scholarship approach to the Chinese feminist movement through the assertions of several arguments. The current standard employs a revisionist attitude toward the movement's core values that jeopardizes the integrity of the historical and present pursuit of genuine feminism. Considering these problems, a new contemporary perspective must be pursued to uphold the movement's historical reality.

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