

The Chinese Female Enlightenment Movement and the Female Body in the Early Twentieth Century

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This paper explores the complex and intricate relationship between various significant Chinese radical movements in the early twentieth century and assesses their influence on the gradually evolving liberation of women's minds, emotions, and bodies. This latter aspect is virtually ignored by scholars--a regrettable and inexplicable omission--it was central to the whole emancipation movement.

The repression of the Reform Movement (1898), and the Anti-Christian and Boxing Rebellion (1900) temporarily halted the Western missionaries and the Chinese radicals efforts to modernise China in the late nineteenth century. As a result the Chinese Women's Movement for a time was at low ebb.

Early in the twentieth century, however, a Chinese women's liberalisation campaign, stimulated by a new national radicalism began to develop for a second time with the following distinguishing characteristics: patriotism, romanticism, social awareness, and self-emancipation. This paper focuses on the close relationship between the wider Chinese Enlightenment Movement and this campaign with a further closer narrowing of the focus on women's physical emancipation--a neglected and significant phenomenon.

The May Fourth Movement, as a major element of the Chinese Enlightenment Movement, is a subject of controversy in the academic literature of China, Japan, Europe and the United States. There appears to be agreement, however, that the significance of the May Fourth Movement is to be found both in a new political patriotism and in the reformatory ambitions of its participants. In order to comment upon the relationship of the May Fourth Movement to Chinese women and society at the beginning of the twentieth century, I intend to concentrate on the theme of cultural revolution in China in the period 1910 to 1919 focussing specifically on the significance of events such as the major anti-dynastic revolution and related movements prior to 1911, on the national

revolution movement of 1911, on the New Culture Movement of 1915, and finally, on the May Fourth Movement of 1919. This momentum for change comprised the Chinese Enlightenment Movement.

The paper considers, therefore, in chronological sequence: the rise of modern nationalism, China's first nationalist revolution (the anti-dynastic revolution of 1911), the active role of women in the revolution, the failure of political revolution in 1911, the temporary decline of the suffragette movement, the New Culture Movement of 1915 with its associated elements of heretical cultural criticism ("down with Confucianism") and a concern with women's education; mind, emotions and body, the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and the making of a new woman and its characteristics, the turning to the West for images of self, an ethic of rebellion and paradigm for critical thought, the shift from criticism to iconoclasm (attacks on Confucianism, national character and the traditional image of women), the women's self-emancipation movement and social and culture transformation, and finally, the re-making of bodies--the rationale for, and the development of women's physical education and sport.