

Introduction

ENGENDERING THE MAY FOURTH ERA

“Feminism” (*nüquan zhuyi*) has long been a negative term in the People’s Republic of China. In the Communist Party literature, the word “feminism” is always accompanied by the adjective “bourgeois” and often by the qualifier “Western.” Not only has exclusion of feminism from the official discourse erased a history of Chinese feminism from the public mind, it has also been integral to the claim that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is *the* liberator of Chinese women. The “failure” of feminism is contrasted to the success of the CCP’s line on Chinese women’s liberation. In the post-Mao era, as part of Chinese intellectuals’ challenge to Maoism, efforts to reevaluate Western feminism have appeared.¹ What remains unquestioned, however, is the official presentation of the history of Chinese women’s liberation.²

In the West, Chinese women’s liberation has been a constant theme in

1. Since the mid-1980s women from both academia and the official organization known as the Women’s Federation have advocated a reevaluation of Western feminism, which suggests Chinese women’s growing interest in feminism as a counterdiscourse. See Li Xiaojiang, *Xiawa de tansuo* [The exploration of Eve] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1988), and Shanxi Women’s Federation, *Makesizhuyi funüguan gailun* [An introduction to the Marxist theory of women] (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1991). For studies of post-Mao Chinese feminism, see Wang Zheng, “Research on Women in Contemporary China,” in *A Selected Guide to Women’s Studies in China*, ed. Gail Hershatter et al. (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, 1998), 1–42; and Zhang Naihua with Wu Xu, “Discovering the Positive within the Negative: The Women’s Movement in a Changing China,” in *The Challenge of Local Feminists: Women’s Movements in Global Perspective*, ed. Amrita Basu, 25–57 (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

2. See All-China Women’s Federation, *Zhongguo funü yundong shi* [A history of the Chinese women’s movement] (Beijing: Chunqiu chubanshe, 1989). Compared

works on Chinese women since the early 1970s. Many feminist scholars have focused on the relationship between the Communist revolution and women's liberation.³ This focus reflects Western feminists' concern over the relationship between socialism and feminism. But, largely because of the inaccessibility of primary source material, the major works in the 1980s drew on the CCP's policy and official documents for an interpretation of Chinese women's recent history.⁴ Inevitably, the women in these works do not appear as agents for social change. Readers do not learn how women responded to, coped with, struggled against, or maneuvered to change the circumstances around them, or what role women played in the relations of power in social, political, or domestic arenas. In other words, works based on the CCP's policy tend to reduce Chinese women to obscure entities with little significance in historical processes.

My study grew out of both a political interest in deconstructing the CCP's myth of Chinese women's liberation and an intellectual dissatisfaction with stories about Chinese women that lacked women as protagonists. Refusing to take the party as a heaven-sent savior, we, women scholars from the People's Republic of China, need to examine the historical processes by which the party rose to dominate the women's movement. To shift the focus from the party to women and to look for women's agency, I began by asking questions that did not assume the central role of the party. What, I wondered, were Chinese women doing before the "savior" was born? This question turned my attention to a period of women's activism when political parties had not established their dominance in China: the May Fourth era (1915–1925).

to earlier official texts on the Chinese women's movement, this work offers a more sympathetic description of the early feminist movement in China. However, it still presents feminist history as a preliminary bourgeois stage that was bound to be superseded by a higher proletarian women's emancipation led by the CCP. See also Li, *Xiawa de tansuo*.

3. The major works are Elisabeth Croll's *Feminism and Socialism in China* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), Phyllis Andors's *Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), Judith Stacey's *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), and Kay Ann Johnson's *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

4. In this respect, Christina Kelley Gilmartin's *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) represents a breakthrough. The author, who met with a group of Communist women activists, uses interview material to construct a story from the perspective of women activists in the CCP.

Shortly after the 1911 Revolution that toppled the Qing dynasty, the new Republic of China, which was in a state of political instability, entered a period of unparalleled intellectual exploration. The intellectual and social ferment—the May Fourth New Culture movement, as it was later called—created a wave of feminist agitation and women’s activism in China’s urban areas. Male intellectuals began to debate the “woman problem” (*funü wenti*) at the outset of this New Culture movement and continued to do so throughout the whole May Fourth period.⁵ Although the situation of Chinese women had been a concern of reformers since the late nineteenth century, and although the term “women’s rights” (*nüquan*) entered Chinese public discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century, the “woman problem” was most widely publicized and popularized during the May Fourth era.⁶ The rapidly enhanced public awareness of women’s problems was associated with a dramatic increase in women’s participation in the pursuit of women’s rights. Historians in the People’s Republic of China call this period the beginning of a new historical age, arguing that the May Fourth era gave birth to the CCP. In their view, the May Fourth movement prepared the way for the CCP, which in turn led women to a higher stage of proletarian women’s liberation. Hence Chinese women took the “only correct” route to a bright future. Although I do not adopt this teleological view or endorse the CCP’s leadership as “correct,” I agree that the May Fourth era was a unique and meaningful period for Chinese women. In this volume, I express my perception of what counts as historically significant in the May Fourth era.

Soon after I began my research on women in the May Fourth period, I noticed a peculiar phenomenon. The May Fourth period has fascinated Chinese and Western scholars, but Western scholarship on the era seldom discusses women, despite the abundance and availability of primary documents

5. The Chinese term *funü wenti* was originally a rendition of the English phrase “the woman question,” which had circulated in Europe for centuries. Translating *funü wenti* back into English as “the woman problem,” I intend to emphasize that linguistic importation often alters the connotation of a phrase. *Funü wenti*, as it was used at the turn of the century, suggests not only an awareness that problematized the women’s situation formerly regarded as normal, but also a presumption that women hindered the nation’s ascendance to “modernity.”

6. For a discussion of late-Qing reformers’ advocacy for women’s rights, see Xiong Yuezhi, *Zhongguo jindai minzhu sixiangshi* [An intellectual history of democracy in modern China] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1986), chapters 4 and 7.

Jin Yi, *Nüjie zhong* [The women’s bell] (Shanghai: Datong shuju, 1903). This pamphlet is the earliest declaration of feminism in China. The author created the slogan “*nüquan wansui*” [long live women’s rights]. See chapter 1, this volume, for a discussion of *Nüjie zhong*.

about the “woman problem.” Over twenty years ago, in a well-researched dissertation, Roxane Witke expressed her amazement at this phenomenon. She suggested that the main reason these scholars did not discuss women was that such work would be categorized as “women’s history” and therefore could not rise above “the level of parochial or self-confessed minority history.”⁷ Now, in the 1990s, when gender has emerged as an analytical category in the study of history, any work on the era that omits discussion of gender is considered parochial and incomplete. The gender issue in the May Fourth period not only demonstrates the cultural and historical specificity of “modernity” in China, but also shapes Chinese society in the twentieth century. By exploring the gender issue, this study attempts to reconfigure a history of the May Fourth era.

The May Fourth era has long been a contested site where scholars express their values and positions. Conservative scholars have held the New Culture movement responsible for the destruction of Chinese tradition. Although cultural conservatives vary in their intellectual pursuits and beliefs, their critique of the era reflects their shared concern to salvage Confucian tradition as a response to the disorientation experienced in a rapidly changing world.⁸ Communist scholars, including Mao himself, have defined the May Fourth period as a necessary stage in the world revolution of the proletariat. According to these scholars, the May Fourth movement was a bourgeois revolution led by representatives of the Chinese proletariat. Such a view legitimizes the CCP’s leadership in the supposedly inevitable proletarian revolution. Liberal historians in China and the West have called the New Culture movement a “Chinese Enlightenment.”⁹ In the 1980s,

7. Roxane H. Witke, “Transformation of Attitudes towards Women during the May Fourth Era” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1971), 2.

8. Among the conservatives, “New Confucians” emerged as an oppositional force to May Fourth cultural radicals. In the Maoist era, the voices of New Confucians were mainly heard in Taiwan and Hong Kong and among overseas Chinese. In post-Mao China, the New Confucians have gained a larger audience, and open discussion and publication of conservative views have increased in Mainland China. See Luo Yijun, ed., *Ping xinrujia* [On New Confucians] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1989); Charlotte Furth, ed., *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republic China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); and Wang Hui, “Zhongguo de wusi jiyi” [China’s May Fourth memory], *Zhishi Fenzi* [The Chinese intellectual] (spring 1994): 42–56.

9. See Xiong Yuezhi, *Zhongguo jindai minzhu sixiangshi*, and Hu Shengwu, *Cong Xinhai geming dao wusiyundong* [From the Xinhai Revolution to the May Fourth movement] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1983). See also Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

liberal scholars in China began a concerted effort to revitalize the enlightenment legacy of the May Fourth era in order to deconstruct Maoism. “Democracy” and “science” became the only May Fourth themes in prominent male scholars’ construction of public memory. In the 1990s, amid rapid economic, social, and cultural transformations in the People’s Republic of China, debates about the May Fourth era are a means of self-exploration as well as a strategy to reclaim elite positions for many liberal intellectuals.¹⁰

My investigation of women in the May Fourth era leads me into these debates. Although my project may seem to be influenced by the Chinese liberal intellectuals’ challenge to the Maoist hegemony, my goal to engender the May Fourth era separates me from gender-blind liberal scholars in both China and the West. In fact, contemporary intellectual debates in China about the May Fourth era are largely male-dominated, exclude gender issues, and engage few women readers. I enter the fray, therefore, with my own position, a feminist perspective that holds women as a valid subject in scholarly inquiry and gender as an important dimension in historical processes. In this sense, my study seeks to break male monopoly of the contested site, the May Fourth era.

Just as May Fourth women’s activism was stimulated by Western feminist movements of the time, my study of May Fourth feminism is informed by contemporary feminism. The development of Western feminism in the past decade has turned our attention to cultural and historical specificities of gender construction and the diversity of women’s experiences. “Universal womanhood” sounds like a naive concept in the 1990s; we need a better understanding of cross-cultural similarities and differences in gender processes. In this book, therefore, May Fourth women are not examined in isolation. Rather, I examine the specific cultural and historical contexts of Chinese women’s struggle for liberation by comparing their experiences to those of European and American women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

However, this cannot be a systematic comparative work with a single set of variables applied to each case. The May Fourth women differed so much from Euro-American feminist activists at the turn of the twentieth century that no single set of variables can be identified. Instead, my subject matter

10. The Chinese intellectuals’ famous debate on “humanist spirit” began in 1993 and continued through 1995. For details of the debate, see *Zhongguo renmin daxue shubao ziliao zhongxin*, *Wenyi lilun* [Literary theories], nos. 7–12 (July–December 1995).

requires what Charles Tilly calls a method of individualizing comparison, which reflects the practitioner's concern to "establish exactly what is particular about a particular historical experience."¹¹ Rather than finding generalization in cross-cultural women's experiences, my goal here is to highlight the unique experience of the May Fourth women and simultaneously illuminate the differences and similarities between Chinese and Euro-American women's struggles for liberation.

The cross-cultural comparison in this case is not at all arbitrary. Euro-American feminism entered China early in the twentieth century. In the May Fourth period, translations of Western feminist texts (many translated from Japanese editions) and discussions of Western women's movements constituted a large part of New Culturalist feminist agitation. Why did Western feminism attract a Chinese audience? What impact did Western feminism have in China? What did feminism mean to Chinese women? How did the fate of Chinese feminism differ from the fate of feminism in Western countries? Following these lines of inquiry, a comparative perspective deepens our understanding of feminism as an international movement.

Finally, this study investigates the construction of a feminist discourse in modern China. I ask the following questions: Who promoted feminism in China? Who was qualified to do so? What was the status of the individuals who had the right to proffer such a discourse? Who derived from it his or her own special quality and prestige? What subject positions were created in the May Fourth intellectuals' discursive practice? What were women's relations to the subject positions created in this period? What were the political consequences for Chinese women who embraced the new subject?¹² Approaching my subject matter with these questions in mind, I illuminate the relationships between the emergence of New Culturalists as a social force and the new subject positions for women created in this period, as well as between modernity and women's liberation in China. Thus this study attempts to demonstrate not only the discursive construction of "new

11. Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), 88.

12. My conceptualization of the discursive construction of May Fourth women's subjectivity has been shaped and stimulated by reading Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987); Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds., *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988); Jane Flax, *disputed subjects: essays on psychoanalysis, politics, and philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); and Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

women" in the May Fourth era, but also a gendered process of the formation of May Fourth men's discursive power.

My chosen approach is related to the available source material. Texts written by men of the May Fourth era, which I use to examine the formation of May Fourth discourses, are abundant. To supply what these texts do not, I offer the oral histories of May Fourth new women. These oral histories are constructed from interviews that I conducted between 1993 and 1995. Using my interview data, I attempt to analyze phrases and terms that signify the presence of a subjectivity in the May Fourth era and discern which terms and concepts promoted in that era were meaningful to these women. That is, I use women's own words to reconstruct the subject position of the May Fourth new women, rather than merely search texts produced by men to find women's subjectivity. This method allows me to explore the connection between man-made texts and women's consciousness.

In the May Fourth period, the terms *nüzizhuyi* (female-ism), *funüzhuyi* (womanism), *nüquanzhuyi* (the ism of women's rights), and *fuminieshimu* (feminism) were used by various Chinese authors to refer to feminism. The unfixed Chinese terms for "feminism" reflect Chinese intellectuals' efforts to grasp the complexity of Western feminism in that period. Those who insisted on using the terms *nüzizhuyi*, *funüzhuyi*, and *fuminieshimu* in their translation and writing wanted to call readers' attention to the fact that "feminism" connoted much more than the struggle for women's equal rights. But because the phrase *nüquan* (women's rights) had been used to denote Euro-American women's movements long before the introduction of the term "feminism" into China, because the phrase *nüquanzhuyi* conveys a more concrete and clearer meaning than either *nüzizhuyi*, *funüzhuyi*, or *fuminieshimu*, and because women's equal rights were the immediate concern of many involved in the Chinese feminist movement, *nüquanzhuyi* was more frequently used than other terms during the republican period. Unlike in Japan, where a transliteration distinguishes "feminism" from the term "women's rights," in China the phonemic transliteration *fuminieshimu* did not circulate beyond texts that introduced feminism. The ideographic character of Chinese writing, which prefers semantic translation to phonemic transliteration, thwarted those who intended to use *fuminieshimu* to convey a more comprehensive and complicated feminism to the Chinese.

In the Mao period, when there was no public forum in which to engage in feminist debate, the CCP had the absolute power to define "feminism." In CCP texts on the women's movement, *nüquanzhuyi* became the only translation of "feminism" that had a fixed meaning. *Nüquanzhuyi* was

associated with “bourgeois” and “Western” and was therefore a negative word. In the CCP’s definition, *nüquanzhuyi* suggests bourgeois women’s narrow pursuit of equal rights without a political or economic revolution—but the Chinese character *quan* can also be understood as “power,” and the resulting image of women’s power invoked by *nüquanzhuyi* aroused as much, if not more, negative sentiment as the abstract notion of “Western bourgeois” among the Chinese after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The centuries-old fear of women who usurped power seemed to be justified and intensified by the role of Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, in the Cultural Revolution. Against this political background, a new generation of Chinese feminists in the post-Mao era have adopted another term for feminism: *nüxingzhuyi* (feminine-ism). In the dominant gender discourse of femininity in the post-Mao era, the term *nüxingzhuyi* is understood variously as equivalent to “feminism” and as referring to a new study of femininity. Although various translations of this and other feminist neologisms confuse people, the CCP no longer monopolizes the definition of “feminism.”¹³

It might seem a simple task to translate these Chinese terms back into English, given that they are all renditions of “feminism.” Yet I hesitate when translating *nüquan* into English. Without *zhuyi* (-ism), *nüquan* can mean both “women’s rights” and “feminism.” In most cases, I use “feminism” for both *nüquanzhuyi* and *nüquan*, because in the May Fourth era these terms were used as equivalent to “feminism.” For example, I translate *Nüquan yundong tongmenhui* as the “Feminist Movement Association.” But when *nüquan* appears in a text published prior to the introduction of the term “feminism” in China, or when the speaker specifically meant “women’s rights,” I translate it as “women’s rights.”¹⁴ In discussing the problems of translation, I hope to call readers’ attention not only to the continuous linguistic

13. Scholars in Taiwan have long been using the term *nüxing zhuyi* for feminism, which may be the source of Mainland Chinese scholars’ adoption of the term. For a discussion of the discourse of femininity in post-Mao China, see Wang Zheng, “Nüxing yishi, shehui xingbie yishi bianyi” [An analysis of “female consciousness” and “gender consciousness”], *Funü yanjiu luncong* [Collection of women’s studies], no. 1 (1977): 14–20.

14. Karen Offen traces the emergence of the term “feminism” in European feminist history and finds it first used by the French women’s suffrage advocate Hubertine Auclert in 1882. It spread to North America and Asia in the early twentieth century. See Karen Offen, *European Feminism(s): 1700–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming). The term “feminism” did not appear in Chinese until the May Fourth New Culture period. It came from multiple sources, as New Culturalists translated feminist texts from Europe, the United States, and Japan.

contention in China over the English word “feminism” but also to nuances in the various translations of “feminism.” Readers will encounter these varying translations in the written texts as well as in the narrators’ accounts. Even the term *nüquanzhuyi* has a variety of nuances, depending on who is using the term. This variety reflects a historical process of discursive negotiation in which various political forces presented their understandings and definitions of “feminism.” Examining this process, I attempt to illuminate a paradox in modern China: although the May Fourth feminist agenda has entered the twentieth-century Chinese political mainstream, the term *nüquanzhuyi* has fallen from its May Fourth glory to a debased obscurity in Mao’s China.

THE NEW CULTURALISTS AND THE NEW WOMEN

Historians have emphasized various themes in their respective works on the May Fourth movement. Whereas some highlight the patriotic student movement, and some the enlightenment movement led by the New Culture intellectuals, most historians describe the May Fourth movement from a broad historical perspective that includes both cultural critique and students’ activism.¹⁵ I am inclined to understand “May Fourth” as a historical period that began with the New Culture movement and ended with the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925.¹⁶ In my view, both the New Culture enlightenment theme and the patriotic theme of student activism were only distinctive in scholarly works. Events and attitudes about the New Culture and student activism were largely blended in the public mind in the years after

15. For discussion of different definitions of the term “May Fourth,” see Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), introduction.

16. In May 1925, a Shanghai worker (a CCP member) was killed by Japanese guards when he and other workers went on strike. The Shanghai CCP branch decided to call for a larger strike and to launch an anti-imperialist movement. On May 30, when thousands of workers and students protested in the Shanghai international settlement, the British inspector in the police station ordered his men to fire at the crowds. Thirteen demonstrators were killed and twenty wounded. The May Thirtieth Massacre shocked and enraged the entire nation. The CCP and the GMD quickly channeled indigenous nationalism into the political goal of the National Revolution. The May Thirtieth Incident made anti-imperialism a more pressing issue than ever. In my view, it was an important event that turned feminist energy into a nationalist drive and made nationalism prevail over other May Fourth themes. For a discussion of May Thirtieth, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 340–341, and All-China Women’s Federation, *Zhongguo funü yundong shi*, 187–210.

the May Fourth Incident in 1919.¹⁷ What affected women of that generation were the events from that entire era. Defining May Fourth as a confluence of intellectual and social trends rather than a single social movement better fits the historical experiences of the May Fourth women. In this study, the term “May Fourth movement” is used narrowly to refer to the high tide of students’ activism directly after the May Fourth Incident in 1919. The term “New Culture movement” refers to the new literature and new thought movement that predated the May Fourth Incident. And the term “May Fourth era” or “May Fourth” refers to the entire decade between 1915 and 1925.

Although the major intellectual strands in the New Culture movement had been in existence since the late nineteenth century, the birth of the New Culture movement can be traced to the publication of *New Youth* (originally titled *The Youth Journal*) in 1915. The 1911 Revolution failed to establish a strong modern nation-state. Instead, it ended in a shamble of warlordism. Disillusioned Chinese intellectuals turned to a cultural solution to strengthen and revitalize the nation. They believed that for China to survive as an independent nation, Chinese culture and Chinese national character had to be remolded. *New Youth*, whose creator and editor in chief, Chen Duxiu, would later cofound the CCP, became the first intellectual forum for criticizing the foundations of Chinese cultural hegemony, Confucianism. A group of literary men quickly joined the critique by either contributing to *New Youth* or opening new forums in other periodicals and newspapers.

The New Culturalists, as they were later called, shared striking similarities. Most of them were from declining scholar-official families. All had been educated in the Confucian classics during their childhood. Most had been to “new” schools that followed either Western or Japanese models. Many had been abroad, mostly to Japan. All were conversant with one or more foreign languages. Most had a strong interest in both Chinese and foreign literature. Coming from different areas in China, all ended up in big cities, especially in Beijing and Shanghai, where they found their niche in universities and the press. They represented a new social category emerging in modern China: intellectuals (*zhishi fenzi*). Unlike the traditional Con-

17. The May Fourth Incident is a major historical event in modern China. After World War I, the world powers at the Versailles Conference signed a treaty that transferred all of Germany’s rights in Shandong to Japan. The news motivated Beijing students and citizens to protest on May 4, 1919, and sparked subsequent mass demonstrations against imperialism nationwide.

fucian scholars, these new scholars were shaped by both Confucian and Western education. Because the connection between education and officialdom had been severed when the civil service examination system was abolished in 1905, the new scholars did not belong to the social group that had maintained the Confucian-dominated imperial system. Instead, the dislocated new scholars—modern intellectuals—became rebels against the dominant culture.¹⁸

The emergence of New Culturalists was inseparable from China's encounter with the West. Not only was their education partly Western, but their professions were located in institutions modeled after the West. More important, they found in the West the intellectual weapons that facilitated their challenge to Confucianism. Western ideologies—social Darwinism, liberalism, anarchism, socialism, Marxism, and feminism—provided them a position outside of the dominant Confucian framework and enabled them to claim to be the creators of a new culture. Moreover, the power of the West made powerful those who appropriated Western ideologies. At the historical juncture when the demise of the Chinese empire contrasted with the rise of Western imperialist powers, the New Culturalists' promulgation of Western ideologies carried extraordinary weight. This gave them power that marginal groups in other cultural and historical contexts could hardly dream of. Ironically, the unequal power relation between China and the West became the source of power for the small group of cultural rebels in early-twentieth-century China.

Adopting a humanist position from Western liberalism, the New Culturalists concentrated their critique on the "inhumanness" (*feiren*) of Confucianism.¹⁹ The three cardinal principles in Confucianism—ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife—were held responsible for making Chinese into slaves. Or even worse, the Confucian ethics that maintained a hierarchical social order were nothing but "eating human

18. For English biographies of leading New Culture men, see Jerome B. Grieder, *Hu Shih and the Chinese Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970) and Lee Feigon, *Chen Duxiu, Founder of the Chinese Communist Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). For autobiographies in Chinese, see Zhou Zuoren, *Zhitang huixianglu* [A memoir of Zhou Zuoren] (Hong Kong: Sanyu tushu wenju gongsi, 1974), and Mao Dun, *Wo zouguo de daolu* [The journey I have made] (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1981). For a discussion of the new intelligentsia, also see Marie-Claire Bergere, *The Golden Age of the Chinese Bourgeoisie, 1911–1937* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 41–42.

19. The Chinese word *feiren* connotes a life less than human, a life degraded almost to the level of animals. Here I use "inhumanness," instead of "inhumanity," to convey the original meaning.

beings."²⁰ If the Chinese ever wanted to establish a modern democratic republic, the New Culturalists argued, they had to replace Confucian principles with freedom, equality, and independence. Liberal individualism was thus used as a subversive and liberating tool to free the subjugated Confucian subject.

The concept of an abstract human being with inalienable rights was alien but powerful because it was advocated as a universal truth. The New Culturalists, with their ready access to Western texts, claimed to have grasped the truth. In an age when evolutionism dominated Chinese intellectual discourse, the "truth" that pointed to a higher stage of human existence was appealing. More important to the New Culturalists, the "truth" exposed the falsehood of Confucianism. In sharp contrast to the autonomous human being, the submissive Confucian subject was described not only as a pitiable figure in the modern world, but also as totally unfit for a new civilization. The self-proclaimed holders of truth would not have been so powerful if they had lacked this claim to universal truth when dismantling the shrine of Confucianism. The shocked reactions and vehement responses they provoked proved that they had chosen an effective tool at that historical moment.

Attacking Confucianism and advocating a Western liberal concept of human rights at that historical juncture led necessarily to an inclusion of women. One of the three basic principles of Confucian social order is gender hierarchy (husband guides wife). Therefore, a wholesale offensive against Confucianism had to include an attack on gender hierarchy. More important to the New Culturalists, the social institutions based on this principle provided ample evidence of the inhumanness of Confucianism. Foot-binding, concubinage, arranged marriage, female chastity, sexual segregation, and so on were cited frequently by New Culturalists to demonstrate what they viewed as the "cruelty, irrationality, backwardness, and stupidity" of the Chinese cultural tradition. Women, therefore, became a quintessential symbol of the Confucian *feiren* (inhuman) system. Moreover, Chinese women were eventually described as having lived an inhuman life (*feiren de shenghuo*) for the past two millennia. Although their ahistorical and generalized portrayal of Chinese woman as victim is problematic, the male New Culturalists loudly identified women's oppression as symptomatic of a Confucian culture built on patriarchy.

20. See Lu Xun, "Kuangren riji" [A madman's diary], in *Lu Xun xuanji* [Selected works of Lu Xun], ed. Wenxue chubanshe (Hong Kong: Wenxue chubanshe, 1956), 53-63.

Because feminist movements, predominantly suffrage movements, were at their peak in the United States and Europe in the early twentieth century, the Western-oriented New Culturalists had one more point of reference when they discussed Chinese women's deplorable situation. The feminist movement was viewed by these men as a necessary stage in the development of human society. It was a sign of *modernity*. Gender equality, therefore, was a principle of modern society that was in direct opposition to the feudal principle of gender hierarchy. If China was to become modern, Chinese women had to be emancipated and to achieve an equal status as human beings. Otherwise, with half of the people enslaved and subjugated, the semiparalyzed nation would never evolve into a modern civilization. The link between women's status and a nation's status in the modern world made women's emancipation, together with human rights and modernization, an integral theme in the symphony of the New Culture.

The New Culturalists' critique of Confucian gender hierarchy and their promotion of women's emancipation generated a feminist upsurge in the May Fourth era. Because these literary men controlled or had access to the press, they could circulate their ideas among readers. Their readership dramatically increased after the May Fourth Incident, when a nationwide student movement came into being. A large student body, including many female students, became followers of New Culture ideas. The New Culture, swept along on the tide of the patriotic student movement, entered the mainstream of Chinese urban society. Identifying with the New Culture became a sign of modern citizenship. Talking about women's emancipation was an easy way to express such an identification. Men who claimed to be progressive all jumped on the bandwagon of women's emancipation. The May Fourth era witnessed unparalleled intellectual agitation for women's emancipation. A Chinese feminist movement emerged as the result of the inclusion of women in men's pursuit of a "Chinese Enlightenment."

In its initial stage, May Fourth women's involvement in social movements was stimulated by nationalism, not feminism. The May Fourth Incident provided young women students the opportunity to cross the gender boundary in the interest of the nation. The May Fourth movement saw the rise of a new social category: female students (*nüxuesheng*). Their patriotic action won them social recognition as a legitimate group in the public realm. Once they became involved in patriotic activism, many female students turned their attention to feminist issues.

In the few years after 1919, the Chinese feminist upsurge blossomed and reached its peak. After a period of men's agitation to make a women's movement in China, a women's movement began to emerge. Not only did

women's magazines proliferate—many of them run by women—but also women's organized activities for women's rights appeared nationwide in 1922. The *nüquan yundong* (feminist movement) of the early 1920s was prompted and shaped by the New Culturalists' feminist agitation. Its emergence not only illustrated the discursive power of the New Culturalists but also demonstrated the rapid growth of a new social category: "new women"—that is, educated women who acted from their newly acquired subject position of "being a human."

Born at the turn of the twentieth century, women of the May Fourth generation experienced dramatic institutional changes. The late Qing reformers' campaigns protesting footbinding and promoting women's school education were remarkably successful. Convinced by the argument that a strong nation needed women who were strong, not crippled, upper-class parents let their daughters retain "natural" feet, and the practice gradually spread to other families with access to new ideas. By the time the new republic passed laws banning footbinding, many girls from elite families had already escaped the torture, and many others had unbound their feet. Thus, a large number of women physically capable of an active and mobile life emerged.

A second dramatic change occurred as women's education gained the support of the government in the late Qing dynasty. The 1911 Revolution furthered the development of female education. A version of the American-based "republican motherhood" argument promoting female academies circulated in China even before 1911.²¹ By the time female education was institutionalized by the republican government, sending daughters to school had already become a patriotic gesture as well as a desirable status symbol. Public and private schools, together with Western missionary schools, educated a rapidly increasing number of young women in the first two decades of the century. Teaching became an accessible occupation for women who aspired to an independent life.

The location of schools also helped to nurture a group of new women. Because girls' schools above the elementary level were built in either county seats or metropolises, going to a secondary school marked the be-

21. "Republican motherhood" in U.S. women's history refers to the promotion of patriotic mothers who raised virtuous sons in the early republican period. See Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), chapter 3. Educating women to be patriotic mothers who would then bring up virtuous republican sons was the major rationale for popularizing women's education in the United States. A similar argument was frequently used when Chinese reformers promoted women's education.

ginning of independence for many teenage girls. In the past, only an arranged marriage would prompt women of the middle or upper class to move so far away from home. Now it was their own choice, in many cases after much hard struggle, to move far away to pursue their dreams. We can imagine that in this situation many a strong-willed girl was drawn to the big city. The May Fourth Incident later drew many young women into social activism from girls' schools in China's metropolises.

In other words, it was crucial to the success of the New Culturalists that at this historical juncture thousands of educated women were already concentrated in big cities where the New Culture publishing activity centered. Without these educated women, the New Culture feminism would have circulated only among men, a prospect some men feared. A few men and women had tried to spread feminist ideas at the end of the Qing dynasty,²² and their efforts led to the short-lived suffrage agitation after the 1911 Revolution. But they lacked a sufficient number of women readers and thus were unable to gain wide currency for feminist ideas. When the New Culturalists recovered an almost silenced feminist voice several years later, the fate of earlier feminist advocacy was still fresh in their minds.

By contrast, in 1919 the *nüxuesheng* (female students) were a receptive audience for the new ideas. Years of schooling imbued them with nationalism. Expecting to be modern citizens and to make their special contribution to the nation, educated women on the eve of the May Fourth era confronted numerous obstacles. The most serious of these obstacles was the fact that society was still segregated by gender. Especially for women from privileged classes, proprieties prohibited them from mingling with men other than their family members. Except for teaching and nursing, the two recently available "decent" female jobs, few professions were open to women. Even the educational system was gender-segregated: there was no coeducation above the elementary level, and there were only a few women's colleges, which in any case had a different curriculum from that of men's universities. Instead of breaking the gender boundary, nationalism was often used in the public discourse to keep women at home: rearing good republican citizens was seen as a glorious duty for a patriotic woman. Without the means and justification to break into the men's world, the *nüxuesheng's* future would still culminate in an arranged marriage.

22. Peter Zarrow discusses the role that He Zhen—an early feminist—played in popularizing feminism; see *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), chapter 6. For a discussion of early feminist agitation, see also Xiong Yuezhi, *Zhongguo jindai minzhu sixiangshi*, chapter 7.

It is not surprising that the New Culture movement's call for women's emancipation struck such a responsive chord among educated women. The rights of human beings, equality between men and women, independent personhood (*duli renga*), the inhumanness of feudal ethics, and the oppression of women—all these new phrases greatly empowered women in their pursuit of social advancement. The new language enabled them to reexamine their own and other women's lives. What had in the past been considered normal, or "woman's fate," was now labeled "women's oppression." The new language also opened up a vision of a new life, a life beyond the gender boundary. Young women with high aspirations could plan a future that fulfilled their dreams. In these ways, the new language made these educated women the "new women" (*xinnüxing*).

Nationwide discussion of the "woman problem" during the May Fourth period was a discursive practice that raised the consciousness of young women and created a new subjectivity for women in modern China. The "woman problem," which originally emphasized Chinese women's universal subjugation, evolved quickly into "women's problems," a widely extended examination of various women's predicaments (though the Chinese language does not distinguish singular or plural forms).²³ The proposed norms for an emancipated woman—that is, the new woman—were quite specific. The norms included an education that would make her a conscious modern citizen as well as secure her an occupation; an independent personhood, which meant financial self-reliance and autonomy in decisions concerning marriage, career, and so on; a capacity to participate in public life; and a concern for other oppressed women. The description—or rather, the prescription—of the new woman was radically different from that of a filial daughter, good wife, and virtuous mother in the Confucian system.

The liberal feminist prescription of the emancipated new woman was in wide circulation when it came under criticism by the rising Communist Party. The CCP's Marxist analysis pointed to the class bias in the new woman formula and called it a bourgeois feminist fantasy. To date, historians in the People's Republic of China still insist that the failure of "bourgeois feminism" illustrates the correctness of the CCP's Marxist line on women's liberation. However, my interviews with a group of May Fourth women demonstrate that the liberal feminist discourse was successful in constituting a new subjectivity for women in modern China. Far from being a mere

23. For comprehensive entries on the issues discussed nationwide during the May Fourth period, see Mei Sheng, ed., *Zhongguo funü wenti taolunji* [Collected essays on Chinese women's problems] (Shanghai: Xinwenhua chubanshe, 1929).

bourgeois fantasy, the new woman was a feminist social construct and a new social category that contributed greatly to breaking gender boundaries in modern China.

In her influential article "Theorizing Woman," Tani Barlow expounds upon the discursive construction of a new subjectivity for women in modern China.²⁴ As Barlow says, "Nüxing was a discursive sign and a subject position in the larger, masculinist frame of anti-Confucian discourse."²⁵ Her insight that the May Fourth discourse made *nüxing* a new category has been important to my conceptualization of this research. However, in her reading of the source material on multiple discourses of the May Fourth era, Barlow emphasizes the importance of a Victorian sex binary in constructing *nüxing*: "Nüxing was one half of the Western, exclusionary, essentialized, male/female binary." She argues that Chinese feminists not only grounded sexual identity in sexual physiology, but also embraced the notions of female inferiority associated with the sex binary. "Thus Chinese women became *nüxing* Woman only when they became the other of man in the Victorian binary."²⁶

This argument gives rise to several questions. Was the critique of Chinese women's lack of personality or human essence merely an attempt to "valorize" notions of female passivity, biological inferiority, intellectual inability, and so on, or was it also a condemnation of Confucian inhumanness and, therefore, an effort to raise women to the position of human being (albeit in the form of man)? If, given their own self-interest, male fiction writers represented woman as the other of man, what was women's interest in circulating the scientific notions of female inferiority in their struggle to move out of an inferior social position? If a new subject position only offered women an identification with a scientifically proved, innate inferiority, how would it have the power to change women's consciousness and to constitute new subjectivity? Was *nüxing*, the new subject position that appeared in the May Fourth era, really constituted by the Victorian binary?

Though I fully recognize the validity in Barlow's argument that the Victorian sex binary was introduced to the Chinese audience during the May Fourth era, I nonetheless maintain that it was far from a dominant discourse. The task of the May Fourth feminists was to discredit the Confucian patriarchal system. What they needed was a theory (or theories) to justify men's

24. Tani E. Barlow, "Theorizing Woman: *Funü, Guojia, Jiating*," in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 253–289.

25. *Ibid.*, 265.

26. *Ibid.*, 266–267.

and women's escape from the subjection and submission required by that system. The humanist concept of an essential and abstract human being who possesses inalienable rights was in opposition to the Confucian concept of a relational human being who was constituted by hierarchically differential normative obligations. For the May Fourth intellectuals, the essential and abstract human being, when it was held as the universal truth, had the power to pull men and women out of the Confucian web of unequal social relations and set them on an equal footing. That is why they eagerly promulgated liberal humanism and feminism. Against this historical background, the sex binary, which suggested a gender hierarchy, would only do a disservice to their purpose. This was precisely the reason why it was limited in its circulation.

My interviews with a group of May Fourth women have led me to a different understanding of the subjectivity of the new women. Their portraits in this volume show no sign of the presence of a subject position constituted by the Victorian sex binary, even though I asked each woman if she had read any of the famous May Fourth literature that represents woman as the sexed "other." However, the language they use reflects their familiarity with the New Culture feminist texts I examine in chapters 1 and 2. Although none of them could remember the specific article or magazine that provided them with their new language, they articulated New Culture feminist terminology effortlessly. This does not indicate that they never read May Fourth literature based on the Victorian binary. Rather, it demonstrates what, in May Fourth texts, was meaningful to them.

My major argument in this study is that nothing stipulates that the adoption of liberal humanism in China should duplicate the discursive process of differentiation and exclusion by which Western liberal humanism was constructed.²⁷ Grounded in a very different philosophical, political, and cultural context, the Chinese Enlightenment tells a story of male intellectuals' inclusion of women in their construction of the "modern human being." In this particular context, differentiation and exclusion in the process of establishing new definitions and new identities were practiced by negating the Confucian subject and cultural practices. The inclusion of women, however,

27. Differing from this feminist critique of the Enlightenment legacy, recent studies present a more complex picture of the Enlightenment. They examine women's role in the Enlightenment and analyze mixed messages proffered by Enlightenment thinkers and mixed legacies of the Enlightenment. See Dena Goodman, "Women and the Enlightenment," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renete Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard, and Merry E. Wiesner (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), and Offen, *European Feminism(s)*, chapter 2.

did not guarantee a virtual elimination of asymmetrical relations of power, especially when that inclusion was carried out by male intellectuals blind to the masculinist bias in humanism. "To be a human" in the context of the Chinese Enlightenment was to be a man with all the constituting "modern" values. Chinese women, in this sense, were not regulated to become the "other" of man, but rather, were called on to be the same as man.

The May Fourth feminist emphasis on women being "human," rather than on sex difference, took root quickly in China. The power of May Fourth feminism was felt in the following arenas. First, educated women with a new consciousness entered the public space, demanding social, cultural, and political changes. Second, higher education opened up to women. Third, gender segregation in occupations broke down. Finally, equality between men and women as a principle was written into the platform of both the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD). Almost a half century later, echoing the May Fourth ideal of humanist inclusion of women, Mao proudly announced, "The times are different. Now men and women are the same. Female comrades can do whatever male comrades can do." However, a women's liberation holding the male-universal as the norm was problematic. In the second half of the century, when this masculinist gender equality became the state hegemony, many Chinese women found it oppressive. Their discontent with the state hegemony led women in post-Mao China to repudiate the notion that they should be "the same as man." The story of Chinese women's revolt against the masculinist Maoist gender equality in the late twentieth century is the topic of another project.²⁸ The point I want to emphasize here is that the May Fourth feminist discourse, with its hallmark of women being "human," has had an impact on women in China throughout the twentieth century.

My reading of the development of this masculinist discourse on gender equality suggests two main points. First, precisely because the liberal human being is masculine, the subject position created by liberalism in China was a powerful one. When the May Fourth women had access to it, they

28. Chinese women's revolt against a masculinist gender equality in the post-Mao era demonstrates that an empowering and subversive May Fourth discourse has become the state hegemony in the People's Republic of China and that a statist gender equality with an inherent masculine bias can be oppressive to women. Challenging the hegemonic gender equality, Chinese women and men in the post-Mao era have deployed the sex binary found in May Fourth literature. A sexologically oriented and scientifically elaborated femininity has become a new subject position in post-Mao China. It poses a challenge to the masculinist "human" position. The May Fourth legacy is complex. For a discussion of Chinese feminism in the post-Mao era, see Wang Zheng, "Research on Women in Contemporary China."

immediately claimed a share in the power and privileges that had been exclusively men's. Second, to possess this masculine subject position required a denial of female inferiority rather than an embrace of scientifically defined feminine weaknesses, and the May Fourth new women did exactly that.

As rising critical forces in their time, May Fourth humanist liberalism and feminism provided new options for that generation of men and women. To be sure, other competing discourses, old and new, also constituted subject positions for women. The new woman was certainly not the only subject position in the early twentieth century. From the stories of the new women, we learn that there was at least one other new category that the new women did not want to be associated with: *taitai* (wives of officials or bourgeoisie). It is unclear when *taitai* became a special term for wives of upper-class men. But it is certain that in the May Fourth generation, *taitai* included newly educated women and the relatives, friends, or classmates of the new women. Moreover, a *taitai* was associated with modernity, because she could accompany her husband on social occasions. It would be interesting to conduct a comparative study of new women and *taitai*. However, that is beyond the scope of this work. The relevant point here is that, as an educated woman, a new woman could have chosen to be a *taitai*, dependent on her newly rising bourgeois husband for a comfortable and consumerist life. But she opted not to do so. Although a *taitai* could read, dance, play the piano, and have a social life, in essence she did not differ much from the traditional wife insofar as she lacked that quality most essential to the new women: *duli renga* (independent personhood).

The new women, however, were not merely constructed by the New Culture discourse. Ironically, the old culture provided them with a positive subject position as heroines. Traditional Chinese heroines (*jinguo yingxiong*) were women who fulfilled their obligations to the ruler or their kin with remarkable deeds in warfare. The stories of ancient heroic women warriors appeared in both heterodox literature and Confucian orthodox history books. To be a Confucian woman was to fulfill one's obligations as a daughter, wife, mother, and subject. A woman's martial spirit (*shangwu*), demonstrated by fulfilling her obligations, qualified her as a remarkable woman rather than as a masculinized woman or an androgynous woman in the Western sense.²⁹ By the same logic, to be a Confucian man was to fulfill

29. Du Fangqin, *Nüxing guannian de yanbian* [The transformation of views on women] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1988). It is revealing that Du, a historian of Chinese women's history who does not speak English, never uses femininity and masculinity to describe Chinese ancient heroines. See her discussion of Hua Mulan on page 276.

one's obligations as son, husband, father, and subject. A man's lack of martial spirit (typical among Confucian literati) did not make him feminized. In other words, martial spirit (*wu*) and civility (*wen*) were not gender codes signifying masculinity or femininity. Rather, they were positive qualities that either men or women could acquire.

The Chinese heroine had been a discursive sign produced mainly by men to promulgate among women Confucian ethics such as loyalty and filial piety. Martial heroines in local plays and folk songs reached Chinese women of all classes and localities. Of various martial heroines, the legendary Hua Mulan became the most popular among young women born at the turn of the twentieth century. It is perhaps because they found it easy to identify with this unmarried young woman from a commoner's family, or perhaps because the famous poem "Mulan ci" [Ballad of Mulan] helped circulate Mulan's story among young girls who were able to read. The popularity of Hua Mulan in that period is quite understandable. Replacing her aged father, Mulan disguised herself as a man and joined the army. For twelve years she fought bravely against invaders. When the enemy was defeated, she chose to return home to serve her old parents instead of becoming a high official. Like all the other heroines, Mulan retreated from the men's world once she fulfilled her obligations to her ruler and her country. In addition to being remarkably courageous and skilled in martial arts, Mulan was notably patriotic and filial to her parents. At the turn of the twentieth century, facing the threat from Western imperialists, many men found Mulan and other martial heroines desirable role models for their daughters or female students. Not only did the "Ballad of Mulan" become a popular text for young girls, but many girls were named after Mulan.³⁰

The popularization of a traditional heroine was significant to young women born at this time. Embedded in nationalist ideas, young women found in Mulan a subject position that allowed them to envision a life beyond the scope of domesticity and gender boundaries. The welfare of the

30. The references to Mulan appear frequently in women's writings at the beginning of the twentieth century as well as in old women's memoirs in the late twentieth century. Men's eulogies of Mulan and other martial heroines also appeared in newspapers in the late Qing. See Li Yu-ning and Zhang Yufa, eds., *Jindai Zhongguo nüquan yundong shiliao* [Historical source material on the modern Chinese feminist movement] (Taipei: Zhuanji wenxue chubanshe, 1975), 167-172. The legend of Mulan has been passed down mainly through the poem "Mulan ci" [Ballad of Mulan], also called "Mulan shi." It is believed that the poem was written sometime between the fourth and six centuries. See Chinese Department at Jinan University, ed., *Zhongguo lidai shige mingpian shangxi* [A selection of famous poems in Chinese history] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1983), 180-183. Mulan is familiar

nation required the devotion of China's loyal and filial daughters. Because now the goal was not only to drive away invaders but also to establish a modern nation, the modern Mulan (the young woman who received a nationalist education) was eager to move into the public arena and stay there without being disguised as a man. At this historical juncture, the modern Mulan happily encountered the new ideas of women's rights and equality. Her dream of entering the men's world was legitimized by the language of modernization imported from the West. After all, the image of Mulan was completely compatible with the image of a modern woman enjoying equality with men. That is, in men's armor, a woman could behave just like a man in the men's world. In this sense, the legendary Mulan offered a position from which Chinese women could appropriate the masculine liberal subject position.

The New Culturalists' promotion of women's emancipation may likewise be understood in the light of cultural continuity. Historically, when Chinese literati created signs such as Mulan for women, they played the role of moral guardians. The new intellectuals functioned in exactly that same way in promoting new signs for women. These dislocated intellectuals were greatly empowered by advocating women's emancipation, because in doing so, they assumed the position of liberator as well as leaders of new morality. However, men's role as champions of women's emancipation led to a paradoxical situation: in their effort to dismantle Confucian hierarchical social relations, they nevertheless maintained a gender hierarchy. An examination of the New Culturalists' private lives reveals that these men maintained a social position superior to women (the liberator and the liberated, the enlightener and the enlightened, the instructor and the student). Moreover, their treatment of women in their daily life (and even in their writing) often reflects the old culture rather than the new culture.

Confucian culture continued to exert its power over May Fourth men and women in various ways. Many new women rejected an outright subordinate role, especially to men of the same generation. But when unequal

to American readers of Maxine Hong Kingston's book *Woman Warrior* (New York: Knopf, 1976). Disney's film *Mulan* increases Mulan's popularity in the English-speaking world. However, unlike Disney's representation of Mulan, to the Chinese minds, marriage is irrelevant to the Mulan legend. For many women of the May Fourth generation, to be a "Mulan" meant an alternative choice to entering a marriage. Moreover, the accentuated theme "to be true to oneself" in the Hollywood Mulan expresses well the quintessential American value, but it alters the central moral message in the Chinese Mulan legend, which is "to try one's best to fulfill one's obligations."

gender relations were masked by grand rhetoric such as obligations to the nation, to the people, or to the CCP, young women were often in a dilemma. The Mulan position in their consciousness reminded them of obligations to others, whereas the modern woman position insisted that they had equal rights. For the May Fourth women who joined the CCP, this conflict was most severe because the party demanded total submission of the individual. The solution was to suppress the new woman who had an independent personhood and to draw strength from Mulan, who exhibited strong loyalty and patriotism. It was a painful process, but the revolutionary Mulan could console herself that she joined the CCP not for her father, but for the people. Hence, all her submission and sacrifice acquired new significance.

Educated young men of the May Fourth era—the students of the New Culturalists—are absent from my study, although they are important to the lives of new women. Did educated young men also take gender equality as a principle in life? Did they experience a similar process of consciousness raising? What kind of new subject position was created for them in the May Fourth discourses? How did the subjectivity of men and women differ in the May Fourth era? These questions must be left for a future project. Here I can only suggest that it is not accidental that the era created the term *xin-nüxing* (new woman) instead of *xinnanxing* (new man). Though May Fourth feminism changed educated young men's views toward women, it is the new women that emerged as a new social category in modern China. The May Fourth era, in this sense, represents a meaningful breakthrough in the long process of Chinese women's liberation.

May Fourth liberal feminist agitation did not last long. The emergence of feminist advocacies and the flurry of women's organized activities were possible largely because of the unique political situation in the early twentieth century. Between the fall of the Qing dynasty and the rise of a new central political power, Chinese intellectuals and students were able to engage in a cultural revolution on their own initiative. Although prominent New Culturalists soon gained more discursive power than ordinary followers, there was no effective intellectual or political authority to control the expression of different ideas, approaches, solutions, or explorations. Twentieth-century China has never seen a freer intellectual forum than that during the May Fourth period. The National Revolution promoted by the alliance of the GMD and the CCP brought an end to this era of intellectual freedom. Nationalism, promoted as a rallying issue to enhance the political power of the alliance, soon overshadowed other isms after the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925. Although the May Fourth feminist agenda was largely incorpo-

rated into the National Revolution, the social space for nonparty feminist activities was reduced drastically.³¹

The failure of the political alliance between the two parties in 1927 resulted in further adversity for feminism in China. Immediately after the dissolution of the alliance, the CCP's fugitive status forced many feminists in the party to either go underground or flee into the mountains. Their immediate concern was shifted from mobilizing women to ensuring their own and the party's survival. At the same time, the GMD's tightening political control further constrained the May Fourth intellectual forum. Although in the GMD-controlled areas, non-Communist feminist organizations were allowed to exist, radical agitation for a feminist revolution disappeared. In a period when the new regime was consolidating, feminism as a subversive ideology was of little use to a ruling class trying to maintain social stability by promoting Confucian norms. Even though both parties claimed to uphold gender equality, and despite the fact that some May Fourth feminist issues continued to be addressed by feminists within each party, women's emancipation did not rank high in either party's plan for achieving political dominance.

Feminist activities and mobilization were subdued in the changed political landscape after the late 1920s. However, the May Fourth feminist discourse, contained and expressed in social categories, institutions, organizations, and legislation, as well as in beliefs and words, had become a part of the twentieth-century process in China. The new subjectivity of women created by this discourse lingered in modern Chinese society. And the new women continued to pursue their feminist goals with whatever means were available to them. These new women, our protagonists in this study, have both testified and contributed to the power of May Fourth feminist discourse. Their solid footprints mark the advancement of Chinese women in the twentieth century.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ORAL HISTORIES

When I began my research in Shanghai in 1992, I had no idea that I would be able to meet educated women born at the beginning of the twentieth century. But for my project on May Fourth feminism, it was crucial to understand the lives of women of that generation, or, at least, to understand the lives of women activists of that time. So as soon as I landed in Shanghai, I

31. For more information on feminism in the National Revolution, see Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*.

looked for women who had been active in the women's movement during the May Fourth era and for places that might have preserved personal documents of these women.

The first stage of my search was discouraging. None of my friends and relatives knew any women that old, and my acquaintances working in libraries and museums looked baffled when I asked if these institutions had archival collections of diaries, letters, and other personal documents of women; they replied that only a few famous men in the past have been entitled to this kind of attention. I realized then that my search for women's personal writings might be futile. First, the percentage of women who were literate in that generation is very small. Second, even if many educated women had kept diaries and written letters, the chances were slim that these personal documents had survived civil wars and the War of Resistance against Japan. Third, even if some women had been fortunate enough to keep their personal documents intact before 1949, it was still unlikely that those documents would have escaped destruction during the Cultural Revolution. I decided that a more realistic approach would be to locate surviving women.

Given my advantage of being a Shanghai native, I eventually met the women I was looking for through personal connections. I interviewed ten women who were approximately ninety years old and three younger women who told stories of a mother or older sister. Most of the old women who told me their own life stories were members of the Shanghai Research Institute of Culture and History (SRICH), or the Wenshiguan, as the Chinese call it. I, too, will use the term "Wenshiguan," because the English translation conveys a sense of prestige that Wenshiguan does not actually have. The Wenshiguan is an institution that the CCP created nationwide after 1949. Celebrities of different walks of life before 1949, including the last emperor, have been appointed as members of the Wenshiguan by officials from the central committee to local governments. In official parlance, "the Wenshiguan is an honorable institution which the party and government established for the purpose of placing and unifying old intellectuals."³² The government pays salaries to the members, who are supposed to do research or write historical accounts of past events. But research and publication is not a requirement for maintaining membership. Most members only write

32. Wang Guozhong, introduction to *Shanghai wenshi yanjiuguan guanyuan zhuanlue* [Biographies and autobiographies of members of the Shanghai Wenshiguan], vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenshiguan, 1990). Since 1990, Shanghai Wenshiguan has published four volumes: volume 1 in 1990, volume 2 in 1991, and volumes 3 and 4 in 1993. The publication is classified as *neibu ziliao* (restricted material).

when they have the opportunity to publish—that is, when on special occasions the government or newspapers and periodicals ask them for articles. In short, the Wenshiguan is more a means for old non-Communist celebrities to have a place in socialist China than a genuine research institute. As one of my interviewees poignantly commented, the Wenshiguan “is like a place collecting high-class beggars. . . . All kinds of people are shut up in the Wenshiguan, the ones who had some fame and some followers in the old society. While we are under the surveillance of the cadres sent by the government, the party can show the world that they treasure intellectuals.”

Most of the women I interviewed became members of the Shanghai Wenshiguan in the early 1980s. They were recruited into the Wenshiguan for several reasons. The Cultural Revolution had drastically reduced the number of members because the Wenshiguan stopped recruiting. At the same time, many members had died either because of persecution or from natural causes. In 1978 the Wenshiguan began recruiting new members with requirements different from those before the Cultural Revolution. Now, old people with a college degree obtained before 1949 may be accepted as members even if they were not celebrities. Most new members endured exclusion, discrimination, and persecution in the Mao era. In providing them with financial security and social status in their old age, the party seems to be apologizing for its wrongdoings, as well as hoping to use these people’s personal networks to reach overseas Chinese, including those in Taiwan. My interviewees see their membership in the Wenshiguan as a compensation for the losses they incurred as a result of actions by the government. Although they appreciate the fact that they are provided for in their old age by the Wenshiguan, they can never be oblivious to their losses—losses for which nothing in the world can compensate.

With a few exceptions, my interviewees are women who received either college or secondary school education in the early twentieth century and established their careers in the 1920s and 1930s. Besides education and career, the women I present here have something else in common: their creative and active lives ended abruptly after 1949. A ninety-three-year-old woman told me shortly after I met her, “In 1949 I was in the prime of my life. I should have been able to do a lot of things. But my life has been wasted since then.” The new government not only deprived these women of their cherished careers but also successfully deleted them from history. As a woman born after 1949, I had absolutely no idea before I met these women that such a large number of independent career women existed before liberation. Brought up in the Maoist era, I never questioned the claim that only

the Communist Revolution liberated Chinese women. Therefore, facing these witnesses of history and listening to their sagas one after another, I was greatly shocked and deeply touched.

The interviews were often emotional for my interviewees as well. These old women had not expected that someone would value their life stories. They welcomed this stranger warmly, and many poured out their experiences right away (although this was partly because I was introduced to them by someone they knew). They felt quite at ease with this younger Shanghainese woman who spoke their language but came from the United States. Several said that they could tell me a particular story because I was not going to publish it in China. Still, they did not feel entirely unencumbered. They asked me not to tape them whenever they criticized the CCP, even though their criticisms were far milder than those I overheard in the markets, on the buses, and in other public places in China. They did feel free, however, to express their emotions. Along with their stories, they laughed heartily and cried without embarrassment. To some of them, my arrival meant a great deal. An eighty-eight-year-old woman said at the first interview, "My friends have all passed away. I am now very lonely. I can't sleep, always thinking about these things [her past involvement in women's activism]. I won't be able to die with my eyes closed if I do not tell the stories of those sisters." She showed me pictures of her tombstone, which she had made in 1990; the inscribed epitaph mentioned several women who once worked with her. She said, "I has this tombstone done for these people I mentioned here. I was just worried that they would be forgotten. If you had come earlier, I would not have had to make this tombstone. . . . I do not believe in religion. But I think fate may exist. Probably you are sent by God." She died three months after she told me her life story.

In a sense, this book memorializes these women, whose heroic past has long been forgotten. It is a memorial written largely by the women themselves. Their extraordinary accounts of their lives, which were so unexpected to me and so "irrelevant" to my original research design, shaped the reconceptualization of the book and constitute the main story presented here. As a friend to these women, I wish to draw their portraits in the way that they wish to be remembered. Therefore, I have constructed their narratives with their own words from both interviews and their autobiographies. I have made a few minor structural changes from the original material in order to present a chronological story without unnecessary repetition. The tapes from the first round of interviews, conducted between February and July 1993, were transcribed in full length. I then selected information from follow-up

interviews conducted between December 1994 and January 1995 to add to the original narratives. The rest of my editing is limited to deleting repetition and removing detailed information on family members.

But as a study of history, this work cannot take the format of a memorial. In my effort to place these isolated stories in historical context, to present a fuller historical drama in which these women played important roles, I, as a historian, must turn these social agents of historical change into objects of scrutiny. Their narratives become in turn the primary source material that I must examine, analyze, and interpret. Rather than being only a record of the women's words, this book expresses my position in relation to my historical subject.

My awareness of the historian's role in presenting history led me to explore a suitable format for this project. Because I strongly wish to let the May Fourth new women speak on their own terms, altering their words as little as possible, I present their narratives in their entirety instead of selecting quotations from their narratives to meet my needs. Accordingly, I have organized chapters around the individual narratives rather than the sequence of historical events. My analyses following each narrative situate the narrator in the specific historical context and present my understanding of the narrative's meanings. Thus, part 1, "The Setting," traces the formation of May Fourth feminism from the written texts produced from late Qing to the May Fourth era and presents a historical setting for the emergence of the new women. Part 2 begins with an introductory chapter that is followed by five chapters, each consisting of a narrative by a new woman and an interpretation by me. I hope that this format allows readers to hear the new women's words directly and to derive their own interpretation of those words.

Because the narratives constitute a major part of this study, I must also address the complexity of doing oral history. Reading the stories of the new women, readers should be aware of certain issues. First, as one scholarly commentator observes about oral history, "The subject's story (the data) is the result of an interaction between two people. The personality and biases of the researcher clearly enter into the process to affect the outcome."³³ Although in my interviews an open-ended question like "How did you get your college education?" or "How did you get involved with the women's movement" often led to a monologue by the narrator—a monologue interrupted only by my requests for clarification—the narratives are never-

33. Kathryn Anderson, et. al., "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," in *Feminist Research Methods*, ed. Joyce McCarl Nielsen (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 102.

theless products that reflect a specific set of dynamics between the narrators and I. My manifest interest in women's history and my position as a junior woman scholar from the United States may have encouraged the narrators to glorify their past experiences. American scholars have warned researchers about the superior power position of the interviewer in these situations, noticing as well the narrator's tendency to downplay the significance of their experience.³⁴ But in my case, the narrators are well-educated women, and many of them have a knowledge of Chinese classics superior to mine. Although their elite status has long been lost, membership in Wenshiguan grants them a respectability expressed by the reverent way they are addressed: the gender-neutral suffix *lao* (senior) is attached to their surnames (for example, Zhulao, Lulao, and so forth). Addressing them in this manner put me, a graduate student researcher, in a reverent position immediately. Even without this *lao* that suggests their respectable social standing, the generational hierarchy in Chinese culture automatically placed these senior women in a position above me. In the interviews, they took obvious pleasure in teaching history to this junior woman by emphasizing their own struggles and achievements in the past.

They generously shared their life experiences with this junior woman because each had her own agenda in the interview. They knew of their deletion from history, and they saw in me, a historian from the United States, one who could give them a voice, or even restore their place in history. The power of the pen and my geographic location contributed to the enthusiasm of my informants. The prospect of having their stories published in the United States may have led them, on the one hand, to express their thoughts freely and, on the other hand, to select stories from their life carefully.

If my junior position was an advantage in inducing senior women to pour out their rich experiences, it was also an obstacle to discussing certain aspects of their life. Sexuality is a topic that educated Chinese are not used to discussing freely. If sexuality is ever discussed, it is usually between friends or relatives of the same generation. It would have been inappropriate for me to probe into a senior woman's sexual life. As a result, this topic was almost untouched in our conversations. But my interviewees' reticence on sexuality should not be interpreted as merely a response to my age. It is also consistent with their view of what made them who they are. Unlike the bour-

34. See Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), and Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994).

geois *taitai*, whose identity was based on her marriage, the new women defined themselves by their career achievements in the public arena rather than by their private lives.

Second, we must consider the effects of these women's unique experience on their oral histories. Their social position has changed dramatically with changing political contexts and discourses. In the 1920s, riding on the tide of feminism and nationalism, they became active social agents. In the 1930s, they reached the position of social elites. After 1949, they were marginalized by Maoism. Finally, in the post-Mao era, they have been rehabilitated, living their old age with social respect but without social power. A keen sense that half of their valuable lives has been wasted may contribute to a stronger nostalgia about the prime of their lives than that possessed by other old people.

Third, because this is a study of the discursive construction of subjectivity, oral history as a method complicates the task of interpretation. For example, there is the important issue of intervening years. These are women in their nineties telling stories of their youth. From the 1920s to 1990s, dominant discourses in China have changed significantly. If language constitutes subjectivity, then how do changing discourses reshape subjectivity? How can I tell if my informants are expressing their subjectivity today, or the subjectivity they constructed in the 1920s? One way I have tried to control the oral history material is by checking the primary texts written in the May Fourth era. Comparing different terminology circulating then and today, I have been able to single out the phrases unique to May Fourth that were used unhesitatingly by these women. Phrases like "independent personhood" (*duli renge*), "promoting feminism" (*shenzhang nüquan*), "the rights of human beings" (*rende quanli*), and so on, were rarely used in the early 1990s' China. But they flowed effortlessly from these old women when they described experiences in their youth, which clearly indicates the presence of a subjectivity constructed by the May Fourth discourse.

In addition to "outdated" vocabulary in these women's speech, the absence of "fashionable" terms demonstrates the persistence of their May Fourth feminist consciousness. In the post-Mao era, "democracy" and "science" have been the two most prominent words in the construction of the May Fourth memory. Intellectual critique of Maoism and the students' democratic movements that peaked in 1979 and 1989, around the sixtieth and seventieth anniversaries of the May Fourth movement, present the goals of the May Fourth movement as being primarily the pursuit of democracy and science. Interestingly, our narrators never use these popular terms to de-

scribe their May Fourth goals. When I asked about their experiences during the May Fourth movement, they spoke of patriotic and feminist activities. The absence of popular terms suggests that contemporary intellectual currents have little effect on these old women. Or, even if they have an effect, these women do not conform *their own* May Fourth memories to the public ones so recently constructed. After all, the post-Mao revitalization of the May Fourth era is a maneuver of resistance by intellectuals, rather than a form of dominance by the state.³⁵

Fourth, related to the preceding issue is the question: what is the new women's relation to the Maoist discourse? Did they consciously resist that discourse during their long-term marginalization? Or were they, like many other intellectuals, more or less transformed by Maoism? How much of their account is an artifact of Maoism? Does Maoism still serve as a censor, determining what they should or should not say, or what is appropriate to emphasize and what is not? In this regard, the different political identities of these women become highly significant. The one Communist Party member uses much official party language, in stark contrast to the non-Communist women. The sharp differences in these women's speech clearly mark their different positions in the Maoist discourse. Whereas the CCP woman's life has been woven together with the party's history, the other women have no vested interest in Maoism. This factor places them easily in the position of dismantling Maoism in the post-Mao era. However, that is not to say that they have been free of Maoist hegemony. In a very real sense, everyone is still living under the shadow of Mao. Recounting past activities, my interviewees often assumed a defensive tone to argue for their actions. They were not simply responding to my questions. Rather, they were repudiating charges and criticism leveled against them in the Mao era. They relied heavily on the rhetoric of patriotism—*aiguo* (love the country), a positive value in Maoism—to justify and give meaning to their pre-1949 activities. Thus, although their effort to construct their pre-1949 history rejects the CCP

35. In an interview in 1995, Xia Yan, a renowned May Fourth veteran, talks about his recollection of the May Fourth movement. Contrary to the interviewer's emphasis on democracy and science as the most influential issues of the era, Xia stresses that the central themes were anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. In anti-feudalism, he recalls, "First of all, we emphasized equality between men and women, and freedom of marriage. Female students' participation in the movement embodied the demand of equality between men and women. Then there was the slogan of anti-Confucian ethics, and then we moved to anti-Confucius himself." Xia's talk strikes a rare note amid the dominant construction of the May Fourth memory in contemporary China. See "Cuxi tan Wusi" [A chat about the May Fourth], *Donfang* [The Orient], no. 2 (1995): 24–25.

myth of Chinese women's liberation, the language they often use situates them under Maoist dominance.

Feminist poststructuralism calls our attention to the historically and socially specific discursive production of experience. As Joan Scott puts it, "Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political."³⁶ It is important for us to understand the new women's narratives as discursive products. As such, they inevitably contain conflicting, competing, and shifting meanings. Precisely because the narratives contain multiple meanings, they are valuable for our understanding of the complexity of subjectivity. What is more, the meaning of experience is a crucial site of political struggle. In this sense, these women's effort to give their past experience a legitimized meaning—patriotism—is more a stance of political resistance than proof of acquiescence to hegemonic Maoism. At the same time, using the dominant language to strengthen their historical and social position may also lead to a denial or suppression of subject positions that do not have legitimacy in the dominant discourse. This may explain the obvious lack of self-interest and the prominent fixed subject position of patriot in their stories.

Covering the span of nearly a century, the new women's stories are woven out of the vicissitudes of their individual lives in the social, cultural, and political transformation of twentieth-century China. In the limited space here, I can only sketch five portraits, which hardly does justice to the new women's rich and diversified experiences. Still, these women's own presentations provide important clues to many puzzles about the Chinese women's movement, May Fourth feminism, and Chinese women's liberation. Two decades ago, Marilyn B. Young in her pioneering work *Women in China* asked, "What happened to the urban feminists who did not join the Communists? And what was the fate of those who did?"³⁷ I hope this work, in the May Fourth women's own words, provides an answer to those questions.

36. Joan W. Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 37. See also, Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*.

37. Marilyn B. Young, ed., *Women in China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, 1973), 2.