Walking Through Modernity: The Social Experiences and Cultural Representations of Boundfoot Women during the Anti-footbinding Movement in China, 1900s-1930s

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Abstract of Thesis

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By centralizing women’s bound feet as a specific locus of experiencing modernity, my research aims to unearth the boundfoot women’s bodily experiences and subject formations in their everyday struggles during the anti-footbinding movement in China’s early social reform era, 1900s-1930s. Through an astute reading of my primary resources, including newspapers, periodic publications, municipal archives, the first part of my thesis seeks for the textual evidence of women’s self-accounts and personal stories about their foot-unbinding, or “fangzu” (放足) practice. My analysis demonstrates that female foot-binders’ fangzu stories can be characterized as a spectrum of experiences with the case of women committed suicide for physical liberation from footbinding traditions on the one end, and the case of female suicide led by the coercive violence of fangzu campaigns on the other. What situated in between the two ends are women who, willingly or not, engaged themselves in the very process of fangzu practice and eventually survived from it.

My historical exploration centers the relation between women’s physical transformation and her reconfigured subjectivity in complex living surroundings, where socials tension and familial conflicts surfaced along with the political propagation of fangzu message. I also focus on the narrative patterns of the female foot-binders’ fangzu accounts, whose voices, though rare, did appear on mainstream periodic issues. By
developing an acute sense to understand fangzu practicers’ ambiguous ways of speaking suffering, I argue that boundfoot women’s voices were not structurally written out of the nationalist emancipatory narrative, but instead articulated in accordance with the dominant discourse. Here, my concern lies with in what ways the boundfoot woman recounted her past, perceived her present and envisioned her future, and what kind of modern subjecthood had been desired for and constructed through the physical transformation of foot-binders’ fangzu journey.

What follows boundfoot women’s social experiences in the transformative period between 1990s and 1930s is the cultural representation of them in the literary creation of native modernist intellectuals. In order to problematize the dominant discourse of women’s emancipation that set up women with bound feet as the biggest social problem in early modern China, the second part of my thesis examines the male intellectual’s anti-traditionalist narratives and compare it with those of the female intellectual’s writing that created a space for alternative representations of subaltern women. Through an acute reading of the selected writings of male intellectual Guo Moruo, and Yu Dafu, I argue that the image of boundfoot women is an indispensable trope for native male intellectuals to claim for themselves a transcendent stance through which they took the credit for saving the oppressed and debilitated female masses. By venturing into the field of feminist representations of boundfoot women and by offering literary analysis of works written by two women writers, Ding Ling and Ling Shuhua, I argue that these two female writers invented alternative constructions of traditional female subjectivities that oppose those contoured by their male counterparts. Their textual representations of boundfoot
women not only acknowledged subaltern voice and agency, but also offered a glimpse of an alternative modern female subjectivity at variance with what was postulated by the dominant “new woman” ideology.
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Footbinding in China represented a gender-specific institution; this social custom formed an integral part of women’s life in traditional society and its sociocultural significance reflected an overarching Confucian moral worldview.¹ Footbinding among gentlewomen during the Song dynasty (960-1270 AD) became a prominent social phenomenon, and the practice was gradually inscribed in social customs among commoners in various locales. The binding practice, which lasted a lifetime, was an embodied and collective experience of Chinese women across divisions of social status from the twelfth to the twentieth century. This ingrained custom, as a marker of cultural prestige and emblem of feminine beauty (Ebrey, “The Inner Quarters” 40), reached its height in the mid- and late-Qing (1644-1912 AD) popularized among Han women from intellectual and elite gentry to the general populace alike (Ko, “The Body as Attire” 8). Beginning at a very young age, footbinding changed the shape of the practicer’s feet, restricting her domestic activity and social mobility. The custom was exclusive to matrilineal relations, in which the mother and other female relatives enacted the binding process upon the daughter’s body (Ko, “Pursuing Talent and Virtue” 201-203), whereby the daughter’s body and mindset were prepared for a future marital life in her patrilocal family (Blake 682). However torturous it appears to be, the binding process nevertheless

¹ See Ko, “Pursuing Talent and Virtue” 10-14; Zito, “Secularizing the Pain of Footbinding in China” 339-341. On the topic of Chinese women’s footbinding practices, scholars from different disciplines—history, cultural anthropology, and women’s studies—engage themselves in an interdisciplinary conversation about footbinding and offer interpretations from different perspectives. Among these scholars, feminist historians and sinologists Dorothy Ko and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, and cultural anthropologist Angela Zito—to name a few—make invaluable contributions to this topic
was a female ritual, which endowed the practicers with a meaningful social existence in her complex microcosmic surroundings. The persistence and prevalence of footbinding practice among kinswomen and the celebration of it in Ming-Qing gentlewomen’s writings indicate the profound association between a woman’s bodily nature and her social responsibilities and morality. Female virtues, such as filial piety, domesticity, compliance, marriageability, and ritual decorum were performed through and embodied in the binding ritual.\textsuperscript{2} To study women’s footbinding practice, thus, is to study gender-specific lived experiences related to women’s bodily sensations, affects, subject-positions and corporeal ethics.

A drastic social transition throughout the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century catalyzed by western imperialism and native reformism brought world-shaking changes into the foot-binders’ social lives. Women’s bound feet were newly exposed to the gazes of Western spectators, including missionaries and medical experts, who regarded footbinding as deleterious for women’s bodies and lives.\textsuperscript{3} Whereas western bio-scientists produced a body of medical knowledge and anatomically examined the foot-binders’ physicality, the evangelicals developed arguments that the custom inherently defied Christian belief by violating the integrity of the God-given natural body.\textsuperscript{4} Anti-

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{2} Ko, “The Body as Attire” 11-12; Zito “Secularizing the Pain of Footbinding in China” 239-240

\textsuperscript{3} See Ebrey “Gender and Sinology,” pp. 11-25, and Zito “Secularizing the Pain of Footbinding in China” pp. 11-16. Both authors discussed how western medical missionaries framed footbinding an essential social problem of Chinese society. The dominant ways of thinking about footbinding were narrowed down to the topics of fashion, seclusion, perversity, deformity, child abuse, and cultural immobility.

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footbinding as a western discourse proliferated and circulated in the field of western biomedicine and the missionary agenda, seeking to save women with bound feet from their own cultural ills. Considered as a moral and medical issue, footbinding suddenly gained worldwide attention, and became one of the biggest concerns of China’s late-Qing social reform.

At the midst of the 1870s, evangelicals began their mission to organize “natural feet” or “tianzu” societies (天足会) at the local level in order to secularize the anti-footbinding message among the populace (Zito, “Secularizing the Pain” 11-16). In doing so, the missionary anti-footbinding activists were able to incorporate the “tianzu” message into their everyday public preaching activities. Being absent from the native vocabulary and epistemology, the western construction of “tianzu” relied on the logic of conceptual dualism that set up the civilized natural body as the antithesis of the native deformed physicality (Ko “Cinderella” 15). The rhetoric of “tianzu” thus symbolized a high-level civilization, on which the physical being as well as the social status of women became a yardstick for measuring the civility of an entire country in the colonial global hierarchy (Ko, “Cinderella’s Sister” 17). Though the audiences of “tianzu” societies back then were largely limited to their group membership, the discourse of it was nevertheless proliferated and infiltrated into the public. ⁵

The western denunciation of footbinding, along with the promotion of women’s education, appealed to the reformist elites who tried to emulate western civilization by

taking women’s problems—footbinding and illiteracy—into the explanation for the decay of imperial China. Western missionaries’ efforts resonated with late-Qing reformists such as, Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei, who called urgently for women’s emancipation, be that physical and ideological, to ensure that women’s bodily health, fertility and mothering were capable of breeding and reproducing a healthy strong nation. The native reformers were fully concerned that footbinding damaged women’s physical and mental fitness and would seriously reduce their productivity and reproductivity: they blamed this female custom for the biological weakness of the entire Chinese nation. Western eugenic ideas thus diagnosed the social maladies that resulted from footbinding, legitimized by native reformers promoting anti-footbinding campaigns and female education at the local level. Coexisting with the promotion of education for women, anti-footbinding movement was thus incorporated into the nationalist agenda to push the whole country into the new century.

After the Qing government collapsed in the revolution of 1911, the newly established Republican government subsumed the abolition of footbinding into its policymaking and made a concerted effort to mobilize local forces to enforce it. A new round of women’s physical emancipation was initiated and elevated to a new level of

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6 See Ko’s Cinderella’s Sister, chapter 1, pp. 21, and Song Shaopeng’s Song, China and Women in Western Mirror, pp. 20. Both authors discussed how the late-Qing reformist adopted a misogynist tone to portray the female foot-binder as the “parasite” and “animal,” whose disabled body was totally wasted in both economic production and reproducing strong Chinese nation. Reformers, such as Ling Qichao, thus called for women to take the responsibility as “mother of citizens” (guomin zhi mu, 国民之母) in order to ensure a well-bred race of the future China.
As an integral part of a state-building agenda, the anti-footbinding movement gained nationwide support ranging from reform-minded intellectuals and politicians to students, who were committed to staging a revolt against Confucian tradition by fully embracing western science and democracy. Through the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s and 1930s, reformers and revolutionaries sought to overhaul this ancient custom overnight, making women’s physical liberation—freeing their bound feet—a matter of national survival. As a result, the anti-footbinding campaign during that time had a dual agenda: to prohibit adults from conducting footbinding on young girls’ bodies, and to liberate the feet of the binders from the tightly swathed wrapping cloth. This second aim gave the movement its slogan and name: “Let their feet out” (“fangzu” 放足). To achieve the latter, girls and female adults whose feet were already shaped by the previous binding practice were compelled to unfasten their foot-cloth, straightening their arched bone structure and bent toes to enlarge the size of their feet. The fangzu message defined what constituted “bound feet”: for young girls under the age of fifteen, it was wrapping one’s feet with a binding cloth; for female adult elder women, it was wearing a pair of arched wooden soles (Ko, “Cinderella’s Sister” 55). The fangzu edict also dictated the unbinding procedure. Specific instructions were first distributed to the

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7 See Ko’s *Cinderella’s Sisters*, chapter 2 “The Body Inside Out: The Practice of Fangzu, 1900s–1930s,” pp. 38-68, and also Yang, “From Scientific discourse to state governance—the historical analysis of changing social perception on women’s boundfoot” for an insightful analysis of KMT’s implementation of anti-footbinding policy.

8 See Ko’s *Cinderella’s Sister*, chapter 2 for more information about fangzu policy. I will use both “fangzu” and “foot-unbinding” interchangeably throughout the paper to refer to the process of undoing women’s bound feet.

9 See Ko’s Cinderella’s Sisters, chapter 2, and Yang’s “From Scientific Discourse to State Governance”.
public by mainstream medias and local tianzu missionary societies. Then, the government conducted inspections at female schools to ensure the full engagement of girls with bound feet in this new physical transformation.\(^\text{10}\) Facilitated by local government and various social institutions, a top-down implementation of fangzu was made nationally prevalent and locally pragmatic (Ko, “Cinderella’s Sister” 40).

The fangzu movement exposed women’s bound feet to the public spotlight, as their once concealed body part came to the center of governmental surveillance. The increasing public visibility of women’s feet ran against the very rationale for footbinding culture, which extensively relied on the value of concealment. Before the late-Qing social reform, the aura of women’s bound feet did not derive from the feet itself, but rather from the concealment of the physicality of the feet.\(^\text{11}\) Small feet were then covered by white bandage layer by layer, put into embroidered shoes, and then hidden under leggings and skirts (Ko, “The Body as Attire” 16). Moreover, walking in a joggling gait with the absence of the feet was considered as a model of womanly deportment embodies Han civility (wen, 文) (Ibid). Concealment sealed the cultural embodiment of bound feet, allowing footbinding to continually signify female beauty. Now, however, the emancipation movement subjugated the concealed body to the aggressive and voyeuristic

\(^\text{10}\) See Yang “From Scientific Discourse to State Governance” for more information about the local authorities organized inspection team; see Ko’s Cinderella’s Sister, chapter 2, 43-50 and Judge, The Precious Raft of History, pp. 73-76 for more information on female school enforcing fangzu instruction on students.

\(^\text{11}\) See Ko, “The Body as Attire: The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth-Century China,” pp. 16-22. She argued that in Qing dynasty, footbinding custom was generally perceived by Han civilians in general, Han elite families in particular as a female inscription of Confucian civility and thus was made into an ethnic marker that was politically charged to differentiate Han culture from Manchu culture.
gaze of inspection. As a powerful rhetoric, fangzu was inherently paternalistic and nationalistic. It perpetuated the image of women with bound feet as either passive victims of or the residue of feudalist traditions, and thus in need of salvation and transformation. Yet, neither the rhetoric nor the movement itself was pertinent to the life of bound-feet women, whose ways of being and living had adapted to decades of binding. The enforced disengagement from her tradition had nothing to do with liberation in its essential sense, but rather as another round of bodily discipline that initiated another painful modification upon the female body. Pain, as a subjective experience, along with the conflicts and chaos brought by fangzu enforcement in female subjects’ microcosmic surroundings, were conspicuously absent in anti-footbinding discourse, which had been preoccupied instead by the universal valence of national emancipation and modernization (Ko, “Cinderella’s Sister” 59). The nationalist narrative framework of the anti-footbinding movement thus is nearly devoid of any subjective experience of women across lines of generation, class and region.

As more scholars become sensitive to women as historical agents while practicing traditional customs, their subjective voices and social experiences are being restored to a level of historical detail that had been rendered unseen or unintelligible by conventional androcentric paradigms. Over the past two decades, scholars like Dorothy Ko, Angelia Zito, Joan Judge and Patricia Ebrey,\(^\text{12}\) to name a few, have produced a powerful body of

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\(^{12}\) In addition to Ko, Zito and Ebrey, scholars like Joan Judge and Gai Hershatter made remarkable contributions to Chinese women’s history in modern China and included a wide-range of subject experiences, ranging from female students in Republican education system to sex workers in entertainment industry. For more information, see Judge’s *The Precious Raft of History*, and Hershatter’s *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century*. 
scholarship that make invaluable contributions to the study of women’s transformative social experiences related to anti-footbinding movement in the early twentieth-century China. Their methods, ranging from historical archival research to cultural-anthropological fieldwork, launched a revisionist overhaul of the written history of Chinese women with bound feet and challenged the victimization of traditional female subjects perpetuated in both May Fourth modernism and Communist ideology. The shift in historical paradigm from an androcentric to a gynocentric perspective re-situates a complex and diverse set of female experiences within their specific historic contexts. These studies also make a huge departure from an earlier glorification of the emancipatory achievements—demolishing the shackles of tradition—which overrode the subjective sufferings inflicted by the emancipation itself. In the work of Zito and Eebrey, anti-footbinding serves as both a social movement and a revolutionary discourse that places women in symbolic relation to national modernization. Thus, the anti-footbinding message represents a system of power/knowledge that was culturally and historically constructed, rather than an essential and universal value. In addition, historians like Dorothy Ko and Yang Nianqun have extensively explored the historic evolution of the anti-footbinding movement from the first local campaigns launched by missionaries and reformers to a nationwide movement sponsored by the government. Their studies also locate the anti-footbinding movement at the center of China’s modern state-building, and pay attention to the apparatus of state power that enabled a top-down mobilization of various social institutions to push the fangzu campaign forward. Overall, the balance of

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13 See Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters*, chapter 2, and Yang, “From Scientific Discourse to State Governance”.
scholarship demonstrates violent and compulsory side of the anti-footbinding movement as an institutional mechanism of modern biopolitics through which women’s body and life were managed to achieve modernization.

Incorporation of the anti-footbinding movement directly into the state’s plans for modernization gave it an unprecedented political valence. However, if anti-footbinding was so important historically to the biopolitics of China’s modern state-building, why have historians not examined the physical bodily experience of the unbinding process? How did women with bound feet, as a specific category of social beings, understand their own physical transformation at the time? In fact, we do not know much about how the implementation of fangzu impacted women’s bodies. This gap is my starting point for investigating how subjects with bound feet came to experience fangzu, and how they envisioned and repositioned themselves in relation to this changing world. Female bodies, both material and sensory, underwent a drastic transition requiring both physical and cultural reconfiguration. The anti-footbinding movement should also be seen, therefore, as a process of subject-formation, whereby women who lived traditionally faced the violent interpellation of emancipatory discourse. Therefore, my paper is vitally concerned with the personal narratives of the fangzu subjects. The narrative, as an autobiographical genre, is a reservoir of personal history, in which the narrator-actor reconstructs her past, perceives her present and attempts to image her future. Through recalling the experience of unbinding one’s feet, the individual forms a new identity by integrating her bodily transformation into a story of self-evolving. In achieving this new subjectivity, the sense of a “modern self” begins to emerge in relation
to her transforming body and changing interactions with her surroundings. The process of fangzu is also a process of subject-becoming, a never fully achieved agenda exclusive to the female with bound feet, since woman with natural feet would have never experienced this process not the pain/joy endowed by it.

Informed by previous scholarship, my research begins to unearth the female experience of fangzu through women’s personal narratives. By centralizing the feet of these women as a specific locus of experiencing modernity, the first chapter aims to bring to light the bodily sensations, affects, changing subject-positions and everyday struggles engaging with the anti-footbinding movement during China’s social reform period from 1900 to 1930. In primary sources ranging from newspaper and periodicals to municipal archives and legal cases, I collect the textual evidence for women’s personal stories and narrative identity surrounding foot-unbinding. Based on these women’s narratives, my study is dedicated to recapturing the subjective experiences of women with bound feet, who as daughters, mothers, wives, and grandmothers, lived through the everyday struggles of compulsory physical emancipation. My analysis demonstrates that women’s engagement with fangzu represents a wide spectrum of experiences, from complying to resisting government regulation. Extreme responses to the conflicts, disorders and violence brought by fangzu enforcement congregate at the two ends of this broader spectrum, with female suicide in support of physical liberation at one end, and female suicide for resisting it at the other. Many others occupied the middle ground, willingly or not engaging in the process of fangzu and eventually surviving it. I argue that the process of fangzu both visually and conceptually reset the boundaries between the normative and
non-normative body, requiring fangzu practicers to reconstruct their social identity and acquire new subjectivities in and through the disembodiment of the footbinding tradition.

In the first part of chapter 2, I situate women’s fangzu responses and reconfigured subjectivity in the context of her lived surroundings, where social tensions and familial conflicts surfaced alongside the elites’ propagation of the fangzu message. I argue that local fangzu campaigns not only enabled violation of and discipline over female bodies, but also disengaged the woman with bound feet from her own social relationships establishing her social being as a filial daughter, a virtuous wife and a responsible mother. The removal of these traditional ties caused social conflicts in families and local societies. The relations between wife and husband, daughter and mother, youth and elder changed, while the antagonism between reform-minded men and women and entrenched conservatives intensified. In the second part of chapter 2, my research situates the everyday struggles of women undergoing fangzu, whose voices, though rare, did appear on mainstream media, including newspaper, periodic issue, fashion magazine and municipal records. Instead of divorcing fangzu practicers’ voices from the grand historical narrative of modernization, I attempt to develop an acute understanding of these women’s ambiguous way of speaking about suffering. Here, my concern lies in how to interpret the historical agency of a subject with bound feet undergoing the unbinding

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14 A similar point is made by Ko in her historical research of anti-footbinding, but through different cases. See Ko’s Cinderella’s Sister, chapter 2, 59-62.
process in subjugation to the hegemonic discourse.\textsuperscript{15} I argue that the voices of women with bound feet were not structurally written out of the nationalist emancipatory narratives, but instead articulated in accordance with the dominant discourses. This is to say, in certain contexts, these subaltern women spoke not in the form of resistance to oppression, but rather in compliance with it. Although abiding by the language of reformational discourse as a whole, the subjects of fangzu spoke of the oppressive movement and their bodily experiences at every stage of the fangzu journey.

Following the reading of fangzu practicers’ self-narratives, I continue to investigate the hegemonic representation of boundfoot women in the writing of May Fourth Movement intellectuals. Studying anti-footbinding in Chinese cultural history requires close attention to complex interactions among the political parties, social movements, and cultural representations that all sought various sorts of transformation. This same complexity leads me to use a transnational feminist approach that does not uphold modernization as a universalizing solution for how socially marginalized bodies are culturally embodied. Literary analysis offers a critical interrogation of the discursive formation of anti-footbinding as a \textit{historical process}, in which male intellectuals played an active role appropriating and reproducing the western idea of a normative female body, gender, and sexuality. Besides taking the form of a political campaign, the

\textsuperscript{15} This point of view is inspired by Gail Hershatter’s study of female sex workers in 1920-1930s China, in which she reckons with Spivak’s question “can subaltern speak”, while arguing that subaltern women did not remain completely silent in specific historical contexts, such as the semicolonial state of China’s modern history. Subaltern women did speak, in fact, and sometimes even expressed themselves in direct ways. But their voices can be heard only if we understand those expressions on their own terms. See Hershatter’s argument about subaltern speaking in the Chinese semi-colonial context in “The Subaltern Talks Back: Reflections on Subaltern Theory and Chinese History”
imperative of fangzu was also affirmed by the cultural circumstances of the May Fourth cultural movement that made life with bound feet difficult and unlivable. The dominant cultural representations of boundfoot subjects in the May Fourth era (1910-1930) were predominantly formed by male elite intellectuals who habitually placed their modernist masculine point of view at the center of the production of Chinese modernity, thereby culturally marginalizing and refusing to recognize diverse feminine ways of living and being. Usually registered in a misogynist tone, male representations of boundfoot subjects involved a series of complex literary practices and formed a monolithic narrative pattern that continually pathologized and stigmatized the boundfoot women’s bodies and sexuality. A feminist literary critique thus serves to clarify the immense disparity between the lived experiences of boundfoot women and the discursive reconfigurations of them in the intellectual world.

Perceiving themselves as the voices of China, May Fourth male intellectuals actively engaged in writing about boundfoot women’s social oppression and the urgency of their physical emancipation. Male criticism of the women’s binding tradition was less a conscious effort to take a stand for women’s interests, and more an expression of their determination to break out the fetters of tradition. Writing about physically deficient and intellectually underdeveloped subjects functioned as an irrefutable signifier that marked male intellectuals in a transcendent revolutionary stance, on the one hand; on the other hand, it gave them authorial agency to free play in the imaginary construction of modern women and sexuality. The term “New Woman” was vested in the project of cultural regeneration as the antithesis to female tradition, and was used to differentiate
enlightened women, who acquired western education, progressive ideas, and were physically intact, from those women who still practiced the footbinding customs and remained hesitant to adopt social changes.¹⁶ My concerns, therefore, lie with what kinds of cultural images about women with bound feet appeared in the literary production of May Fourth male intellectuals, and for what purpose these images proliferated and were perpetuated; from these points, I assess how male intellectuals conceptualized “gender,” and “sexuality” through writing the embodiment of boundfoot women in May Fourth movement, and how the deployment of rhetoric reflects the relationship between male authors and their boundfoot Others.

Intellectual women who were born in elite family and influenced by western education also had their own responses to the anti-footbinding movement and the idea of “women’s emancipation.” Although strategically appropriated by male intellectuals propounding national modernization projects, the emancipatory ideal nevertheless brought women opportunities to negotiate with Confucian tradition and patriarchal culture. Women’s practice of literary feminism in twentieth century lashed out at the patriarchal system that had prescribed women’s social position according to Confucian doctrines. By using the male-authored concept of a “new woman,” female intellectuals articulated their desire for more social and political space, while asserting feminist voices to promote the overall female population’s social status and to eliminate patriarchal oppressions (Dooling 12). In terms of the footbinding tradition, intellectual women

¹⁶ A similar point is made by Yue Ming-Bao in “Gendering the Origin of Modern Chinese Fiction,” Tani Barlow in “Theorizing Women,” pp.19-23, and Jin Feng in The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction, pp.5.
generally displayed a negative attitude, and most of them did not practice footbinding, nor did they live a life where this form of discrimination against their physical beings was so prevalent. The female antagonism towards footbinding traditions assert a vision of a society with an anti-feudalist patriarchy, on the one hand; on the other hand, such antagonism demonstrate that intellectual women themselves became subjectively invested in the norms of the phallocentric system that relied on male superiority (Dooling 16). Here, I want to pursue the following questions, first, was there any alternative expression or narrative organization about boundfoot women in female writings that challenged and resisted the dominant discourse of anti-footbinding? Second, to what extent could feminist representations by female authors construct conditions of alternative embodiment that restored the agency and subjectivity of women with bound feet? Third, in what ways did female authors reveal their awareness of male intellectual hegemony through writing about the subject of bound feet?

To deconstruct the conceptual dualism between “normal” and “abnormal,” “natural” and “unnatural,” “civilized” and “backward” in the societal drive toward modernity, I approach the cultural embodiment of boundfoot women in two ways: first, as an imaginative site on which modernist intellectuals projected an epistemological violence; second, as a site for intellectual women to enable feminist representations of “traditional women” that counter the hegemony of an intellectualist and phallocentric interpretive framework. Therefore, chapter 3 traces the trajectory of textual representation of women with boundfoot in modern Chinese literature. I aim to analyze the textual representation of these women in May Fourth male intellectuals’s autobiographical
novels. In order to problematize the dominant discourse of women’s emancipation that set up the bound feet of women’s bodies as the biggest social problem in early twentieth-century China, I examine the male intellectual’s modernist narratives and compare it with those of the female intellectual’s writing that created a space for alternative representations of subaltern women. My analysis is based on the writings of selected May Fourth writers, including male intellectual Guo Moruo’s (1892-1978) “Black Cat,” (hei mao 黑猫)\(^{17}\) and Yu Dafu’s (1896-1945) “The Line of Cypress Vine” (niao luo hang, 萱萝行);\(^{18}\) female intellectual Ding Ling’s (1904-1986) “Mother,” (muqin, 母亲)\(^{19}\) and Ling Shuhua’s (1900-1990) “Sayoko” (qian daizi, 千代子).\(^{20}\) I argue that by thematizing women with bound feet as a traditional, backward and disabled “other,” the male intellectual expressed their proactive anxiety for modernity as well as anxiety about the crisis of their masculine subjecthood. Body politics, or the politics of aesthetic corporeality, runs throughout the autobiographical works of Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu, creating a paradigm of how to write the female body and its sexuality: namely, the image of the woman with bound feet was placed as the disabled, asexual and despised Other to the male intellectual’s modern masculine Self. Such writing, to borrow Amy Dooling’s

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19 Ding, Ling. *Mother (Muqin 母亲)*. Shanghai: Liangyou wenxue congshu 良友文学丛书, 1933.

phrase, “is necessary precisely because it enables the male narrator to give expression to 
the depth of his own complex, tortured subjectivity on the brink of modernity” (72). Male 
intellectuals’s textual and discursive othering of boundfoot women as either the victim or 
the residue of tradition, I argue, is a strategic remedy for their sense of inadequacy in the 
face of western hegemony, but also a tactic to rebel against an older form of patriarchy.
While the boundfoot subject in Guo and Yu’s reminiscence remains silent via her 
otherness, the voice of the male intellectual continues to reproduce a patriarchal logic 
through the discourse of nationalist modernization. The politics of male authorship places 
women with bound feet in symbolic relation to nation and male subjecthood, which 
inevitably reduces them to a passive, defiled, and silent object, while leaving aside all 
those spaces in which women who lived upon tradition in real life see modernity as either 
outside or antithetical to their lives.

Considering the New Woman writers, I argue that although the literary activities 
of May Fourth intellectual women were conditioned by western ideology, and built upon 
a male condemnation of tradition, their feminist representations did not necessarily 
exclude the subaltern female experiences. Based on readings of selected works from Ding 
Ling, a progressive feminist writer, and Ling Shuhua, an alleged “new boudoir writer,” 
this section aims to evaluate the specific writing strategies the two feminist writers 
adopted in their textual representations of boundfoot women. More specifically, their 
writings interrogate male intellectual hegemony in the reconfiguration of a modern 
patriarchy, while developing acute feminist sensitivity to the diverse domain of modern 
female experiences. Through narrating the life trajectory and transformation of the a
protagonist with bound feet, Yu Manzhen, on the eve of the Revolution of 1911, Ding Ling presents us with the images of female commoners as active social actors who struggled in everyday life to negotiate the process of modernization. With great empathy towards and emotional connection with her female subjects, Ding Ling’s works can be marked by the theme of “womanism,” meaning to define female experience in relation to the culture and life surrounding it. Through the point of view of a Japanese young girl, Sayoko’s encounter with an anonymous Chinese woman with bound feet, Ling Shuhua defies and interrogates the epistemological violence brought by both Western/Japanese Orientalism and its complicit May Fourth Occidentalist intellectuals, whose reductive (mis)representation usually renders the women with bound feet to a silent and defiled object. By restoring the universal valence of maternity and motherly affect to the native boundfoot subject, Ling Shuhua imagines a transnational sisterhood that is free from western imperialism and native nationalist patriarchy. Her literary representation thus is significant for us to rethink the very possibility of transnational alliances based on women’s common and shared experiences.
Chapter 2: Women’s Fangzu Experiences in Between 1900s and 1930s

Fangzu Campaign and Female Suicides

In 1907, Song Guofu, an official of the Jiangsu Education Association, went to Shuyang County in Jiangsu for business where a recent suicide case drew his attention. A young lady, Hu Fanglan, who was married to Xu Jiamao, the son of a gentry family, had been forced by her mother-in-law to poison herself. As a married woman with a child, Hu was nonetheless progressive in thinking. She stood up for women’s western education, and took on abolishing the footbinding practice as her mission in life. Not only did she preach the ideas of anti-footbinding and women’s emancipation to her female neighbors, she also unwrapped her binding cloth and practiced fangzu by herself.\(^{21}\) Such manners drew strong objection from her husband’s family, especially her mother-in-law, Mrs. Xu, who later compelled her daughter-in-law to rebind her feet (fu chan, 复缠).\(^{22}\) Met with Hu’s stiff resistance, Mrs. Xu intended to use opium and fasting to force Hu to behave. In desperation, Hu ended her life by means of overdosing. Before committing suicide, this young mother left her last words to her elder brother and sister-in-law, in which she lamented:

Though I am not a virtuous woman, my actions [unbinding feet and promoting women’s eduction] was not uncalled for either. Unexpectedly, I was humiliated because of my response to the call of anti-footbinding campaign and my

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\(^{21}\) See Song’s official report to Jiangsu Education Association, “Breaking News: Enforced Female Suicide For Fangzu” (Nüshi fangzu beibi biming hanwen 女士放足被逼毙命骇闻). *Shenbao* 申报, vol. 88, 4 May. 1907, pp. 568

\(^{22}\) See Jiangsu General Educational Association's letter to Liang-Jiang Governor-General Duanfang” (Jiangsu Jiaoyu zonghui zhi Jingdu Duan Wushuai shu 江苏教育总会致江督端午帅书). *Shenbao* 申报, vol. 90, 23 June. 1907, pp. 442.
aspiration for gaining education. Live without hope, die without regret. My mission of promoting education for girls is unfulfilled, and the doom of footbinding will eventually befall my little daughter (“Jiangsu Jiaoyu” 708).  

Shocked not only by the tragedy itself but also the indifference of the local society, Song commented: “Rather than regretting the death of this innocent young lady, people think her own misbehavior of unbinding feet brought this misfortune upon herself.”  

Song reported this case to the Jiangsu Education Association, which later addressed the issue in a memo to the Jiangsu government.  

The provincial education association denounced family Xu’s wrongdoing, while expressing the condolence for the loss of family Hu. In doing so, the association presented the deceased’s family a plaque that historically had been used to praise female martyrs who died to preserve their chastity.  

This emblazoning of Hu’s virtue gained approval from the Jiangsu administration, which later took charge in the investigation of Hu’s suicide. The provincial administration accused Hu’s parents-in-law of mistreating the younger woman and not being respectful elders, while granting Hu’s natal family custody of Hu’s child. The family Xu were also punished with heavy fines, which were used to found local schools for girls’ education.

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23 Hu’s suicide writing was published on Shenbao, under the education association’s letter to Governor-General Duanfang, and thus was publicly accessible by the readers.

24 See, “Breaking News: Enforced Female Suicide For Fangzu”

25 See “Jiangsu General Educational Association's letter to Liang-Jiang Governor-General Duanfang”

Echoing the official condemnation, local “natural feet” civil organizations
(Jiangsu tianzu hui, 天足会) held several public memorials to mourn Hu’s death. The
chairman Shen Zhongli, along with other leading members of the organization, gave
public speeches to propagate anti-footbinding ideas to an audience of hundreds of
people. Assisted by local reformist elites, the organization also raised funds to build a
bronze statue for Hu’s memorial, and listed Hu’s heroic deeds in its periodical
publications. Many supporters of the tianzu association, most of whom were reform-
minded literati, expressed their mourning of Hu’s tragic death in letters to the newspaper.
Many tributes in forms of short biographies, lyrics songs, and poems were published in
the most influential press at the time, the Shanghai Newspaper (Shenbao, 申报) to praise
Hu’s suicide. In 1909, responding to the tianzu society’s actions, a male literati even
wrote a biographic novel *Chinese Woman’s Bronze Statue* (中国之女铜像) based on
Hu’s story to highlight a female rebellion against the evil footbinding tradition. It later

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27 Jiangsu Tianzu Society is the biggest non-governmental civil organization for anti-footbinding in Jiangsu province and developed eleven branches in local as the major site for educating and propagating fangzu message. See “Special Record Event of Tianzu Society” (Tianzu hui yijiao tebiehui jishi 天足会移交特别会纪事). *Shenbao* 申报, 17 Sept. 1906, pp. A1

28 See “Shen Zhongli Examines the Petition Sent to Duan Wushuai” (Shen Zhongli guancha shang Duanfang bing 沈仲礼观察上江督端午禀) *Shenbao* 申报, vol. 90, 23 June. 1907, pp. 442.

29 Shenbao as the most influential news media played a pivotal role in the formation of public opinion and dominant discourse in China’s social reform throughout late nineteenth century and first-half of twentieth century. In terms of women’s footbinding, Shenbao served to disseminate the anti-footbinding message of reformist and local tianzu societies to the public. It reflected the changing public attitudes towards women’s footbinding, while adding the fuel to the nationwide engagement of women’s physical emancipation.

30 The novel was created in 1909; see also Nanwu Jingguan Zidezhai’s (南武静观自得斋主人) *Chinese Woman’s Bronze Statue* (Zhongguo zhi Nü Tongxiang 中国之女铜像)
became a stage adaptation performed during public campaigns of the tianzu association. The proliferation and circulation of Hu’s great sacrifice invigorated the anti-footbinding campaign, and brought its unprecedented influence into the Jiangnan region.

Three narratives surrounded Hu’s death, engendered by the widespread circulation of her story. The Jiangsu educational association emphasized the relation between Hu’s grand sacrifice and her lifelong dedication to women’s education. In this narrative, Hu was a reform-minded woman who intended to participate in the entrance examination of Jiangsu Female Normal College, yet whose decision was suppressed by her conventional parents-in-law. Therefore, Hu’s suicide presented a gesture of resistance against the feudal tradition, which deemed western education acquired by a woman a stain on the family reputation. This scenario was used by local schools as a perfect example of female enlightenment to urge the young girls to unshackle themselves from family tradition and to pursue western education. An alternative narrative from the tianzu association accentuated how Hu’s suicide was motivated by her commitment to fight against the backward footbinding tradition. In this scenario, lady Hu became a civic leader of the local fangzu campaign, and her autonomous engagement in unbinding her feet and enthusiastic persuasion for other women to do so iconoclastic. Her martyrdom was extolled as a milestone of the nationwide anti-footbinding movement. The literary portrayal of Hu’s agency slightly differs from these two major narratives, in which Hu’s story was almost entirely wrought of her self-awareness and volition. The novel ascribed

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32 Ibid.

33 See “Special Record Event of Tianzu Society”.
her awakening and progressive ideas to her elder brother Xiangjiu’s enlightening influence, who was the first person to gain western education in Hu’s family. These narratives, nevertheless, share a great deal in common by considering lady Hu’s death in relation to the achievement of national reform. The tragedy itself glorifies Hu’s physical mutilation as a vehicle to raise the populaces’ awareness of a corrupting Confucian tradition. Consequently, the husband’s family was castigated for its typical feudal conservatism, whose inertia, endowed by entrenched Confucian ritual doctrines, continually impeded the reformers’ agenda of national rebuilding.

However, none of these scenarios gave attention to the implacable conflicts and unrelenting resentment between two generations, between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. Hu’s death is not about a single tragedy, but a multifaceted one of two broken families. Here, I return to the last words Lady Hu left in writing. Historically, the suicide writing left by female martyrs displayed a specific form of self-narrative produced under extreme conditions, in which disorder and violence in the subject’s surroundings threatened the her bodily integrity and reputation. As a specifically gendered social phenomenon, female suicide to maintain chastity reached its height, to an unprecedented degree, during the Ming and Qing dynasty as it permeated imperial regulations, public buildings, family and community life. It became a culturally sanctioned and socially normalized form of female performance of chaste womanhood, but also an act of the subject’s self-interest, identity, status and reputation prescribed by Confucian patriarchal values (Theiss 4). From the female martyr’s perspective, her suicide decision was often

34 See Chen Yali, “Politics on the Feet: An Research on the Novel of AbolishingWomen’s Feet with Bandages in the late Qing Dynasty”
made in extremely difficult and stressful conditions moments, which usually rendered her aggrieved and/or humiliated. By such extreme and violent means, the subject was granted a coping mechanism to withdraw from such abject conditions. Before committing suicide, women who were literate would write poems or letters to inscribe their personal history, feelings, self-determination and unfulfilled wishes. Often accompanied by a short autobiographical preface, these writings point to the reason for their martyrdom, and the self-consciousness and the agency of performing and executing suicide actions (Fong 108). In the very moment of composing the suicide writing, the subject recall specific experiences, express complex sentiments and state a desire to die. Through the rituals of self-inscription and self-immolation, women reproduced an ethic of female virtue, and in so doing reclaimed moral power and rejected social abjection. Therefore, suicide writing is a significant indication of female agency and willpower left before her physical death, and should be read as at once discursive and material attempts to reverse a defiled status and, in Grace Fong’s language, to “reincorporate themselves into the dominant discourse” (109).

But if we only read Hu’s last words as an expression of her desperation and the will to die, we neglect the reasons behind this tragedy, and perpetuate the dominant narratives of the educational institute and anti-footbinding organization presenting her suicide indeed as a choice. Her suicide writing reflected more than her “disenchantment”

35 See Theiss, Disgraceful Matters, 197-198. Theiss discussed the extreme conditions could be considered as, for example, widows took their life when they lost husbands and were forced to get remarried. During the Ming-Qing transition, female remainders of the previous dynasty committed suicide in order to safeguard their loyalty. During wartime and social turmoils, suicide incidents occurred frequently among female relatives when they lost family members or were confronted with rape or other forms of sexual violence.
from Confucian tradition and a great sacrifice for the nation’s future. So, how do we understand lady Hu’s suicide in relation to her transgressive act of self-unbinding in the context of Confucian family order? What is the rationale behind the extreme violence and resentment from Hu’s parents-in-law? Why did her fangzu action result in the collapse of family structure and dramatic changes in family relationships? I have no intention to justify the abuse her parents-in-law inflicted on Hu, but only to understand for what reason the family members turned against each other to articulate when a national anti-footbinding campaign began to affect local microcosmic order and familial relations.

In her suicide writing, Hu narrated that she suffered from and was humiliated by her parents-in-law, who adopted vicious measures—such as physical abuse of poisoning and fasting—to force her into submission. Foremost among the reasons for such violent treatment are Hu’s series of provocative actions: first, unwrapping her footbinding cloth and then disobeying the mother-in-law’s order to rebind her feet. The mother-in-law regarded her misbehavior as outrageous, demonic, and unscrupulous (zuoyao zuoguai, 作妖作怪), and thus grossly offensive to family decency. In order to understand such an extreme condition in which violence, in both forms of abuse and suicide, were inflicted upon Hu’s body, we need first to inquire why footbinding mattered so much for her mother-in-law—that is, why was there such valorization of female bodily discipline and mutilation in a traditional Chinese family?

According to Charlotte Furth, the traditional Chinese medical understanding of the human body differed greatly from the Christian belief in the superiority of the God-given natural body, which undergirded burgeoning nineteenth-century bioscience (Furth
3). Rather, the body in traditional Chinese epistemology is a site for self-cultivation (xiushen 修身), and thus is born to be malleable and cultivatable. As Lisa Rosenless incisively points out, in an overarching Confucian society, female’s natural body in fact symbolizes an untamed animal is thus in need of strict management and discipline (Rosenlee 143). By shaping and trimming the female body through artificial means, one brought her natural body into the realm of civility. Thereby, in order for woman to become a fully moralized being, she must first of all be shaped. The body in this sense does not conform to a western notion of an autonomous individual born with freedom and independence. Instead, the Chinese body is always already a body situated in a social context of a self-in-relations (Rosenlee 144). The female body as prescribed by Confucian ethics dedicated her to a specific position as well as labor in service of family —namely, a wife/mother and her reproductive and maternal duties Just as Charlotte Furth deems, in late-imperial medical discourse, the female body was depicted as a “sacrificial reproductive body” that fulfilled her social responsibilities associated with domesticity, endurance, humility and whole-hearted devotion (Furth 5). Therefore, bodily pain forged a link to women’s potential for socially recognized accomplishments. Physical pain was an integral element of embodied female virtue. Enduring physical pain indicated her ability to sacrifice, and was an inevitable experience from which she learned to comport herself properly and circumspectly.

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36 At this point, Rosenlee continually argues that while, the boy is born with the legitimate access to literary learning and thus engages himself in a lifelong project of Confucian orthodox education, the girl cultivates herself through lifelong practice of footbinding and other forms of ritual observation (142). In this sense, footbinding is a gendered way for women to enter into a male-dominated moral world.
A woman was trained to adapt to extreme physical sufferings from a young age. The lesson of pain was first and foremost learned from the protracted footbinding process her mother diligently performed on her body. The mother’s purpose was to prepare her young daughter for future marriage. By means of wrapping the daughter’s feet and training her to bind herself, the thoughtful mother equipped her young girl with a body-mind capable of performing female virtue and duties, and of dealing with complex social surroundings when she became a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. A woman’s incredible endurance of both physical pain and her humble status in her husband’s family credited her with exemplary wifely qualifications. The Traditional women’s education, represented for example by Ban Zhao’s *Lessons for Women*, emphasized that along with a strict bodily disciplines that regulated the female body to behave properly, a wife’s implicit obedience to her parents-in-law expressed the virtue of a daughter-in-law. ‘Whenever the mother-in-law says, “Do that,” even if what she says is wrong, still [the daughter-in-law] submits unfailingly to the command’ (Wang 186). An exemplary wife thus is not supposed to act contrary to the wishes and the opinions of the parents-in-law. Such docility that sacrificed personal interest for the elder was praised as the most valuable virtue in Confucian ethical doctrine—filial piety. A wife and daughter-in-law

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37 See Blake, “Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor,” in which he provides insightful points on the significance of the footbinding practice from the mother-practicioners’ perspective. It was the means by which women were able to master their embodiment of space, to prepare for the aggravation and dread associated with menstruation, sexual intercourse, pregnancy and laboring. Situating the intimate relations between mother and daughter, he argues that the practice that imposed by mother on her daughter’s body served as an efficient means of motherly discipline for instructing daughters in how to handle all kinds of bodily insult in her future kinship family. The ritualized everyday practice not only inscribes the very painful experience in women’s adolescence, but also reconstructs her gendered identity in association with the bodily transformation that prepared her for a social role shifting in future.
was expected to represent and secure the family reputation by achieving domestic harmony and maintaining respectful relations among familial members. Ultimately, the way of respect and acquiescence required sacrificing her personal interest to secure the family reputation. Therefore, the traditional cult of filial piety made her diligent binding practice integral to the definition of female virtue in general, and that of the filial daughter-in-law first and foremost. A pair of well-wrapped small feet showed the daughter-in-law’s docility and a respectful, whole-hearted devotion to her parents-in-law.

Footbinding as integral part of ritualized “li” (ritual propriety, 礼), displays the maintenance of inner/outer boundaries on a physical, spatial and social level. The attire of bound feet incorporated into a dress code, ensuring that the nature of the moral principle inhered in the body as material substance. Footbinding physically mutilated women and made it impossible for them to traverse far beyond the inner quarters of the family compound, reinforcing the strict ritual propriety that prohibited women from entering into public space dominated by men. Such boundary maintenance could be enacted through spatial-architectural segregation (e.g. the women’s boudoir), or the social division between private and public sphere (nei/wai, 内/外), or the physical discipline of the body. Stated otherwise, the spatial boundaries and the bodily bindings were inseparable and mutually constitutive in order to maintain social boundaries and family order. Therefore, footbinding had its profound significance in ritual propriety which maintained social orders and hierarchical relations, while at the same time, to borrow Zito’s phrase: “confining yin-positioned women physically into demarcated, gendered, walled spaces (“Ritualizing Li” 340),” where women’s multiple subject-positions as wife, daughter-in-
law and wife come into meaning. It was a lifelong process of ritual that generated symbolic and social significance—filiality, obedience, and devotion, etc.,—attached to the female body, which was naturally suited, logically sanctioned, and above all, proper to the secluded inner quarters. Physical discipline and spatial confinement yielded the ideal subject as virtuous wife, filial daughter-in-law and respectful mother, and in turn enabled a well-ordered hierarchy between mother and daughter-in-law. The very *raison d’être* of footbinding, as we now see, lay in the daughter-in-law’s bodily enactment of obedience to her mother-in-law.

Now, to turn back to the case of Hu Fanglan’s suicide, the dramatic conflict between Hu and her parents-in-law is to some extent reasonable. Her mother-in-law saw Hu’s behavior of releasing her feet from the wrapping cloth as an offensive act and thus a challenge to her own authority. The role of the mother-in-law as an agent of ethical virtue made her responsible for guiding and instructing her daughter-in-law’s behavior. From Mrs. Xu’s perspective, Hu’s audacious act was “ill bred” and suggested the mother-in-law incapable of teaching and guiding the younger woman. Ignoring and disobeying her mother-in-law’s command to revert to binding was unfilial and disrespectful, because it challenged the authority of the mother-in-law, whose reverential treatment upheld her moral responsibility to maintain the family order. Hu’s act of unbinding her feet also broke the spatial boundary of the women’s boudoir within which Confucian claims of female virtue was established and secured. It contradicted women’s domesticity as the most prevalent and widely praised expression of female virtue in the family sphere. What lay behind Hu’s rebellious deeds was her desire for self-transformation to modern
subjecthood. The idea of the “individual” and “self” was incompatible with a social context that prioritized interpersonal relations and family interests over individual matters. When Hu’s selfhood as a reform-mind individual overrode her preexisting gender positionality as an outsider-within, a humble younger, and an obedient daughter-in-law, the family hierarchy could no longer maintain its proper order. In addition to her “outrageous” bodily transgression, Hu’s attempt to convert other young women to the idea of women’s physical and ideological emancipation put family reputations at risk. Accordingly, Mrs. Xu’s abuses against her daughter-in-law should be understood as an excessive exercise of her moral authority to regulate the younger, and her responsibility to restore the family order. Yet, the situation went to the opposite way of Mrs. Xu’s wish to chasten her daughter-in-law and elevated to a point at which the conflict between the two generations became irreducible and irreconcilable. In this context, Hu’s suicide represents more than her individual sacrifice for the grand agendas of abolishing footbinding and promoting women’s education, but rather a mechanism to cope with the inflicted humiliation and violence, and a strategy to withdraw from unlivable conditions once the family tie was severed.

In Hu Fanglan’s case, the dead’s voice was heard by the public, and became politically and socially influential because of her unusual alliance with the dominant anti-footbinding discourse articulated by reformist elites and fangzu organizations. Her voice, articulated through the suicide note, was publicly accessible and presentable, because she was appreciated as an iconoclast, a reformable subject, but also a quintessential maneuverable and malleable object the reformist-elites could actively employ and
appropriate in order to transform the collapsing imperial dynasty to a civilized nation-state. The early wave of anti-footbinding campaign in between 1890s-1900s, though it began from the local level, was inherently an elitist movement led by official and intellectual reformers whose westernized ideology remained unintelligible to the general populace. As the movement gained nationwide attention, its promoters purposefully incorporated fangzu discourse into the national modernization project. As revolutionary forces formulated a new vision of civilization, the state turned to view the destruction of both feudal family structure and conventional social custom as a catalytic initial step to lay the proper foundation for modernity. In Hu’s case, the co-functionality between provincial administration, educational association, and reformist elite power facilitated the establishment of new gender norms on both conjugal and intergenerational levels. The historic implication of glorifying Hu’s suicide emerges as part of a transforming patriarchal system through which familial kinship structures once ruled by the male patriarch were penetrated by modern state power. The state’s assertions about the life and death of a woman with bound feet manifested a systematic and pragmatic regulation of a female body and her way of being and living. The overpowering hegemonic discourse surrounding Hu, from her iconoclastic self-unbinding to her grand martyrdom, exemplified how practices of state-building individualized the female out of her situated cultural and social context, and repositioned her body and identity directly in relation to the state. Hu's death was heard, but only heard by and for the state as a meaningful and useful message. Such interpretations fall under the nationalist-reformist framework, and foreclosed other possible interpretations of the multiple meanings behind her social death.
Many tragedies like Hu’s happened during the early anti-footbinding movement, in which young women who suffered from and defied the traditional valorization of footbinding committed suicide in order to avoid forced (re)binding by their parents-in-law. However, this type of suicide was only one part of the state’s regulation over the female body in the anti-footbinding movement. There were also cases about women ending their life as a gesture of resistance to the actual enforcement of fangzu policy during the Republican era. In 1928, the KMT central government declared a national ban on female footbinding, carried out stage by stage in each and every province. As I mentioned in the introduction part, the anti-footbinding movement during that time had a twofold goal: to prohibit female adults from conducting binding procedure on younger generations during their childhood, and to untie the wrapping cloths on the binders feet. This second agenda—“fangzu” or “let their feet out”—lent itself to a specific form of governmental intervention to restructure the life and body of foot-binders.\(^{38}\) To achieve the goal, girls and female adults whose feet were already shaped by previous wrapping procedure were required to unfasten their binding cloths, and to flatten their arched bone structure and huddled toes in order to increase the length and width of their feet.\(^{39}\) Back then, many female foot-binders arranging from gentries to commoners had to engage themselves in this daunting process to reverse what Ko calls “an irrevocable bodily process” (Ko “Cinderella’s Sister 47). 

\(^{38}\) See Ko’s *Cinderella’s Sister*, chapter 2 for more information about fangzu policy.

\(^{39}\) See Ko’s Cinderella’s Sisters, chapter 2 “Body Inside Out,” and Yang’s “From Scientific Discourse to State Governance”.
Differing from the early day’s campaigns organized by local civil servants, the Republican anti-footbinding effort was secured by the central governmental authority. However, the KMT Nanjing central government had still experienced decentralization due to the residual of warlords’ local influences, even after KMT’s official unification in 1928. The state’s attempt to monopolize the fangzu movement thus gave way to local provincial and municipal administrations to carry out the order. The latter’s active engagement of fangzu edicts lends itself to the variations of implementing process. With a certain degree of administrative agency, the local government’s fangzu order remained an unambiguous assertion on what constituted “bound feet,” and to what extent and on what status, the bound feet could be considered as “unbound”. At this point, Ko explores that the pragmatistic language of local fangzu implementation in fact reconceputalized women’s footbinding exclusively in accordance with the public imagery of the women’s bound feet, rather than the individual’s specific physical situation (“Cinderella’s Sister” 53-55). For example, according to her historical document of 1920s Shanxi fangzu movement, for girls under their age of fifteen, wrapping one’s feet with binding cloths and socks constitute footbinding; and for those elders, wearing a wooden soles signifies one’s bound status (Ko, “Cinderella’s Sister” 55). Based on a distanced observation, local fangzu policymaking only involved concerns of foot-binders’ age and the unambiguous material sign of the foot-wear ornamentation. Here, one could claim that the local engagement of fangzu project regarded women’s bound feet as a generalized and uniform

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40 See Ko, *Cinderella’s Sister*, chapter 2 “Body Inside Out,” and Yang, “From Scientific Discourse to State Governance”.

41 See Yang, “From Scientific Discourse to State Governance,” pp. 22-25.
site without specifying and contextualizing its condition in and through the lives it situated.

Though the enactment of the fangzu policy varied place by place, it nevertheless required all regions to prohibit binding practices among young girls, and required women with bound feet to unwrap their foot-cloth. Putting the liberation of women’s feet on agenda, the official ordinance from the Nanjing central government set up a specific plan: the first three months was the period for persuasion and education; and the following three months was the period for completing the liberation.42 Some specific deployments applied by local administration served this cause. For example, the Beiping municipality organized a “women’s correction squad” (妇女矫风队) that consisted of both reform-minded men and women to undertake the work of inspection and persuasion (Yang 24). Similarly, the inspection team in other provinces, such as Jiangsu and Jiangxi conducted fangzu instruction, side by side with the inculcation of knowledge about healthy lifestyle, hygiene, and scientific mothering (Ibid). Also, school became the frontline where the fangzu instruction and regulation took place.43 Some female schools, such as those in Hubei province, forbade students with bound feet to attend class, while others purposefully solicited students with bound feet to enter the schools and then required them to practice fangzu.44 In doing so, some schools incorporated fangzu criteria into the students’ dress code and added fangzu instruction in a physical education (PE) course

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42 See Yang,“From Scientific Discourse to State Governance,” pp. 22-25.


These modern techniques of governance were extensively practiced by social institutions at every level, ranging from police enforcement to schools, to push females with bound feet to engage in foot-liberation.

As the fangzu enforcement extended over six months, the results did not meet the Kuomintang Party (KMT) government’s expectation. Enforcement remained inconsistent and incoherent across time and space. The first stage of exhortation met strong aversion and objections from local people (Yang 24). The social influence of the inspection squads at the beginning merely relied on verbal persuasion to convert individual binders to follow the fangzu order. For example, in Shanxi province (陕西), some women, especially female elders would unbind their feet during the day to avoid surveillance and exhortation, but wrap their feet during the night. Some inspectors failed to convey the fangzu message, and instructing other females with bound feet to do so, would turned to other matters of enforcement. When only achieving minor effect, local administrations in both provincial and county levels arbitrarily adopted violence in their daily inspections. Local administration of Beiping and Shanxi, for example, set a fine as punishment for those “incorrigible” women who resisted removing their binding cloths. Even worse, in some places, the local offices equipped inspection squads with police force. Those women who did not have the economic capacity to pay the fines were


46 See Li Tengxiang, “General Song Zheyuan and Women’s Fangzu Movement” (Song Zheyuan Jiangjun he funü fangzu yundong 宋哲元将军和妇女放足运动), pp. 198-99

47 See Li Tengxiang, “General Song Zheyuan and Women’s Fangzu Movement,” and Song Xuejing, “Hedongdao County Magistrate Ma Jun” (Hedongdao Daoyin Majun 河东道道尹马俊), pp.24-26
arrested by these police squads and sent to local asylums to start the mandatory “rehabilitation,” namely enforcing fangzu on their bodies.\textsuperscript{48} In some cases, the inspection squad would violently strip off and burn women’s wrapping cloth when they found their targets walking on the street. For example, in 1927, General Song Zheyuan, a progressive politician, who took the position of Shanxi (陕西) governmental president established a fangzu office and endowed the fangzu inspection team with executive power.\textsuperscript{49} In one case, a male inspector stripped an old lady’s wrapping cloth off and hung them on the door of her house. In desperation, this old lady later took her life by hanging herself in her own house.\textsuperscript{50} In Hedongdao County, Shanxi province (山西), the magistrate Ma Jun organized the inspection squad with female evangelicals who known to the local populaces as the “second devil” (二鬼子).\textsuperscript{51} Intruding into local residences going door to door, these inspectors ordered female residents to take off their shoes and socks to see whether they wore the foot-binding cloth. In some counties, women refused the enforced unbinding and attempted suicide by jumping into the river. \textsuperscript{52} As the number of fangzu-related suicide cases grew, the fangzu movement owed this not to the moderate effort of

\textsuperscript{48} In Beiping Fangzu Inspection Report, there had been 51 female unbound their feet, among which 8 woman were enforced to do so in rehab asylum.

\textsuperscript{49} See Li Tengxiang “General Song Zheyuan and Women’s Fangzu Movement” pp. 198

\textsuperscript{50} See Li Tengxiang, “General Song Zheyuan and Women’s Fangzu Movement” pp. 198

\textsuperscript{51} According to Song Xuejing, during anti-footbinding movement, local commoners called western missionary “foreign devil” and the Chinese evangelical “secondary devil”. The similar point can also be found in Yang Nianqun’s article.

\textsuperscript{52} See Song Xuejing, “Hedongdao County Magistrate Ma Jun,” pp. 26
verbal exhortation, but rather the violent regulation and the abuse of power that intervening in the customary forces of local societies.

As footbinding issues became a state concern in China’s twentieth-century modernization process, the coercive sovereign power usurped the moral power to invest in defining and correcting so-called “defective bodies”. The discrepancy between fangzu as an ideology granting modern citizenship to fangzu subjects, and fangzu as a physical regulation that inflicted suffering and humiliation on female body extended itself to an unprecedented degree, foregrounding the role of state power in this imperative. Women’s bound feet served as a medium to articulate the state’s ambition to transform the old feudal society into a modern one. From the state’s paternalistic perspective, fangzu provided an ideal national salvation project that would liberate the female masses from feudal traditions, and elevating the nation’s status in the hierarchy of global civilization. It was simultaneously a liberation and an oppression of females with bound feet who refused to succumb to it. It served as the only path to modern citizenship, while foreclosing other ways of being and living. For cases of female suicide resisting fangzu, the victims’ deaths were blamed on their own “unenlightened” mind and obstinacy in adhering to a backwards tradition. These women did not leave their suicide writings, nor were their dissident voices acknowledged by the hegemonic liberation discourse. The records of their death appeared only in public spaces, such as newspapers or tabloids, reported on as transgressions that disturbed the public order, or as deplorable vestiges of a lingering feudalism. Their death did not receive sympathetic or condoling comment, but rather contempt. As an integral part of modern state-building, the anti-footbinding
movement pushed such subaltern subjects into a dilemma where self-transformation through physical unbinding was, in Gayatri Spivak’s language, the one thing the women “cannot not want”. Either encapsulated within or foreclosed by emancipatory discourse, these female suicides remained obscure in the grand historical narrative of progress and modernization, yet nevertheless indicate the everyday struggle of subaltern subjects encounter with a compulsory modernity.

However, we also need see female agency in even these coercive and violent conditions, where the woman was not merely a passive victim of state violence, but also a potential saboteur of hegemonic anti-footbinding discourse. Their agency can be read as the capacity to express and perform their willful disobedience to coercive fangzu by cheating and avoiding inspections. Committing suicide, likewise, was a strategy for women to withdraw themselves physically from the unbearable conditions under which their bodily integrity was violated. To borrow Spivak’s phrase, the suicidal resistance of women with bound feet to fangzu is a “message inscribed on the body when no other means will get through,” a modality of expression and communication for the subaltern.53

From the above analysis, we see the extreme conflict and disorder disrupting local societies and families as a result of the anti-footbinding movement led to two sorts of female suicide: one for achieving physical liberation and retreating from family conflicts, and one for resisting and rejecting the fangzu order. These two cases establish the two ends of a broader spectrum of fangzu experiences, while many others occupied the middle ground and—willingly or not—engaged in the process of fangzu practice and

eventually survived it. The following part will situate these subjects’ personal narratives, and assess the ways women with bound feet recounted their past, perceived their present and envisioned their future, meditating on what kind of modern subjecthood had been constructed through their physical transformations.

*Women’s Self-Engagement in Fangzu Transformations*

In 1933, the periodical *Civic Life* (minzhong shenghuo, 民众生活), a publication created by the Shanghai Civic Society in Shanghai published three consecutive special issues on the progress of fangzu campaigns in Yunnan province.⁵⁴ According to the editor’s preface, there were three purposes for compiling this series. First, it aimed to provide the nationwide anti-footbinding leaders with valuable information about how to organize and promote the fangzu campaign. Second, it intended to help both men and women from different social sectors to realize the irreversible trend of social revolution. Third, it offered young female pioneers of fangzu advice and to share their methods and techniques with other female readers.⁵⁵ Responding to the government’s fangzu policy, the publication was committed to expanding its influence among female audiences, while persuading them to engage in self-liberation. By collecting fangzu practitioners’ own reports of their past experience, the *Civic Life* set up a dedicated column to share these women’s intimate knowledge of their bodies. A series of articles, for example, “My

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⁵⁴ See “Editor’s Words” in Civic life (Minzhong shenghuo 民众生活), no.50, pp. 1-3,

⁵⁵ Ibid.
Experience of Footbinding and Fagnzu (缠足与放足经验谈),”56 “How to Let Your Feet Out (如何把脚放大),”57 and “A letter to My Boundfoot Sisters (致缠足女同胞的信),”58 etc., were compiled into this thematic series. This collection of female autobiographical-narratives provide an alternative lens through which we can understand how female subjects with bound feet came to experience fangzu and how they subsequently repositioned themselves in relation to a changing world.

This corpus of personal fangzu stories generated its own familiar narrative pattern. Generally speaking, it began with narrators’ reminiscences of childhood footbinding sufferings, and then shifted to an exhortatory tone to share their fangzu experiences and pragmatic advice. The first part speaks bitterness (诉苦).59 This specific form of expressing grievance, strategically adopted by fangzu narrators, recreated their wounded and traumatic past in a lamenting tone. It also served as a public testimony through which the narrators selectively recounted their past and reconstructed their narrative in adherence with the emancipatory fangzu ideology. For example, in “A letter


57 Ying Xue 映雪. “How to Let Your Feet Out” (Zen yang ba jiao fangda 如何把脚放大). Minzhong shenghuo 民众生活 (Civic life), no. 50, 1933, pp. 13-16.


59 Here, the “speaking bitterness” is a specific form of expressing grievance, through which the narrator recount the painful past in a lamenting tone. It is the same narrative pattern promoted by Chinese Communist Party in 1950 land reformation, by which the peasants were encouraged to express grievance and anger publicly about old feudalist land system and their exploitative landlord master.
Lady Xiang recounted her childhood when her cruel-hearted mother coaxed her to endure the acute pain imposed by her mother’s binding practice. When she tried to unfasten the bandage, her mother scolded her and stitched up the cloth tightly with needle and thread. Feeling her body increasingly losing energy, she was unable to walk, and even had a hard time eating and sleeping (Lady Xiang 23). Ms. Hui related how her mother bound her feet at the age of five in consideration for her future marriage. Similar to Lady Xiang’s experience, Hui couldn’t go to sleep nor eat. Applying medical ointment on the festered wound was the most unbearable pain beyond words. Every time she unwrapped the bandage from her feet for cleansing, she could see that the white bandage was stained by blood and pus (Hui 20). Through confiding these past sufferings, the female narrators relived the past, reenacted the graphic scene of her bodily mutilation, and gave authenticity to their visceral suffering. The reminiscence also illuminated the narrators’ memories about their mother. They mourned their miserable childhood, while recreating the profound and affective mother-daughter connection.

Some narrators blamed their cruel-hearted mother, some did not. “We don’t blame our mother, because she is also the victim of footbinding” Mrs. Hui claimed in her story, “we only blame the custom itself” (22). After all, a pair of 3-inch lotus feet bespeaks female virtue and future marriageability, and wins a reputation for the humble mother. These narrators, nevertheless, expressed a complicated affect for their mothers which reminds us how the matrilineal bond was tied up by footbinding rituals passed from generation to generation. Overall, speaking bitterness as a specific narrative strategy adopted by female
subjects with bound feet transformed their local, personal, and intimate stories into collective memories that resonated with many women with bound feet in their readership.

Continuing to unpack a wounded past, Lady Xiang recalled her enforced unbinding experiences in local female school. Living in a small village, Lady Xiang’s mother wanted her daughter to have a better education, and sent her to the local school at the age of ten. By that time, the school was on the “front line” for women’s physical and mental emancipation. By instrumentalizing the slogan of “build a strong body, build a strong nation,” the educational institute incorporated fangzu instruction into the curriculum of physical education. Lady Xiang’s school was one of the institutions that accepted girls with bound feet only if they obeyed the school’s orders to unwrap their feet. Similar to many of her female schoolmates, when Lady Xiang took the mandatory PE class with her well-shaped tiny feet, she could not walk steadily. The schoolteachers with natural feet were urbanites from the nearby city. In order to mobilize schoolgirls to follow the fangzu order, teachers strategically included fangzu messages in their everyday classes by denigrating the binding custom as a pernicious feudal tradition, while promoting an anti-footbinding gospel. Yet, few of female student were willing to do so, including Lady Xiang, due to a similar thought: “It is such a pity to just give up this pair of well-shaped small feet. After all, it costs us a lifetime of pain to maintain it” (24). The school thereafter forced students to obey the rule, threatening to dismiss those did not comply. The school also organized the teachers to check whether the girls wore binding

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60 For example, the Huben Girls’ School even provided samples of special shoes to help girls and women to accommodate their feet to the unbinding process and following intense exercises, including football and aerobics. See Hockx, Judge, and Mittler, Barbara’s. *Women and the Periodical Press in China’s Long Twentieth Century: a Space of Their Own?* pp. 94
cloths, and to rummage in their bags to see whether any cloths were hidden within.

Receiving school inspection and discipline became an everyday procedure before attending class. Students were afraid of dropping off and many replaced the binding cloth with tight socks, which looked less suspicious did not effectively unbind the feet. A few months later, still walking in a swaying gait, Ladt Xiang’s feet were let out. However, due to the lack of advanced educational resources nearby, Lady Xiang stayed at home after finishing primary school and turned back to the binding just like her peers: “My feet at that time were the biggest among my siblings. They looked so ugly; I doubled my efforts to make them smaller” (Ibid). This phase lasted until the age of fifteen, when she started fangzu practices again.

Reminiscing about past bitterness ended here, where Lady Xiang shifted her tone to express her grievances. Reflecting on her painful past, Lady Xiang imputed this excruciating back-and-forth process to the custom itself, she addressed as the root of all the suffering she had had to go through. Speaking of the ravages of footbinding, Lady Xiang spurned her deformed physicality as a symbol of social abjection. Lady Xiang believed that her bound feet no longer gained her men’s appreciation, nor secured her marriageability in this changing society. “Modern men hate small feet,” she asserted, “instead, it (small feet) drags you down to hell” (25). This long, emotional, and dramatic testimony presented the narrator’s grievous losses—that of her natural body and social status. After castigating footbinding, Lady Xiang reoriented her tone of grievance to fangzu admonishments. “As long as I know that footbinding is pernicious to my body, my society, and impeding my acquiring modern citizenship,” Lady Xiang asserts, “I will
undo my bound feet by my own hands not even wait for the government's call” (Ibid). In this statement, Lady Xiang deeply affirms that fangzu is the only path to a promising future in which she is able to gain a brand-new identity as a modern woman. Fangzu thus becomes an irresistible lure that guarantees the woman with formerly bound feet a life with dignity. Such desire derives from her own rejection of her stigmatized body, which is designated by modern society as crippled and abnormal, thus symbolizing her incompleteness as a human being. The valorization of the natural body, physical freedom and female autonomy in Chinese women’s emancipation forced the subjects with bound feet to become to aware that their feet established their marginalized social status, which had already fallen behind in the linear progress of national modernization. Awakening to this realization, Lady Xiang made a statement, a solemn resolve and promise that regarded her present leading role in the fangzu movement, and her future commitment to self-improvement as well as the progress of society as a whole. Undergirded by a promising fangzu future, these narrators created a stylistic exhortatory narrative to disseminate and mediate the fangzu message and political education to female readers.

However, if we only read this corpus of fangzu narratives as political propaganda for anti-footbinding policy, it would too simply ignore the practicers’ subtle signs of dissent and resistance within their compliance with the dominant fangzu discourse. Amidst her admonitions, Lady Xiang claimed, “My sisters, stop seeing the government’s fangzu policy as a form of oppression and so resist against the order” (25). This suggests that at least some subjects admitted that the policy of unbinding was wielded against their will. This hesitant realization of the compulsory and oppressive nature of the fangzu
movement was nevertheless overridden by the general determination for liberation. For Lady Xiang, releasing her feet from the binding cloth gave her a second chance to live with freedom, even if she had to relive the pain during fangzu process. Just as many other narrators, after this exhortation, Lady Xiang turned to recount her second unbinding process:

It was a harder adjustment then I expected. I could barely walk when initially pulling off my wrapping cloth. Every step was painful. But after few months, I could manage to have a walk and my feet let out to a bigger size. Fangzu is that simple, and the younger you are, the less pain you will experience (25).

Compared to the pain of footbinding, the concomitant suffering of fangzu seems worthwhile. For Lady Xiang, the endurance of the trial of fangzu enables her to transform from a socially abject being to a fully realized modern female citizen. The inconsistency between Lady Xiang’s acknowledgment of the coercive nature of fangzu and her endorsement of such coercion is understandable to the point that fangzu was her only recourse to free herself from the past, and to escape from an unwanted status a modernizing society had ascribed to her.

Women’s descriptions tended to downplay the physical pain engendered by the fangzu process in dictating instruction. Instead, fangzu practicers adopted the logic that an ideal womanhood nowadays can only be achieved with the proper physical sacrifice, which drew from the same logic and raison d’être of the cultural survival of traditional footbinding customs. The physical compromise ensured by the bodily reconfiguration eventually matters little, yet had alway been the price for the practicer’s body to pay. The woman’s body again was rendered as a socially sanctioned and naturally suited sacrificial
body, not only for the service of family or kinship, but also for the needs of the nation. If the physical pain of footbinding was a lesson from which women became a conscious subject in the context of the Confucian family tradition, then the pain brought by fangzu also gave birth to a conscious subjecthood who saw and repositioned themselves as the freed individual in modern society. As they were subjected to and controlled by their own physical emancipation, these women envisioned the process itself as the painful outgrowth of China’s modernization.

In the last part of their narratives, fangzu narrators provide detailed fangzu methods that were technically pragmatic and effective to facilitate the unbinding process. From their point of view, fangzu was both a physical and mental trial. Thus, the novices needed the advice and assistance of the skilled practitioners (guolai ren 来人), in order to be patient enough to endure the pain and discomfort of the initial unbinding stage. Lady Xiang put alum in warm water to wash her feet twice or thrice per day (26). Lady Yingxue from Kunming, Yunnan province, shared her fangzu techniques in the article “How to Let the Feet Grow Bigger”. She suggested that fangzu needed to be processed step by step in order to let the feet grow up to an ideal size. The best means was to unwrap the binding cloth completely (15). However, since many women who bound their feet for decades and had corns and callused on their sole, she suggested they loosen their wrapping cloth first and apply alcohol and salicylic acid to exfoliate the dead skin (16). In terms of how to let the feet grow bigger, practicers’ methods and advice slightly differed from each other. For example, Lady Yingxue introduced “the scientific approach to fangzu” (科学的放足法), and suggested that since the bone and muscle of the bound feet
had degenerated after long-term binding, the only way to simulate its growth was to have foot baths in warm water to increase blood circulation (15). Lady Hui discussed how many layers you should unwrap during the first-time unbinding, and how she managed to take a walk and do other activities after the first week of fangzu. The means to alleviate the pain are also matters of technical experience, so the novice needed to adjust these methods according to personal need (21-22). Hui also advised applying vaseline on any wounds caused by the rubbing of unfitted shoes. The fangzu practitioners invested scientific information into their physically transforming instructions in order to make the whole corpus of fangzu writing more reliable and authoritative (22). A scientific fangzu discourse substantiated the practice as advanced in opposition to the backward footbinding practice that was regarded as unsanitary, unhealthy, and eventually destructive of women’s productive and reproductive ability. The hygienic techniques to keep the unwrapped feet clean also suggests the introduction and incorporation of the concept of hygiene (weisheng, 卫生) into fangzu instruction. In this sense, we see both hygienic and eugenic idea of western medical knowledge extensively adopted by women in fangzu practice to realize and expedite their physical transformation.

What is worthy of notice is that the fangzu narrators adopted a sisterhood narrative in their exhortations by addressing their female readers as “sisters” (jiemei men, 姐妹们). Though narrated in a monological way, these individual fangzu stories have distinct dialogical character. The intimate tone of a sisterhood narrative enables a dialogical relationship between the narrators and the readers. It mediated a spectrum of

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61 The similar point can be found in Yang Nianquan’s research.
subject positions, and negotiated not only female subjectivities but also gendered intersubjectivities. The sisterhood discourse indicates that the collection of fangzu personal stories comprises a “women’s sphere”. This connotation imparts women’s narratory agency that was exercised to the extent that the narrators could emotionally mobilize their female audiences by building a sense of identification and belonging based on the shared traumatic bodily experiences. The publication of these women’s fangzu stories aimed to propogate the fangzu message, but simultaneously crafted a textual space in which the readers were empowered by a shared identity and bodily experiences. The construction of fangzu sisterhood reinvented fangzu beyond the limit of a paternalistic nationalistic framework. It established and constituted a conjoining of individual women’s bodily experiences with the national anti-footbinding movement. However, we also need to acknowledge the exclusivity of this fangzu sisterhood discourse, because it stood for the woman with formerly bound feet who had been “awakened” to claim her national liberty, and worked against those refused to do so. The inclusion/exclusion of fangzu sisterhood became an indicator for the sharing/non-sharing of identities and mentalities.

From fangzu women’s personal narratives, we see how reformist elites passed the hegemonic message of women’s physical liberation down to female commoners to gain their cooperation and “consent”. It would neither be correct to say that fangzu women succumbed to this coercive fangzu campaign, nor that fangzu women represented a polyphonic expression outside of the dominant discourse. Rather, we should recognize that it was their malleable and imitative utterances that enabled them to produce
alternative expressions within a hegemonic discursive domain. The subjects who survived
the fangzu movement strategically appropriated the liberation discourse to make
themselves an odd alliance with the dominant ideology. In doing so, they created their
own a discursive space within nationalist patriarchal framework to make room for the
voices that grieved the excruciating bodily experience and the voices that spoke out the
coercive and violent nature of fangzu movement in public sphere. This reading of female
voices within the dominant discourse challenges the meaning of emancipatory modernity
itself and contributes to my larger point that women’s engagement in fangzu became the
very means of survival if disassociating themselves from their own traditions. We thus
need to recognize the female masses as historical agents whose cooperation with
compulsory fangzu discipline is the very strategy to restore their abased social status and
to pursue a promising life with dignity.

Bound Feet in a New Era

The journey of female subjects modern transformation started from fangzu
practice, but never ended up at solely letting their feet out. State mandated or otherwise,
for women with bound feet, becoming a “new woman” was a fictive and unachievable,
yet always pursued goal. It is fundamentally a process of becoming rather than a state of
being, which continually functioned to discipline female bodies and urged them to fit the
role of modern subjecthood ascribed to them by society. At the end of her fangzu
admonition, Lady Xiang warned her female readers, “Dear sisters, when you release your
feet from the noxious custom and let them out, don’t follow the trend of wearing high-
heeled shoes just like those modern ladies did. Putting your liberated feet into the
pointed-toe western shoes betrays the fundamental principle of women’s
emancipation” (26). The subtext of her advice connotes that wearing high-heeled shoes
was a new trend for women who let their feet out from binding cloth. As part of the May
Fourth sociocultural revolution to overthrow imperial and feudal tradition, the mission of
the fangzu movement was to reduce the appearance of women’s bound feet in public
spaces. What accompanied the public disappearance of an alleged “crippled body” was
the celebration of a women’s natural body in western-style dress and appearance. The
May Fourth theme of embracing western modernity lent itself reversing to the changing
aesthetic from the frail and concealed female body to the robust and revealed. Alongside
the reconfiguration of bound feet and the appreciation of natural feet, the embroidered
lotus shoes and wrapping cloth as the handiworks of women with bound feet became
obsolete, and replaced by western-style leather shoes and silk stockings (yangxie/yangwa,
洋鞋/洋袜). A pair of stylish high-heeled shoes gave the aesthetic illusion of longer,
more slender legs, seen by elite women as the celebration of the beauty of their natural
body. Among cosmopolitan bourgeois women the fashionable knowledge of western
footwear became irresistible, no matter whether their feet were natural or arched. It
embodied a modern femininity, while affirming certain female agency acquiring self-
satisfaction through clothing and individual autonomy over her physical presence in the
public sphere.

How did women with bound feet follow the fashion trend of western footwear? In
what way did society perceive the women with bound feet wearing western shoes? Did
women themselves find a comfortable way to wear modern shoes? A newspaper article
published in Shenbao 1929 titled “Miss Gilding the Lily” (huashe nushi, 画蛇女士) recorded a local anecdote.62 A young woman with bound feet went to Shanxi Normal College for advanced education, where most of female students had not practiced footbinding. This anonymous young lady had bound her feet since childhood and just recently unfastened her binding cloth. Since it was almost impossible to enlarge her feet to a normal size in a short term, she then came up with an idea to wear a pair of toecaps that were made up of fabric and wood dust. In doing so, she was able to put her feet into a pair of normal-size modern shoes. While still staggering on her feet, this young lady nevertheless entered the school, where people assumed she had a foot ailment. But her roommates eventually found out the secret under her shoes, and as the truth was unmasked, people started to mock her crippled body and swinging gait. In a derisive tone, the author called this woman Miss “Gilding the Lily” and mocked her for a footwear modification that was essentially self-deceptive and totally unnecessary. The report ended up with the author’s comment: “No matter how much effort she put to disguise her feet, she wouldn’t become a modern woman with that crippled body.”63 This female student’s experience indicates at least two points. First, the female subjects with bound feet managed to adjust their bound feet and footwear to make their public appearance meet social criteria. They thus employed some expedient strategies, such as wearing toecaps, to adapt themselves to the fashionable trends. Second, even when wearing western shoes,

63 See Jun Shuo, “Miss.Gild the Lily”.
women with bound feet would still be the target of social criticisms, in which misogynist and ableist discourse continually circulated via public media. Achingly, the fact is that no matter whether hidden or exposed, bound or released, the physicality of women’s bound feet would always be a social stigma they would have to carry for the rest of their lives.

According to Dorothy Ko’s historical document, although footbinding practice lost its popularity in coastal cities, like Guangzhou and Shanghai, where modernization was expedited by local administrative efforts in social reforms, elsewhere in China and among certain regional population sectors the practice continued well into the 1930s and even late 1940s (“Every Step” 133). As the footbinding practice survived over decades of anti-footbinding activism, and as the women still kept the cloth and socks wrapped on their feet, the footwear for this group of women, the traditional style of “lotus shoes” (jin lian xie, 金莲鞋) went modern too. The social transition and modernizing trend in shoes since the 1900s was in fact an extremely inventive one in both the style and craftsmanship of lotus shoes. The lotus shoes were never abandoned, but rather reinvented to follow the fashion trends. What was abandoned and replaced was the women’s handwork—the self-made embroidered shoes—while “the infusion of new materials and techniques, as well as the invention of new styles, was nothing short of revolutionary” (Ko, “Every Step” 134). Not much had changed in this sense, as footbinding had always been about fashionable beauty. Innovation in the lotus shoes lent

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64 See Ko, *Every Step a Lotus*, pp.134-138 for more information about the trending modern shoes designed for women with bound feet. She also explores that once the meticulous female handwork of making lotus shoes was partaken by shoe-making industries. For example, in 1920’s Shanghai, the professional shoe-makers would visit local gentry families to ask fashionable boundfoot ladies for their specific design preference of the lotus shoes (138).
itself to a new vitality in the modern era. By incorporating western design and materials into making lotus shoes, the culture of footbinding survived even under the Republican anti-footbinding movement. The modern lotus shoes called “pointy tip” (jianzui xie, 尖嘴鞋) kept the shape of the traditional version, given foot-binders’ deformed pointy toes, while adding some western elements, such as an elastic gusset on the sideside, an instep strap, a leather sole, and a decoration using cotton laces in the shoes design (Ko, “Every Step” 135). Women with bound feet thus could make a fashion statement by refining their lotus shoes without increasing the discomfort of wearing shoes made for women with natural feet. The wide heel area and flat soles made them more moderate than some high-heeled shoes, and thus less harmful to the women’s feet. However, the new-style lotus shoes nevertheless needed the owners to unwrap their thick binding cloth first, so they could put their feet into the slender new shoes. At this point, Ko argues that when came to the individual level, fangzu was in fact a more relative term than a definitive and rigid status. For most female foot-binders, fangzu could mean a less assiduous binding practice. Young women who bound lightly and whose feet were narrow, with four folded digits bent but without a drastically arched instep, would find the new shoes easily fitted (Ibid).

Similar to the abundance of information about female fashion in general, footwear trends in particular resulted from the wide circulation of women’s magazines and tabloids during a socioculturally transformative period between the 1920s and 1930s. A remarkable example of a Shanghai-based women’s weekly journal, Ling Long Ladies
*Magazine* (玲珑妇⼥女杂志), could provide a prism of women’s modern footwear culture. As a production of cosmopolitan bourgeois culture, *Ling Long* magazine served as an encyclopedia for women to engage in a consumptive urban life. It gathered a wide range of information for a microcosmic lifestyle, including cosmetics, fashion, clothing, household commodities, health, diet and outdoor exercise, as well as a broader scope of women’s public issues considering their social status, freedom, and mobility (Zhu 113-116). By bringing the ideas of the “modern lady” (摩登女郎), or “New Woman” (新⼥女性) into public view, *Ling Long* magazine sophistically cultivated a sizable female readership in urban settings across diverse social classes, from bourgeois elites to commoners, and some readers contributed their writings to the magazine. Drawing heavily on these writing contributions from urbane female audiences, the specific authorship-readership community molded an extensive body of consumptive knowledge, in which readers submitted themselves to elite, urban culture. An encompassing corpus of ideas, attitudes, techniques and practices for cultivating bourgeois femininity, including dress, deportment and confident public appearance, lured female readers into a *mild* bodily discipline that was incongruent with the state’s compulsory physical emancipation. Due to increasing social mobility and public visibility, the improvement and modification of bodily shape and appearance came to be the central concern of women’s self-engagement with modern, urban life. Everyday outdoor activities and social interactions required women to dress up well. Fancy

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65 Initially launched by Lin Zecang in 1931, *Ling Long* was the most well-known women’s magazine as well as female fashion guidebook back then.
Cheongsam or western dress and a pair of Western-style leather shoes could display the natural physicality of the female body, while signifying her confidence, independence and urbane disposition. The concept of “natural feet” was reinvented from its original biological notion as an anatomical structure to a broader scope of reference that integrated the exteriors—socks and shoes as attire and ornament—into a standardized aesthetic. The revolutionary terms of “natural feet, (tianzu 天足)” “liberated feet (jianfang jiao 解放脚),” and “civilized feet (wenming jiao 文明脚)” that were extensively employed in anti-footbinding propaganda were substituted by terms that were more related to modern fashion, such as “beautiful feet” (meizu 美足), “high-heeled feet (gaogen zu 高跟足),” and “modern feet (modeng jiao 摩登脚)”. This change suggests a possible shift of public attention away from a simple female physique (natural or mutilated) to a complex corporeal aesthetic, where women’s feet in modern footwear became significant cultural capital that could be invested in the construction of modern bourgeois femininity.

However, in the discourse surrounding women’s footwear, women in high-heeled shoes were subjugated to public polemics, in which many criticisms similar to Lady Xiang’s admonition targeted the trend is itself as contrary to the essence of women’s liberation. These criticisms, mostly produced and supported by conservative male elites and doctors, pointed out the potential damage of heels on the female body, including forcing the feet into an unnatural position by slanting the sole forward and down, while

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66 The formers were official language used frequently by government to address fangzu policy or by Tianzu societies to advocate anti-footbinding, while the later adopted by women in discussions of the skin care and fashion custom on women’s magazines.
bending the toe bone up. Such disapproval met strong defense from female wearers who actively participated into these polemics. For example, an article “Why I Choose to Wear High-heeled Shoes” written by Lady Li-Fei published in Ling Long in 1933 complained about some male doctors’ objection to high heels by reason of its impairment of the natural growth of women’s feet and for being the cause of bone deformation. To defy the western medical strictures, Li-Fei compared western women’s natural feet in heels with Chinese women’s bound feet in embroidered lotus shoes and turned to argue that high-heeled shoes would not cause the foot deformity, but rather give the feet a beautiful arc with specific delicacy. She then concluded: “except for those women who have a pair of deformed feet, anyone who wears [high-heel shoes] would look good” (Li Fei, 412). She also suggested that the western-style footwear can compensate for the deficiency of Chinese women’s height by giving them a visually longer and slenderer leg. Some female contributors did discuss the painful suffering from foot ailments caused by high-heels, but nevertheless ended up with the reaffirmation of personal choice and female autonomy. Lady Yao Xiafen, for example, in her contribution “Modern Feet” shared her ambiguous feelings about high-heels: “We sisters often sacrifice everything to stay in fashion, even wearing a pair of shoes that don’t fit our body.” She then recalled her personal experience: “The new shoes rubbed my feet severely and there were blisters on my heels, and corns on my soles. It was too painful to let me walk and go outside.”

67 See Li Fei,’s “Why Women Need Wearing High-heel Shoes” (weishenme yao chuan gaogenxie 为什么要穿高跟鞋). Linglong Women’s Magazine 玲珑妇女杂志, vol. 2, no.73, 1932, pp.1061.

68 See Yao Xiafen’s Modern feet” (Modeng de jiao 摩登的脚). Linglong Women’s Magazine 玲珑妇女杂志, vol. 1, no. 12, 1931, pp. 412-413.
then turned to offer a doctor’s advice, such as doing some leg exercise and foot massage, to improve the curve of her legs and blood circulation, while avoiding bone deformation and calluses. Her recovery came quickly, and she then urged her urban sister-readers to do the same to modify their leg muscles in order to make the entire lower limbs more suitable for high-heels.

Similar to the collection of women’s fangzu monologues in the Civic Life periodical, the narrative emerging in Ling Long also took the form of sisterhood, constructing a specific gendered consciousness within author-reader community that was based on a gynocentric worldview. In simpler terms, the sisterhood narrative of Ling Long was taken from a kind of feminist perspective defined exclusively around and thus prioritizing urban bourgeois female experiences. As a result, some sisterhood narratives embodied explicit misandry, the hatred, prejudice and other forms of hostile sentiments towards androcentric discourses and the patriarchal system as a whole. On the topic of modern footwear, some female contributors denounced the modern male fetishism of women’s natural feet and slender legs. Mrs. Peng in her article “Foot Fetishism (ban zu kuang 拜⾜⾜狂)”69 criticized it this way: “I heard an anecdote about the anti-footbinding campaign in Shandong. The local government set the rule to prohibit man from marrying women with bound feet…This makes me think about foot fetishism” (2145). By defining male desire for women’s feet and shoes as “foot fetishism,” and calling these men “sexual perverts,” Mrs. Peng contested that the survival of the notorious footbinding owes itself

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to a type of sexual deviance that is exclusively a male mental disorder. Changing her tone suddenly, Peng harshly slashed out at foot fetishism in western countries, where men have a similar obsession with a woman’s natural feet and her slender legs. “Nowadays, a modern lady with natural feet would follow the trend to wear western shoes without stockings in order to show the line of her legs, the shape of her ankle, and the delicacy of her toes. We the women finally enjoy a life free from binding torture, but nevertheless still succumb to male desire. Weak up, my sisters!” (2146) The pathologization of male sexual desire for women’s feet as a form of psychological abnormality indicated strong resentment against male sexuality. Her misandrist tone not only pungently set herself as the opponent of the male conservative’s ongoing anxieties over and condemnation of the high visibility of women’s body in the public sphere, but simultaneously expressed severe cynicism towards the unbridled libido of reformist male elites who replaced the obsolete fetishism of “lotus feet” with the objectification of and the obsession with women’s natural feet. Peng’s statement indicates that through the proliferation and dissemination of *Ling Long* sisterhood narratives, a group of female readers came to realize that no matter with bound feet or natural feet, women's bodies have always been the receptacle and repository for phallocentric desire. Footbinding, anti-footbinding and the later emergence of footwear fashion are similar to the extent that they are all predicated on and cultivated for male preference.

The above disputes surrounding women’s natural feet reveal how women during this socioculturally transformative period continually struggled to comprehend what “civilization” (wenming, 文明) meant, and how their bodies could perform modern
civility through fashion and consumption. The significant contradictions between Lady Sufei and Mrs. Peng’s views display the diversity and complexity of female definitions of cosmopolitan femininity, which was associated not only with public appearance, lifestyle, class and region, but also a feminist consciousness that was sensitive to gendered oppression in the disguise of fashion discourse. The public appreciation of the natural female body in fact was still encompassed by the artificial product of a consuming capitalist economy. Women’s bodies, once restrained by footbinding traditions, now were subjected to modern westernized standards defined by male desire. Feminine periodicals, such as, *Ling Long*, served as a capitalist medium to proliferate and disseminate the idea of “cosmopolitan” womanhood on the one hand; and on the other hand, crafted a public discursive field where a sense of cosmopolitan sisterhood was constructed via “polyphonic female narratives” that prioritize female everyday urban life experiences. Yun Zhu has argued that the cosmopolitan female magazine allowed its female authorship-readership to explore and redefine female subjectivities and intersubjectivities beyond a national emancipatory framework and apart from male intellectual criticisms that reduced female body autonomy to materialism and consumerism (xv). *Ling Long*, in providing a feminist discursive domain, created an alternative “women’s sphere,” where female voices were interactive and dialogical. Yet, its bourgeois cultural setting was nevertheless exclusive to and distanced from the lower-class female masses.
Chapter 3: May Fourth Intellectuals and Literary Representations of Women with Bound Feet

Modernity, Male Intellectuals and Female Tradition

This chapter explores the hegemonic, masculine representations of boundfoot women and an alternative feminist textual configuration of them amidst the political and sociocultural changes in the May Fourth era. Strikingly distinct from my preceding socio-historical studies of the boundfoot woman’s social experiences at the turn of the twentieth century, the cultural representations of these women in the May Fourth New Culture Movement (1915-1923) was dominated by modernistic, masculine discourse. The abundant and heterogenous expressions of females on their formations of modern subjectivity, however, have frequently been submerged by mainstream, anti-traditionalist voices in Chinese modern intellectual culture. The intellectual’s universal rhetoric of modernization as the only prescription for the collapsing nation, in Ray Chow’s language, “assures the ghettoized existence of the Other” (Chow, “Against” 25). The cultural embodiment of boundfoot women in the era of modern sociopolitical transition existed only in so far as they were represented by the culturally dominant intellectual elites. Here, I invoke representation as a critical prism through which we understand “who represented whom” and the power relationship therein. In the historical and political milieu of the May Fourth movement, the social position of modernist intellectuals served twofold as

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70 Led by intellectuals and students in response to the Treaty of Versailles imposed by western imperialists, the May Fourth movement, contained its threefold agenda as anti-western imperialism, anti-traditionalism and embracing western civilization. It was aimed to destruct Chinese tradition, including Confucian culture and classic writing system, while introducing western ideas of science and democracy. See Shih, The Lure of the Modern, introduction part for more cultural history of China’s May Fourth movement.
both the proxy for and portraitist of the female masses. Through the politics of representation, the boundfoot subject was designated as the victim of feudalist tradition in need of salvation or the vestige of the past in need of rectification.

The May Fourth zeitgeist was the desire to leap into the advanced dimension of western modernity, while hastily negating the legacy and legitimacy of tradition (Shih 16). The radical debunking of Chinese tradition entailed a monosemous and monolithic construction of dualism that posits Chinese tradition as the opposition to Western modernity. When we prioritize the local cultural activities of importing and localizing western modernity over the ideological infusion by western imperialists, we tend to restore the cultural agency to the local intellectual groups as active participants in local cultural production (Shih 15). The project of May Fourth movement thus is the manifestation of collective agency of male intellectual elites in their every attempt to renovate Chinese culture in order to catch up with western civilization.

To begin with, May Fourth male intellectuals accused classic Chinese writing (wen yan wen 文言文) of muting the voice of Chinese populaces, and of preventing them from absorbing western ideas of science and democracy (Yue 47). Hence, in order to “restore the writing and speaking to populaces,” and in so doing, to civilize them, the project of the promotion of written vernacular Chinese over classical Chinese had been indispensable to deconstruct Chinese Confucian literary learning and linguistic tradition (Yue 47). However, it turned out that the vernacularization project did not endow too

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This point is inspired by Gayatri Spivak. When talking about the ambiguity of the polysemous term “representation,” Spivak differentiated the notion of political representation, a speaking for the needs of others, from their re-presentation through art and literature. See, Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak” pp. 72-73.
much writing and speaking agency to the masses nor get close to their everyday life, because it simultaneously deconstructed the traditional epistemological framework which conditioned the intelligibility of the populaces (Yue 48). Along with the promotion of vernacular Chinese, the establishment of “new literature” (xinwenxue 新文学) became the cultural capital accessible only to those one acquired enough training in the western educational system (Shih 71). The literary practices of criticizing Confucian tradition leads to a further negation of masses’ traditional way of thinking and knowing, whereby the masses laid beyond the threshold of modern intelligibility. The discourse of “masses” created by intellectuals was not congruent with the actual social experiences of the masses, but rather as a rhetorical trope exclusively associated with “backward” and “unenlightened” in the service of May Fourth project of anti-traditionalism. Such a reductive writing of masses as the authentic presences of them is itself a problematic process of othering. State otherwise, the native male-dominant intellectual class made the sense of otherness in the absences of “the other,” while leveraging themselves to the status of charismatic leadership in dictating Chinese modernization.

In perceiving themselves as the voices of China, May Fourth male intellectuals actively engaged in writing about women’s oppression because it functioned as an irrefutable signifier for their own revolutionary stance. Thus, the discourse about the boundfoot female subject as the embodiment of Confucian tradition proliferating in their literary practices was a less conscious effort to stand up for the woman’s voice, and more a collective attempt to exploit the discursive value of “women’s issues,” The male intellectuals, who considered themselves as specialists in diagnosing social problems,
often asserted that women who lived the conventional and customary practices indicated a residue of imperial feudalism, and thus were in need of transformation and correction. According to Yue Ming-bao’s studies, the fictive construction of the “traditional woman” in works by May Fouth male intellectuals usually focused on their crippled physique, illiteracy, and underclass social status. The lurid description of their outmoded physicality and mentality, to borrow Yue’s phrase, “often convey[ed] an impression of female existence that is, above all, iconographical” (54). Such a reductive and abstractive writing strategy is a form of hegemonic representation that lends the author’s voice to his female other, while at the same time organizing a misogynist narrative to interpret the Other as culturally inferior and problematize her inferiority. In this sense, the epistemological violence enacted by such reduction/abstraction was justified by the purpose of opposing, more broadly, the feudalistic patriarchy that had subjugated the female masses.

In representing boundfoot woman, intellectuals tended to turn a blind eye to interpretation of the tradition as a cultural expression of womanhood, and instead only see the woman as the passive and ignorant victim. The textual images of women with bound feet appeared to be, to my mind, the “ghost” of the tradition, haunting and lingering in male writings, even while being dismissed. That is, subaltern women were not only being muted and misrepresented, but their very existence reduced to a uniform silent object appropriated and exploited by intellectuals. In the following reading, I will take a closer look at the textual configuration and discursive formation of boundfoot

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72 See Yue’s critique of the cultural representation of uneducated rural women in May Fourth’s fiction writing practices.
women, their bodies and sexuality in the literary world of May Fourth male intellectuals. Using this textual embodiment of the boundfoot subject, I will address different forms of representational exclusion enacted by the male writers Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu. The literary works chosen for this purpose have hitherto been ignored by feminist literary critics. Here, I focus on: first, what kinds stereotypical portraits did male authors create to represent boundfoot women? Second, in what way and for what purpose did the two authors organize their narratives to silence women’s voices while reinscribing traditional femininity as an ultimately passive being? Third, how did male authors position the textual embodiment of boundfoot subjects in relation to themselves, and the modernizing nation-state?

*Guo Moruo and his Boundfoot Other*

As a prestigious author, poet, and historian of twentieth-century China, Guo Moruo (1892-1978) was one of the leading characters in the May Foruth movement. Born into a merchant family, Guo studied medicine in Japan in his early years, just like his intellectual counterpart Lu Xu. During his overseas studies between 1914 and 1920, he gained an interest in literature, and turned to studying foreign languages and literature (Roy 17). In 1921, together with Yu Dafu, Zhang Ziping, and Cheng Fangwu, Guo established the Creation Society, the most important literary association that enjoyed a reputation equal to the Crescent Moon Society founded by Xu Zhimo, Hu Shi, and Wen Yiduo during the same period (Roy 18). Guo’s leadership in the Creation Society paved

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73 See Roy’s *Kuo Mo-Jo: the Early Years*, for more biographic information about Guo Moruo’s career and personal life.
the way for the proliferation and circulation of vernacular literature. Influenced by Hu Shi’s work that rebuked any inhibition of free expression, Guo was drawn to the rising genre of “new poetry” and sought an unprecedented lyrical freedom in his literary practice (Feng 171-172). Deeply affected by Western Romanticism and Sentimentalism, Guo propounded that “the proper task of poetry and literature in general is lyricism” and that lyricism was “the essence of poetry” (171). Embodying the May Fourth zeitgeist, Guo’s writing also contains elements of a political and cultural agenda to propel the revolutionary progress of the entire nation. In 1920, the twenty-eight year old Guo wrote the poem “Phoenix Nirvana” (Fenghuang niepan 凤凰涅槃). The poem celebrated the revolutionary ethos of May Fourth through the metaphor of the phoenix, whose divine power brought a radical transformation from ashes into a new being. Not only did the metaphor of the phoenix signify China’s future as the reborn deity, but it also worked as a reference to the pro-western intellectuals who were newly unfettered from the shackles of Confucian tradition. The linear temporal mode of thinking—self-immolation preceding rebirth—suggests Guo’s own commitment to realizing modernization by subjecting his writing to this sociopolitical transition, while at the same time revealing his iconoclastic personality as the avant-garde standing against the status quo and the restraints of the past.

Behind the overflowing emotion of Guo’s works lies his growing self-consciousness as an autonomous individual who desired the ultimate freedom at both

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74 See Feng Liping’s “Democracy and Elitism: The May Fourth Ideal of Literature” for more critique of the genre of romanticism and lyricism in May Fourth new cultural movement.

75 The poem is included in Guo’s Goddess anthology.
literary and social levels, excercising unbridled intellectual and emotional agency. Guo’s enthusiastic lyrics and emotional free verse reflects his exercise of authorial agency, and yet, simultaneously indicates his deep anxiety and fear of being shackled by Confucian tradition. Additional information from Guo’s background assists in understanding such a complex incentive behind Guo’s literary creations. Raised in a traditional family belonging to the gentry in Leshan, Guo did not escape from the marriage tradition prescribed by Confucian paternalism. In 1911, his mother informed the 19-year-old Guo that he was going to marry a young woman who he had never met before. Although reluctant, he nevertheless acquiesced to his mother’s will and married his appointed bride, Zhang Qinghua, who was an uneducated boundfoot woman from the local gentry (Roy 16). However, Guo regretted this undesired marital arrangement, leaving his hometown and going to Chengdu five days after his wedding. His new life began with his overseas academic pursuits in Japan a few years later. During that time, Guo met and fell in love with a Japanese woman, Sato Tomiko, who later became Guo’s common-law wife and bore five children for him. Somehow, Guo never formally divorced his first wife, Mrs. Zhang, and the latter lived in Guo’s hometown and remained “widowed” for the rest of her life (Roy 17).

The failure of his first marriage affected Guo to the extent to which it gave him the impetus to revolt against Confucian tradition and lead the New Culture Movement in the May Fourth era. His literary innovation became a means to channel his early marital (sexual) frustration into the castigation of tradition. For example, he once hyperbolized: “China, which has been proud of her feudal ethics for thousands of year, is in fact nothing
but an oversized hospital full of sexual perverts!” (Guo, “Aesthetic” 322-323) His strategy of psychological analysis thus aimed to define and pathologize feudal ethics and practices—including paternalistic family values and the practice of arranged marriage—as a form of sexual perversion (Shih 65). Just like Lu Xu, Guo’s acquisition of both western bio-medicine and foreign literature set himself up as a psychoanalytic-intellectual who was capable of diagnosing the crux of China’s backward status quo. However, unlike Lu Xu’s stylistic criticism in which his ironic detachment and satire are always accompanied by a deep sympathy towards what he criticized (Hesford 407), Guo allowed his literary expressions to roam in the realm of unbound emotion, sublimating them to a pure antipathy to tradition. Guo’s lack of self-reflexivity in failing to acknowledge and interrogate his own intellectual privileges is a common characteristic shared by many male modernists during the May Fourth era.

The first selected writing of my literary critique is Guo’s short autobiographic novel “Black Cat” (hei mao, 黑猫). Written in 1934, this short piece was included in the anthology My Youth (shaonian shidai 少年时代). The autobiographic novel is a unique form of a self-narrative combined with fictive elements. Yet, what makes for more nuanced storytelling in “Black Cat” is that Guo adopts a third-person perspective to recount the turning-point of his life—the wedding event at his age of nineteen. This short piece recreates the night in which he first met with the appointed bride, Miss Zhang, and

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76 See Hesford’s “Overt Appropriation” for more insightful analysis about Lu Xun’s literature criticism and satire.

77 Guo, Moruo “Black Cat” (hei mao 黑猫), My Youth (Shaonian shidai 少年时代), Xiandai shuju, 1930.
experienced a psychological transition from pre-wedding romantic expectations to profound post-wedding disappointment. His imagined ideas about his future wife were incongruent with the person in reality. In taking a third-person perspective, Guo Moruo calls the young male protagonist by his own childhood name, Guo Kaizhen (郭开贞), while he also inserts some introspective comments about this tragic marriage from his present self, the writer Guo Moruo. As a result, the reader sees two distinctive perspectives alongside the interchangeable use of Guo Kaizhen and Guo Moruo throughout the story. As Janet Ng suggests, self-naming is an important topos in modern Chinese autobiographic novels, because names denote identity (92). Guo’s use of his natal name thus suggests a specific emotional connection between his present and past. Such reminiscence allows the narrator to travel back to the past and take a bystander’s stance from which he can examine his past with a critical outlook. In this light, the author's derogatory portrait of the woman he married is justified. In Yue’s language, the violence of misrepresentation become a matter of innocence “by establishing his absence from the venue, the scene of the crime,” where the ontological and epistemological literary violence against women takes place (55).

The story begins with the Kaizhen’s memory of his failed betrothal in earlier days. One lady, San Sao, he was set to be engaged with later married to his elder brother, and unfortunately died after her childbirth. After this tragedy, Kaizhen had no interest in arranged marriage and left for Chengdu to gain a high-school education. At the age of nineteen, Kaizhen returned home for the New Year festival, and unexpectedly received his mother’s announcement that she had found a proper family who was willingly to
marry a daughter to Kaizhen. The appointed bride, Zhang Qinghua, was the daughter of family Zhang in the nearby town, Suxi Chang. His mother worried about Kaizhen’s age, and planned the arrangement with a local matchmaker without asking Kaizhen’s opinion. Considering his mother’s good intentions and the local marriage tradition, the filial son couldn’t help but accept this marital contract. The following passage describes the wedding night, which was also the night of the Lantern Festival. Kaizhen stands outside and waits for the arrival of the bridal sedan chair. As the band plays suonas and drums, Kaizhen’s mind keeps drifting away and falls into imagining his forthcoming marriage partner:

Could she be an orchid in a hollow, or a lily in a wild grassland…Progressive he is, the educated young man is in the bloom of his youth. Longing for a romantic encounter, Kaizhen sometimes imagined himself a prince of Milan who met a beautiful lady in a deserted island, or a Saxon hero who gained admiration from the Flower Queen. Kaizhen roamed in the realm of fantasies and anticipated a similar relationship with his future wife….He wished his bride would be as delicate as his elder brother’s wife, San Sao, the most elegant and virtuous sister-in-law in Guo’s family. She always reminded him of the Japanese classical portrait of a lady on a spring day: one sunny day, the spring water flows through the green garden, the rolling mountains from the distance curve like the beauty’s body….At the age of eight, Kaizhen ran into San Sao at a local school when she was waiting for her husband. He was deeply attracted to her soft, pink hands, which looked like rose and begonia. Ah! He wished he could touch that pair of tender hands. Guo Moruo later confessed that the fantasy for San Sao was the beginning of his sexual awakening (Guo, “Black Cat” 4).

While innerly uneasy, Kaizhen consoles himself by indulging in fantasies about his future wife. Guo’s imagination about the not-yet-met lady overlaps with the episodic memory of his sister-in-law, San Sao, who has been the object of Kaizhen sexual fantasy ever since they met. The feeling of uncertainty stirs up ripples in his mind, forcing him to retreat to a world where he can sink into sweet romantic illusion. His sexual desire for San Sao
appeared in his puberty and has lingered till now. The detailed description of San Sao’s body is, however, less literal than figurative. Guo deploys an analogy between San Sao’s body and classic Japanese paintings of women, and the depiction of the latter assembles the spring garden, the flowers, brook and mountains, but lacks a female body. Such figurative description not only creates a parallel between the female body and nature, but also sublimates the naturalness of the female body to a transcendent aesthetic. The object of painting and the objects appearing in the painting—spring water, flowers, and trees—together signify the profound aesthetics of the female’s natural body. In addition, Kaizhen specifically recalls his memory of an encounter with San Sao, whose physical appearance in general, and hands in particular, left him with an unforgettable impression. The focus on San Sao’s hands becomes a site for the projection of Guo’s fetishization of the female body. By reconstructing San Sao’s body in his episodic memories, Kaizhen relieves his adolescence in which he attained a sexual awakening. The craving for the female body and sexuality mirrors Kaizhen’s romantic expectations for his appointed bride.

Then, the bridal chair arrived. Kaizhen opened the curtain of the chair. But the first thing that appeared in his sight was a pair of diminutive lotus shoes. Kaizhen cursed inwardly:

“Oh, no! How terrible it is!” His preference was certainly for the natural feet of women. His eldest brother Guo Chengwu educated him in his early days that “big feet are civil, bound feet are barbarous.” Kaizhen felt he had been hoodwinked by his mother. The local proverb says “buying the cat within a pocket, the buyer expected a white one, but it turned out it is black” (Guo, “Black Cat” 5).

The bride wore a headdress with a phoenix adornment, under which red satin veils her face. Whining in the inside, Guo had no choice but to continue the wedding ritual. The
anticipatory tone shifts to a grieving one, through which he rebukes the traditional wedding ritual—bride and bridegroom prostrating themselves in front of their parents, and then to each other—as “primitive and backward phallic worship” (“Black Cat” 5). Later, when entering into the bridal chamber, the couple drank wine, which tasted bitter in Kaizhen’s mouth. Finally, the wedding ceremony reached the last step: Kaizhen was about to lift the bride’s veil. Now it was time to see whether it was a “white cat” or a “black cat” in that pocket:

His heart pumped so fast. Holding his breath, Kaizhen unveiled the black satin and saw nothing but a pair of big nostrils tip-tilted like the chimpanzee. “OH SHOOT! This is the worst!” Kaizhen screamed in the inside again. All of a sudden, his fantasies were shattered. Beauty and Queen Flower, orchid and lily, completely vanished. Someone stripped off the veil and put it into Kaizhen’s arm. Now, they were officially bound together. Kaizhen didn’t say anything, but turned and went out of the room. Ah, a pair of bound feet! Ah, a pair of chimpanzee’s nostrils! That assembled into a strange picture swirled and haunted in Kaizhen’s mind; the red veil and black scarf twisted together and wrung his neck (Guo, “Black Cat” 6)

Muddleheaded the next morning, Kaizhen felt exhausted and was trailed by relatives to visit his wife’s family. Kaizhen was further disillusioned by Zhang’s ill-breeding—she was only schooled by some pedantic Confucian doctrine about womanly virtue, and was addicted to opium just like her father. Five days later, Kaizhen left home for Chengdu, and thereafter rarely went back to his hometown nor had any interaction with Mrs. Zhang. At the end of the memoir, the author changes narrative perspectives from Guo Kaizheng to Guo Moruo and signs: “In this martial tragedy, Kaizhen lost his virginity. Zhang Jinghua had no choice either to undo her miserable marriage. Since then, she lives
only with a title of Guo Moruo’s wife, a widow whose husband is still alive, and a
sacrifice to the feudalist marriage system” (“Black Cat” 7).

The blatant appeal to erotic lyricism, including the personal confession of sexual
desire for the female body, incurred many criticisms from conservative moralists of his
time (Shih 65). But there were also progressive intellectuals who defended Guo’s erotic
lyricism. For example, one of the leading May Fourth figures, Zhou Zuoren, once argued
that the literary exploration of sexual desire was “a healthy release from the
dissatisfactions arising from male-female sexual relationships,” because the sex that
brought an individual to love and the true pleasure was the sex that marked a higher
civilization (Shih 66). The art of writing modern sexuality became an art of revealing
individual, unconstrained feelings and an art of expression free to enjoy sexual pleasure.
The explicit longing for San Sao paradoxically served to mark his healthy sexual
impulsion and virility that were in no need of regulation or concealment.
Correspondingly, by displaying his antipathy to the feudalist tradition that repressed
individual freedom and human desire, as well as to the pervasive traditional male
fetishism of women’s bound feet, Guo reaffirmed his superior and normative functioning
masculinity. Meanwhile, criticizing traditional femininity positions the author in the role
of psychoanalyst in relation to the object—the “traditional woman”—he attempts to
diagnose. As the embodiment of pervasive feudalism and thus deviant sexuality, the
traditional woman can be eventually cured and converted to a normative being by the
psychoanalytic writer.
When realizing Zhang was in fact a woman with bound feet, Kaizhen lamented: “it’s like buying cat within a pocket, while the buyer expected a white one, it turns out to be a black” (“Black Cat” 6). In Guo’s metaphoric language, this arranged marriage is nothing but a blindfold transaction, in which Guo himself as the “buyer” expected a beautiful, unbound, well-educated, or at least, a San Sao-look-alike wife. But it turns out his bride Zhang has none of these characteristics. Zhang is the “black cat,” a traditional woman who assembles all the notorious and heinous attributes of feudalism—footbinding, Confucian doctrinairianism and opium addiction—that Guo regarded as the embodiment of perversion and abnormality. Given Guo's western medical education, we can also see certain eugenic ideas invested in his portrayal of Zhang. Her deformed body, ungainly looks, and addictive condition are perceived belong to both a physiologically and a psychologically deficient being. For Guo, Zhang’s crippled and disabled body is nothing but an embodiment of feudalistic perversion that symbolizes that society’s corruption and decadence. The iconographic description of Zhang’s gruesome face is abstract and reductive, and only highlights part of her physicality, such as her bound feet and ugly nostrils. In comparing Zhang to the chimpanzee, Guo’s metaphoric language is not only misogynistic, but to a certain degree animalizes Zhang’s embodiment so as to deny her full humanity. The misrepresentation of the boundfoot woman in “Black Cat” is inherently violent and dehumanizing, while silencing the female subject's voice completely. In addition, when comparing the textual image of Zhang with that of San Sao, we sense a different textual treatment of the two figures. Though the full image of San Sao remains unclear, at least in Guo’s memory, her attractive and natural physicality
is the one that brings Kaizhen a sexual awakening. The sexual fantasies projected onto
San Sao’s body became meaningful in his growing modern subjecthood as it to some
extent remedies Kaizhen’s emasculated status when he succumbs to paternalistic and
feudal tradition. In effect, both female bodies—the bound one and the natural one—are
instrumentalized in Guo’s literature to in order to establish himself as a modern
masculine subject and a normative sexual being.

Kaizhen’s realization of this unwanted marriage leads him to a tremendous
psychological letdown. The body of Zhang, as we have seen, is a site for him to
experience disempowerment and subjugation by tradition. His ties to a traditional woman
become a stain and moral burden, which this young progressive modernist impatiently
wishes to shuffle off. The immediate departure after the wedding event suggests his haste
to escape from this traumatic experience of powerlessness. The interchangeably used
names—“Guo Kaizhen” and “Guo Moruo”—throughout his narrative suggests that under
Guo’s impartial gaze, Kaizhen was just a naive and innocent victim of this arranged
marriage. Yet, the very effort to distance himself from his younger self and his buried past
has continually haunted Guo till now. The third-person use of multiple names thus serves
to hide his fear of and anxiety about reliving that emasculating moment, on the one hand,
and on the other hand, to safeguard his intact modern subjecthood. The retrospective
narrative as told from a self-defined modernist perspective is a tribute to his rebirth from
the past and also a lament to his emasculated adolescence. This past was buried, but never
disappeared. In fact, it became the motivation for Guo’s anti-traditionalist writing, and
thus fulfilled an intellectual’s responsibility “to use myself to illustrate the entire
era” (Guo, “Black” 1). As a man of action, Kaizhen speedily recovered from his temporary emasculation under Confucian tradition and turned to save the masses were still plagued by it. Guo exercises his intellectual agency by first and foremost deposing a set of Confucian filial traditions: rejecting his arranged marriage, betraying his mother’s will, despising his wife for her traditional way of being, and leaving her in a desolated and childless condition with no explanation, all could be characterized as his unique form of “matricide,” of demolishing multiple forms female tradition as well as maternal-filial obligations. Guo’s performative writing and enactment of breaking filial ties thus is his own way to rebel against Confucian patriarchy. Through negating traditional feminine subjectivity, Guo invests himself with the power to reform the weakened and feminized masses. Male power, in Guo’s universe, had been impaired by traditional constraints against modern love, but was restored partially, if not completely, through unfilial disobedience, western education, and anti-traditionalist writing. His authorial autonomy in acting out “matricide” reverses the forced castration of his own patriarchal society. From then on, Guo evolved to achieve an independent modern masculine subject, free to build his own version of patriarchy through wielding intellectual hegemony. The images of the traditional women he left behind became the forgotten past that was trashed along with tradition.

78 In contrast to Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua’s point that the May Fourth anti-traditionalist project is the “epoch of patricide,” I argue that in order to demolish the overarching Confucian patriarchal system, the intellectual must first and foremost erase the cultural and social values of tradition that the female population lived by. This is why I call Guo’s betrayal and unfilial gesture as a symbolic execution of the female beings embodying these traditions.
However, we should be mindful of the broader conditions of attempted patricide/matricide—that is, the state of semi-colonialism, under which male modernists were forced to face western imperialism even as the same modernist intellectuals embraced its hegemonic discourse. The agenda of masculine reconstruction carried out through anti-imperialist discourse during the May Forth Movement manifests a sneaking desire for revenge, or, to borrow Rey Chow’s phrase, “to do to the enemy as exactly what the enemy did to him” (“Where” 334). After all, it was not feudalistic paternalism, but hegemonic western modernity that subjected his masculinity to an inferior status. The anxiety to approximate a modern subjecthood evokes the individual’s will to be controlled through the very concept of modernity articulated by hegemonic powers. Therefore, the desire for revenge—to destroy tradition and in doing so to confront the westerner—is, in Chow’s language, the fantasy of envy that ran throughout May Fourth masculinist and anti-imperialist discourse. Guo’s matricidal writing strategy mirrors the same complex of native modernist intellectuals envious of a hegemonic western Other, who was capable of civilizing and curing the weakened nation as well as its feminized masses. Reclaiming the nation through the will to matricide, mixed with the fantasy of envy, is as Chow concludes, “Oedipal in structure” (“Where” 334). Dissembling the feminine embodiment of tradition becomes the very means to reassemble a more advanced mother or nation. Through this action, a modern male intellectual hegemony usurped the position of the old patriarchy.

My reading charges Guo with the appropriation of images of female body, whether bound or natural, as a powerful trope in the reconstruction of his modern
manhood. A crippled and bound female body depicted the Chinese intellectuals collective self-image under a hegemonic western modernity. Guo’s obsession with accusing tradition for this emasculation also relegated the woman with bound feet to a permanent state of desexualized victimhood. Guo’s writing sought to bar boundfoot women from marital life and reproduction, and thus discursively desexualized and sterilized her embodiment of traditional femininity. This textual treatment endowed the author with the agency of sexual autonomy, unbound from the feudalist tradition, and asserted over the not-yet emancipated populace (Shih 109). The boundfoot woman symbolized the residue of the old empire that preoccupied the intellectual nationalist and anti-traditionalist rhetoric, and as such, her real suffering and her essence as a self-conscious being was silenced, erased, and remained unheard and unseen. Inessential, incomplete, and mutilated as represented by modernist male intellectuals, the textual image of the boundfoot woman became the Other to the modern male, who occupied the role of the Self.

Yu Dafu and His Boundfoot Other in the Line of Cypress Vine

Yu Dafu (1896-1945), a popular short-story writer and poet, was another preeminent figure in New Culture Movement. Unlike his peer Guo Moruo, Yu grew up in a modest family home in Fuyang, Zhejiang province (Wang & Chen 8).79 Sponsored by the Chinese government, he went on to receive a traditional Chinese education in Hangzhou in 1912, but later was expelled for participating in a student strike (Wang &

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79 See Wang Zili and Chen Zishan, eds., Research Materials on Yu Dafu vol.1, pp. 2-15 for more biographical information on Yu Dafu.
Chen 8). He then went to Japan to receive his higher education in economics at Tokyo Imperial University between 1913 and 1922, where he met his fellow compatriots, including Guo Moruo, Zhang Ziping and Tian Han (Wang & Chen 9). In 1921, he joined Guo Moruo and others to found the Creation Society, which was committed to the promotion of vernacular and modern literature. During that time, he published one of his most famous works, the short story “Sinking” (Chenlun 沉沦), which was considered by the world of Chinese literature as both iconoclastic and controversial because of its explicit discussion of sexual desires, and its overflowing pessimistic and decadent sentiments. In 1922, he returned to China as a literary celebrity and worked as the editor of Creation Quarterly, editing journals and writing short stories. In 1923, after an attack of tuberculosis, Yu Dafu began to show his interest in Marxist theory and shifted his work to the genre proletarian literature addressing the issues of the masses.

Generally speaking, Yu’s short story is a fictional elaboration of his autobiography and diaries (Ng 71). Many events of his personal life recorded in his diaries were rewritten in his autobiographical essays, while the subject of the diaries is reincarnated as the protagonist in the fictionalized stories. According to Janet Ng’s analysis, Yu’s autobiographical works can be characterized as the fictional genre of “things around himself,” in which the author and the protagonists of the fiction overlap and become indistinguishable (71). The self as the center of the text displays a great sense of individualism, while manifesting spontaneous authorial emotion in relation to his

80 This work is included in The Complete Short Stories of Yu Dafu (Yu dafu xiaoshuo quanbian 郁达夫小说全编).
surroundings. Another important subject of Yu’s work is the body, in the form of both sexualized and objectified embodiment, and as a system of experiential sensation fraught with anxiety, frustration, fantasies, and desires. The former version is found in the female body inciting male protagonists’s desires, and the latter is the body of the male protagonist, whose suppressed sensations agitated underneath. Thus, the body in Yu’s work is the site on which self-identification and affirmation are enacted. For example, in the story “Sinking,” the male protagonist secretly stalks a young Japanese woman and observes her bathing. Such morally transgressive and sexually impulsive activities were followed by a profound sense of self-loathing and shame. By the same token, in his work “Reminiscences on Returning Home,” Yu explores the male protagonist’s moral crisis as he attempts to burglarize a house (Liu, “Narrative” 114). While struggling with this ethical dilemma, he unwittingly finds himself attracted by a pair of women’s shoes at the entrance of the house he intends to enter. The sudden shift from self-remorse to explicit sexual fetishism articulates his complex and inexpressible feelings of alienation and paranoia, and a morbid fascination with the female body and sexuality.

The autobiographical template for Yu’s male protagonist not only mirrors the author himself in many levels, but epitomizes a familiar symptom—psychic and libidinal suffering—shared by many other intellectual males in a semi-colonial China. Most of them had experienced sexual repression and increasingly downgraded self-esteem as the consequence of losing national dignity during the encounter with Japanese/Western modern culture. Rising from this self-abasement, the male protagonist’s sexual frustration

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81 See Liu, “Narratives Modern Selfhood” for more critical insight on Yu’s writing.
ignited before the material traces of a culturally and sexually superior Japanese woman. His obsessive desire to possess a Japanese female body and sexuality reflects his inability to do so, and exposes his culturally subjugated status when confronted with Japanese modernity. The anxiety of unasserted masculine power, combined with the paranoia of being despised by Japanese women, fuels an unsatisfied sexual desire. Such desire, when repressed and agitated, takes the forms of voyeurism and fetishism that turns the unapproachable female body into a site for gazing and objectifying.

Several literary critics, including Lydia Liu, Janet Ng, Sheldon Lu and Shu-mei Shih, to name a few, agree that the profound sense of personal inadequacy in Yu’s writing is reenacted on a literary level as a masochistic tendency. The masochistic mentality in Yu’s writing can be defined as a mode of psychic experience in which the author perceives his own nationality as thwarted and dysfunctional, and consequently renders himself in a state of passivity, self-degradation, and sexual decadence (Lu 42). But more recently, scholar Tsu Jing has argued that Freudian psychoanalytical concepts in May Fourth literature served as a set of techniques to appropriate, import, and recontextualize western knowledge in a local context, and this translational practice had linguistic and discursive ramifications. A certain degree of mistranslation characterized the appropriation of Freudian concepts by intellectuals such as Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu because no basis for western psychoanalysis predated their modernist Chinese context. As Tsu’s incisively argues, the “masochism” present in Yu’s Freudian appropriation is

82 See Lu’s *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, chapter one “Literature and Biopolitics” (39-43) in which he analyzes Yu’s exposure of his inadequacy in national-political and libidinal realms in his story “When Mimosa Blossoms” (Mayinghua kaidi shihou 马樱花开花地时候).
generally referred to as “passive sadism” (beidong de yinnüe kuang, 被动的淫虐狂) which is certainly taken from the Japanese translation, and should therefore be given a more nuanced interpretation (276). The typical masochistic complex that most closely resembles the meaning of its original lexicon appears in his 1922 short story “Endless Night,” (mangmang ye茫茫夜) in which the young male protagonist, Yu Zhifu, had been left alone by his lover at night. After he woke up from an erotic dream about intimate pillow-talk with his lover, he performed self-mutilation using a needle to prick his cheek, while watching his insatiable face reflected through the mirror (Tsu 280). The performance of self-mutilation as an expression of unmet sexual desire arrests him in a ritualized self-sabotage, by which means pleasure is gained through an act of sadistic punishment on his own body. The line between masochism and sadism is blurred at the point that the protagonist’s sadistic actions and agency ensure that he gains a masochistic pleasure.

Yu’s masochistic expression in “Reminiscences on Returning Home” occurs in the absence of the protagonist’s sexual object: the Japanese woman to whom he is deeply attracted but unable to possess. The concealed and obscured female body of the Occidental Japanese Other is even more sexually tempting. However, when the female other appears to be an unwanted subject in his writing, the blurred boundary between active masochism and passive sadism (the indulgence of self-torment) becomes more prominent. In these cases, I argue that Yu channels his psychological sufferings and

83 See Tsu’s “Perversions of Masculinity” for more nuanced understanding of the difference between original Freudian concept of “masochism-sadism” and the Chinese modern reconceptualization of them. Tsu also explores a more dialectic and ambiguous relationship between masochistic and sadistic expression in Yu Dafu and Guo Moruo’s works.
sexual frustrations to a female other, when this “other”—the uneducated and boundfoot traditional Chinese woman—is inferior to his masochistic self. Consequently, his masochistic self is successfully replaced by a fully sadistic disposition that enjoys the violence inflicted on his Chinese female other. I will elaborate this point through my analysis of another of Yu’s short stories entitled “The Line of Cypress Vine” (茑萝行)\(^84\), a 1923 prose memoir reminiscing about his marriage to Mrs. Sun Quan. Scant scholarship has ever probed this work, nor paid attention to Yu’s sadistic complex in his relationship with a traditional Chinese female figure.

According to Yu’s own personal history, he was engaged to Sun Quan in 1917, when he had a temporary visit home from his studies in Japan (Wang & Chen 8). The engagement was based on the matchmaking Yu’s mother had arranged for him. Sun was the daughter of a local gentry family in Fuyang, Jiangxi province, and her father operated a small paper mill after he failed the imperial exam. Raised in a traditional family, Lady Sun received a basic education according to Confucian precepts and had her feet bound since childhood. In 1920, Yu married Sun and then rushed back to continue his education in Japan. After he had received his degree in economics in Japan and returned to China, Yu moved his wife and mother from Fuyang to resettle in Beiping, and moved to many different places for his teaching career. Later, he fell in love with Wang Yingxia, an intellectual woman he met while working for the Creation Society in Shanghai, and remained in a long-term separation with Sun since the beginning of his new affair. Mrs.

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\(^{84}\) This short piece is included in his anthology Collection of Cypress Vine (Niao luo ji 茑萝集) published in 1923.
Sun bore two children for Yu and took care of the whole family for the rest of her life (Wang & Chen 10).

“The Line of Cypress Vine” is a letter Yu wrote to his wife Sun, in which he expresses his grievance about the arranged marital contract between them and accuses this feudal custom of weighting as a burden on his life. Meanwhile, he confesses himself guilty for their failed marriage as an irresponsible husband and father who did not take care of his own wife and children, but instead left his family behind to study in Japan. He admits his moral imperfections, including the wrongdoings of intemperance, infidelity, and domestic abuse, that caused Sun’s suffering. The confessional narrative sets the tone of Yu’s remorse for his cowardly personality, which is further complicated by his profound grievances towards the decayed society, as a whole, in which he finds his talent has always been underappreciated. The stressful life circumstances with an unsound physical condition, career frustrations, and economic destitution result in the feelings of deprivation and crumbling self-esteem. Such feelings further exacerbate his discontent with their arranged marriage. At this point, Yu recounts his first meeting with Sun on the night of their wedding:

According to the inveterate custom of my hometown, breaking the betrothal is a taboo. Plus, your parents put immense pressure on me, while my mother remonstrated with me earnestly in tears, urging me to commit to this marriage. I had barely accepted this decision back in the summer three years ago, but also laid out many hostile conditions against your will, which I never regretted till now. You were not treated with formal wedding rituals, nor did a matchmaker come as the witness of our wedding. No banquet or fireworks welcomed you to this home. You came here alone at the night and only had a simple dinner accompanied by my mother. In the moment you laid yourself on the bed, your gaunt and pale face has never faded away from my mind (“Line” 2).
Yu’s unwillingness to surrender himself to paternalistic tradition preconditions his pessimistic view of this marriage as nothing but fruitless. In Yu’s narration, Sun is a woman who is more pitiable than lovable, a woman he cannot not want. Yu’s portraiture of Sun continues:

Naive as you are, born in the backcountry and never educated in school, you are hardly enlightened with any sight of the outside world. Walking with bound feet and carrying a case filled with a women’s four books, you came to my home but never knew how to act as a charming lady, nor did you master needlework. You just performed obedience and docility (“Line” 2).

Similar to Guo’s textual treatment of his wife Zhang, Yu depicts Sun as a physically and mentally inferior woman who has been trapped in her antiquated body and whose Confucian education limits her vision into a progressive world. Such description fixed the image of the traditional woman as eternally stagnated with no potential for change. In addition, Yu purposefully organizes his narrative to construct a portrait of Sun as an essentially pathetic and miserable being. In one passage he recalls a scene in which Sun got very ill and went to the hospital without any company. When she returned home during the night, Yu saw his wife standing outside of the house:

I saw you on the street. Your hair was disheveled, tangling to a clump around your neck. The gray moonlight reflected on your ashen face. Your eyes closed tightly and your lips trembled a little. Your coat was completely wet through with sweat. When I held you and called your name, your eyes opened and closed again with tears running down your cheeks. Alas, I know you didn’t blame me for my heartlessness. At that moment, I cried out with you. How could I not cry?… (“Line” 4)

Yu’s iconographical depiction of Sun takes a ghastly form that assembles her gaunt and debilitated physique, pale face and always melancholic gaze. This textual visualization of Sun is both graphic and realistic, not only giving the readers a ghostlike impression of the
female body, but also a psychological portrayal of her insanity. Physical and mental
disorder is emblematic of a “traditional woman” as both disabled and abnormal. This way
of visualizing boundfoot embodiment is engendered through Yu’s primary activity of
watching. It is Yu’s gaze that turns the textual existence of the female subject to a
perpetually passive and silent Other, while alienating the subject from her own humanity.
To elaborate with Rey Chow’s phrase, Yu’s gaze can be “theoretically defined as the
primary agency of violence, an act that pierces the other who inhabits the place of the
passive victim on display” (“Where” 325-326). This textual representation divorces the
boundfoot woman from her own subjectivity and exiles her to the permanent status of the
victimized Other. Likening the boundfoot woman to a ghost assigns her to an unlivable
domain, a foreclosed realm where she is passive, static, and immersed in her own silence.
At this moment, she is renounced as a complete human being, but nevertheless inhabits
her own misery, and is dispossessed of her consciousness by the male author. She
completes him, but she herself is incomplete. Her textual image then is forever trapped in
the role of object, characterized by her male creator as Other on every level. The author-
as-master possesses the full capacity to intrude into her world and impose his will to
violate, to dominate and to objectify. He monopolizes the role of the Self and even
transcends himself as the creator of his female other.

But unlike Guo’s blatant misogynist undertones that degraded Zhang as a muted
being, Yu adopts a more sympathetic narrative to “give” a voice to Sun. Ironically, in Yu’s
narrative, Sun spoke as she tried to comfort Yu from his own self-loathing and grievance.
Her agency appears in the form of consolations that remedy Yu’s masculine crisis and
crumbling dignity. Sun’s voice at this point is not self-endowed but enabled by Guo’s authorial agency, while the value of her voice is measured by its inherent silence, and tolerance of Yu’s abuse. Yu’s confession about his emotional abuse of Sun goes as follows:

In this society, I am an oppressed coward, but at home, I am the vicious tyrant. The maltreatment, bullying, and humiliation I experienced outside, I took them out on you. Piteous you are, you have become the scapegoat of my frustrations and rage for the past year. You pay the price of this society everyday, and sacrifice so much for me, this impotent tyrant. When I was bullied and humiliated outside, I came home, either blaming your bad cooking or blaming you for my sufferings. Every time I thought about my future where there was no job and hope, I lost my temper and cursed you: “Go to hell, only if you die can I live a good day. If there were only me, I could go everywhere and not be stuck in this place. I am only encumbered by you. You are usefulness, the parasite living in my home and eating my food. Why you were born in this world? Your life is meaningless.” You couldn’t defend yourself but only wept your tears in secret. Every time I vented my indignation, I felt ashamed and remorseful, so I came to caress and comfort you, while telling you how unfairly society treats me in a soft voice. You listened to me with patience, and in turn comforted me by complaining about society. At the end, we cried for each other, and went through this again and again just like an everyday routine (“Line” 3).

Yu ascribes Sun’s incredible capacity for enduring emotional suffering to her submissive feudalist femininity and the traditional ways of womanly living prescribed by Confucian doctrine. His narrative considers Sun’s obedience as the consequence of her own misery, molding Sun’s obedience to his own masochistic disposition. In other words, Yu assumes that the masochistic disposition he has is likewise applicable to his submissive wife. Yu reorients his confessional narrative to a victim blaming that offers him exoneration for his wrongdoings. Beneath this narrative, thus, we should see his use of Sun’s voice as evidence of her suffering, rather than the manifestation of her autonomy as a not-yet-muted individual. At this point, I want to ask to what extent the boundfoot subject’s voice
can be found in the hegemonic intellectual’s ambivalent gift of speech, when that speech itself is the sign of her absolute subjugation?

The remorse of hindsight nevertheless made Yu’s guilty conscience seek a justification for his violence against his spouse. Yu concluded that the oppression society imposed on him forced him to act as a tyrant in his home. If the agency of an abused woman was seen as her capacity for comforting the abuser, the abuser claimed himself as the true “victim” of an oppressive society. Endowing female “agency” as the performance of submissiveness reflects the author’s own unassured modern masculine self and the profound anxiety resulting from his sense of inadequacy. His justification for the violence he inflicted equally excuses his own weakness. By the same token, Yu employs a strategy of self-victimization to position himself on the side of the female other who was capable of swallowing insults. Here, I argue, the process of Yu’s identification with Sun forages a linkage between himself and his female Other. Such an identification process instrumentalizes and appropriates the sublternity of the boundfoot woman in order to symbolize his own vulnerability and inferiority in society. This bifurcated process—first identifying the traditional woman as the ultimate Other follow by defining the author as victim—constitutes his modern subjectivity as a discursively powerful but socially disempowered subject. His modern selfhood is measured by the degree to which his inadequacy resembles the boundfoot Other’s misery and abjection. Moreover, Yu’s ambivalent self-representation as both a victim (of traditional society) and a westernized modernist intellectual heavily relies on his capacity to “speak for” his boundfoot Other (and the Chinese female masses) on both a political and literary level. My reading
presents Yu’s appropriation of the boundfoot Other’s victimhood and subalternity as parallel to his active victimization that sought to perpetuate the passive status of traditional woman. In doing so, he is able to wield discursive power, inflicting epistemological violence on the boundfoot woman, while elevating himself to the role of savior to rescue her. By displaying his inextricable linkage with the victimized other, the male intellectual claims the power of vulnerability that to some extent neutralizes the atrocity of misrepresentation, while absenting himself from the scene of the crime.

In this short piece, Yu repeatedly calls Sun the woman he “cannot not love”. Loving the Other seems to contradict his abusive treatment, but in fact is a fundamental remedy for his lost dignity and castrated masculine selfhood. In this letter Yu claims that his victimhood and traumatized psychological condition arose from a national subordination, racial/ethnic inferiority, and sexual frustration. The condition of emasculated manhood parallels that of a sadist, and the two states of being are dependent and consequential to each other. His trauma reflects itself in his maltreatment of his wife. His sadistic disposition and will to inflict violence on Sun thus is essentially therapeutic to his sense of inadequacy. The subject desires a reputable social status, but is unable to mediate his outrage. A sadistic response to an inferior female Other re-endows the male self with power and pleasure. Yu’s complicated affects towards Sun entails the psychologically complex and paradoxical condition of “having to live on what he refuses to live with.” The fear, anxiety, aversion towards being left behind by modern society and left alone with the female Other are mixed with the his hesitant acknowledge of personal attachment to, dependence on, and above all, identification with his other. The textual
reenactment of Yu’s sadistic treatment of his wife also reenacts his own subjection and abjection, and he does so in order to show that mastery over his inferiority, his power over the other, constitutes the modern intellectual’s inviolable sovereignty.

My reading of selected works from Guo and Yu demonstrates how the textual representation and discursive configuration of the boundfoot woman become a medium for the male intellectual’s anti-traditionalist pronouncements. While the boundfoot subjects in both Guo and Yu’s reminiscences remain silent via their otherness, the voices of male intellectuals continue to produce patriarchal logic through nationalist anti-traditionalist discourse. The old wine was put into a new bottle, and a new patriarchy replaced the old one in order to reclaim its dominance over women’s voices and lives in the modern era. On one hand, we see that male literary representations of boundfoot women stand in stark distinction to my preceding sociohistorical analysis that documented the various forms of speech that boundfoot women actively practiced to make sense of their ways of being and living. On the other hand, the silence of Chinese women in the May Fourth rhetoric of cultural reformation raises the fundamental question of whether the politics of representation has perpetuated the sociopolitical exclusion of the female masses via their cultural misrepresentation. This relationship between women and their representations forms the problematic of hegemonic representation as a form of epistemological violence against the represented. Just as Yue Ming-bao in her discussion of the May Fourth male intellectuals concludes “the problem of silent China is very much a problem of gendered representation,” (62) or in other words, the systematic oppression of class and gender has been continually reproduced.
and reinforced through modern intellectual discourse. The power disparities between the masses and elite intellectuals, between men and women had continually manifested itself through the May Fourth male authors’ images of the boundfoot female. In the domain of New Literature, what kind of representations could possibly challenge this powerful trend of androcentric literary practices that continually reproduced patriarchal models of female experiences?

*The Feminist Representations of May Fourth Intellectual Women*

The formation of New Literature in modern China also recruited many female intellectuals to participate in writing and representing “women’s issues.” A sizable group of intellectual women, including Bing Xin, Feng Yuanjun, Lu Yin, Ding Ling and Ling Shuhua, to name a few, emerged as leading female intellectuals in the May Fourth Movement, and held alternative perspectives on the female responses to the pervasive sociocultural discourse in favor of women’s emancipation (Feng 2). However, as long as the agenda of “women’s emancipation” was subsumed under the May Fourth masculinist nation-building project, the female writers’ voices would never appear as the center. The ideological quest for a modern subjecthood during the May Fourth period was mostly voiced from male perspective, while women’s efforts to articulate a feminine identity and diverse experiences mostly went unheard.85 Employing the irreconcilable relation

85 This similar point is made by Amy Dooling’s *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China*, introduction “Women and Feminism in the Literary History of Early Twentieth-Century Chian”, pp. 1-34; Tani Barlow’s *The Question of Women In Chinese Feminism*, chapter 3 “Foudnation of Progressive Chinese Feminism”pp. 64-126. More case studies of female writing in May Fourth movement can be found in Tani Barlow and Margaret Decker edited *Gender Politics in Modern China.*
between the new woman and traditional woman, male intellectuals felt compelled to monopolize the politics of representation to speak for the women of the Chinese masses. The male-dominated field of literary criticism not only inherited a misogynist legacy from Confucian orthodoxy (Dooling 8), but also created a powerful nationalistic incentive to glorify a revolutionary and progressive mindset. Such a mindset ran throughout May Fourth knowledge production to discipline and regulate the literary production of female writers. Through the continual suppression of “feminine writing” and trivialization of its cultural significance, male writers reaffirmed their reputation as the only experts on the authentic representation of female experiences.

Intellectual women’s writings often encountered male criticism on the weakness of their feminine writing style. During the mid-1930s, male literature critics divided and classified May Fourth female writings into three categories along a continuum (Dooling 78). Receiving harsh criticism from this group of progressive male writers, the first category was the so-called boudoir school (guixiu pai 闺秀派), which included writers like Bing Xin and Su Xuelin, whose literature prioritized women’s boudoir sentiments and still worked within the ideological framework of Confucian ethics (Dooling 78). This corpus of writings was regarded as insufficient to inquire about the broader scope of social problems, limiting their writing to the domestic sphere and conjugal relationships. More progressive, yet not entirely divested of Confucian gendered values was the school of the “New Boudoir” (xin guixiu pai, 新闺秀派) that notably included works from Ling

86 More arguments and critiques of the male categorization of female writing could be explored in Dooling’s Women’s Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China, introduction part, and Feng’s The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction, introduction part.
Shuhua, Lu Yin and Feng Yuanjun (Dooling 78, Feng 127). This group of female authors tended to situate female experiences and subjecthoods in a modern social context, but still patterned their narratives as individualistic and feminine sentiment that ultimately adhered to the conventions of the boudoir literature tradition. Gaining the highest praise of male intellectuals, the third group of female writers was labeled as the school of “New Women” literature (xin nüxing pai 新女性派). It was characterized by its ideological affinity with the male progressives and aimed to denounce and transcend the literary traditions that suppressed free expression of modern romance and sexual desire (Dooling 78). From this male categorization, we can perceive that the concept of “new woman” not only existed as a textual construction of an ideal modern female subjectivity prescribed by male intellectuals, but also incentivized a shift within women’s literature to break away from the imperial boudoir literature paradigm. In a word, male intellectuals asserted their authority over female writers particularly by criticizing their gendered sentimentalism as continuing in the tradition of boudoir writing and lacking in revolutionary insights for progressive national reform.

Male coding for the idea of “new women” in relation to modern expressions of masculinity did not sanctify women’s emancipation as much as to assert their ownership of a native feminist ideology. The gestation of feminist thought in China, though, still owed something to western feminist discourses preoccupied by debates about female subjectivity, cultural representation, and political rights (68). Indigenizing and incorporating feminist thought into a local political context, nevertheless, relied on its native interpretation and application in accordance with the overarching purpose of state-
building. As more male modernist intellectuals proclaimed their success in advancing a feminist ideology and thus elevating women’s social status, the discourse itself became more gender-blind (Fang 127). The constitution of the “new woman” and its outgrowth as “Chinese feminism” are conceptually abstract, yet empowering to the ones who produced and perpetuated it. Male intellectuals gained cultural and political legitimacy by employing and deploying feminist language—gender equality and anti-patriarchy—in their own literary creations. Consequently, we see that a male-directed “feminist” discourse, rather than voices speaking for and spoken from women, became the battlefield for guardianship of women’s gender and sexuality between Confucian orthodoxy and modern national patriarchy. In doing so, the concept of “woman” had to be split into two oppositional categories: the “new woman” and its traditional other, with the latter doomed to be torn down.

However, as Dooling contests, the complete refutation of Chinese modern feminism is also problematic, because it attributes the failure of early Chinese feminism to the bourgeois elitist nature of intellectuals as a whole, and invalidating contributions by intellectual women in both social movements and cultural politics (4-5). Indeed, male intellectuals had strategically appropriated the May Fourth feminist discourse to contend for discursive legitimacy. But, nevertheless, the discursive domain did not

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87 Such criticisms were mostly informed by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to produce state mythology that claims the Party’s credit in leading and achieving women’s liberation. According to Amy Dooling, the contemporary criticism of early Chinese feminist idea is majorly formed during Maoist and post-Mao era, when CCP claims to own the credit of realizing the modern project of “women’s emancipation,” and in turn, criticizes the celebration of bourgeois femininity in May Fourth women’s writings. Such reductive criticism nevertheless ignores its own limitation: the distance between the state-organized class revolution still perpetuates the patriarchal ideology, thus inevitably ensures the underrepresentation of Chinese women as a whole. See Dooling’s, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China*, p. 4-5
necessarily preclude women from participating as authors and readers, the representatives and the represented, from asserting their own visions and voices about Chinese modernization. Just as Tani Barlow once articulated, early Chinese feminism was “a particular constellation of political ideas, expressions and practices, a discursive field in which both male and female intellectuals committed to critical reflection about the relation between gender and national crisis” (66). From her point, early progressive feminist discourse opened a domain in which to envision gender in relation to China’s future. It assembled diverse visions from female intellectuals about women’s emancipation, suffrage, and other forms of public engagement to amplify women’s voice. By using the male-authored concept of the new woman, female intellectuals themselves actively responded to and participated in the realization of women’s liberation, while being concerned with the state’s future. Through their own literary representation, female intellectuals articulated a desire for more social and political space to promote the overall social status of the female population and to eliminate the oppression imposed by both traditional and modern patriarchy (Dooling 8).

Therefore, my goal in the following analysis is to take account of women writers’ participation in Chinese modern literature as their strategic exercise of authorial agency to confront and challenge the male intellectual’s assumptions and representations of those socially and culturally misrepresented female subjects. In this section, I venture into the field of feminist representations of boundfoot women by offering historical and literary analysis of works written by two women writers, Ding Ling and Ling Shuhua. Their works built fictional worlds from unique female perspectives, and invented alternative
constructions of traditional female subjectivities that oppose those contoured by their male counterparts. Their textual representations not only acknowledged subaltern voice and agency, but also offered a glimpse of an alternative modern female subjecthood at variance with what was postulated by the dominant “new woman” ideology. Without romanticizing the ability of women’s literary production to represent feminist ideas or idealizing all women’s writings as cultural-political resistance to a native modern masculine hegemony, I aim to recognize feminist counter-narratives that had the potential to disrupt and sabotage the male discourse of “women and tradition.” In doing so, I pursue the following questions: how did the intellectual women who turned to creative literature articulate women’s oppression in the writing of the “feminine quotidian”? Would it be considered feminist discourse to challenge and delegitimize the modern masculine logic of female victimization and stigmatization? What kind of gender negotiation and feminist intervention did these two female writers offer to transcend the image of traditional women as objectified and silent others in the encompassing masculine discourse? How did these two female writers demystify or undo stereotypical images of the “traditional woman” as the mere production of a misogynistic and modern cultural imperium?

*Ding Ling and Boundfoot Women in “Mother”*

Ding Ling (1904-1986) was one of most celebrated feminist writers and leftist intellectual figures in China’s 20th-century history.88 She was born to a gentry family in

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88 See Dooling and Torgeson edited *Writing Women in Modern China*, pp.263-266, for more biographic information of Ding Ling.
Linli, Hunan province, and her father died when she was only four. Her mother Yu Manzhen was raised in a traditional Confucian family, yet was influenced by western ideas and became an educator while raising Ding Ling alone. Ding Ling once claimed that she could never have become a successful writer without her mother as her role model (Dooling & Torgeson 263). At the beginning of 1922, her uncle’s family (with whom Ding Ling and her mother lived after the loss of her father) arranged for her to marry her cousin. Encouraged by her mother, Ding Ling repudiated this arrangement and left for Shanghai to attend Shanghai Women’s Normal School. In 1924, she went to Beijing alone for advanced education in Beiping University, but failed to gain admission. She then turned to literary creation and began to write autobiographical short stories. At the same time, she met and fell in love with her future husband, Hu Yepin, a leftist poet and the editor of Beijing Newspaper. However, Hu along with others from radical leftist groups was executed by the KMT government during a political cleansing against Communists in 1931 (Dooling & Torgeson 264-265). Ding Ling later joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1932 and reoriented her literary production to a more Marxist proletarian stance (Ibid).

Ding Ling’s early works (roughly before 1930s) were modeled largely according to her personal experiences and her mother’s stories, and centered on the thematic construct of the “new woman”: the progressive-minded female students who strove to break the fetters of feudal traditions and pursued free love and marriage.⁸⁹ According to scholars such as Jin Feng, Ding Ling’s early works encapsulated her life experience and

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⁸⁹ See Feng’s The New Woman, Chapter 7 “The Bold Modern Girl: Ding Ling’s Early Fiction” for the May Fourth male criticism about Ding Ling’s early writings.
typically represented the ambiguity of many contemporaneous women writers, whose intellectual position at once was enfranchised by and then turned to destabilize dominant modern masculine discourse. During the May Fourth period, her autobiographic fiction underwent a significant change in both content and style alongside her turbulent life circumstances. (Feng 149-152) Her early textual configuration of the new woman, for example, in “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” “Wild Grass,” “Suicide Diary,” and “Day” was organized chiefly around young women in urban settings, who sought self-validation but nevertheless faced various forms of frustrations and dilemmas in their negotiations with both tradition and modernity (Feng 151). Her subjects extended from young, urban women to lower-class, proletarian and peasant women, often portrayed as revolutionary heroines who either left their bourgeois life to embrace socialist ideology, or broke away from feudal traditions in the countryside to dedicate themselves to social movements. With a growing feminist political consciousness and the motivation to thematize women’s heterogenous experiences, Ding Ling established certain patterns and strategies for modern Chinese feminist politics through textual representations that brought up forgotten subjects as powerful historical agents in the broader context of social transformation.

The work I have selected is her unfinished novel “Mother.” The gestation of this novel spanned several months between 1932 and 1933, during which time she had gone through personal tragedies and hostile political circumstances. She wrote this novel for

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90 Feng regards 1930s as the watershed to differentiate the Ding Ling’s early “new woman” from her later more revolutionary feminist writing. Her novel “Mother” was finished right at this transitional time, from which her works took unprecedented commitment to women’s self-empowerment. See, Feng pp. 151 and 171.
her livelihood and never had the chance to finish or revise it, so the storyline of this piece understandably lacks coherence (Barlow & Bjorge 201-202). Disjointed and incomplete as it is, the novel marks a turning point in Ding’s writing career, in which her works came to focus on women’s self-empowerment and personal transformation even more acutely (Feng 171). Unlike her later realistic writings that adopted a generalized representation of female proletarian subjects, the creation of “Mother” still harkened back to her early writing style with heavy biographic narrative. Adopting a third-person perspective, Ding Ling straddles both personal and social changes: the female protagonist Yu Manzhen's personal transformation is on many levels synchronous with broader sociopolitical transitions (Barlow, “Gender” 124-125). Unmistakably, one could say that “Mother” is a biographical novel of Ding Ling’s own mother. Her depiction of Yu Manzhen delineates a rural woman’s life-long struggles through the transformative era of early twentieth century China.

The story is set on the eve of the 1911 revolution, when the decadent rural kinship system bespoke the upcoming social and political transformation. The female protagonist Yu Manzhen, a widow and a mother of two children, lived with a gentry family in the countryside and received news her mother’s death. She found herself in a deplorable condition, compounding the loss of a family member, physical ill health, and economic deprivation (Barlow “Gender and Identity” 127). In order to escape from a decrepit and

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91 See Barlow and Bjorge edited I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling, “Mother” pp. 201-260 for the historical background of the gestation of Ding Ling’s “Mother” and the English translation of the original work.

92 See Barlow’s ‘Gender and Identity in Ding Ling’s “Mother”’ for more discussion about the genre of “Mother”.

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vulnerable situation under which her dead husband’s relatives try to rob her belongings, Menzhen then decided to return to her natal family in the nearby town of Wuling with her children. The Yu family, like many other traditional gentry families in same locale, retained the conventional practices of footbinding, concubinage, and servitude for generations. But since Manzhen’s father and her elder brother Yu Manqing were influenced by ideas of reform, the family gradually stepped into social changes and allowed the younger generations to chase the pace of revolution. By negotiating with her natal family members and winning her brother’s approval, Manzhen was allowed to enter a local female school established for women from gentry families. At the same time, the anti-footbinding movement gained nationwide attention and began to popularize in local societies. When Manzhen attended the school, she followed the school’s instruction and engaged herself in fangzu practice, while associating with a group of progressive female students who saw themselves as part of the revolutionary forces. Yet, the young female students’ ambition to engage in social reform was rebuffed by local conservatives. Later, Manzhen left the town with her children and moved to the city, where she eventually pursued the advanced education and became a schoolteacher.

Indeed, the trajectory of Manzhen’s character development shares many similarities with other heroines in Ding Ling’s works that can be generally bracketed within the stylistic construct of the “revolutionary female personality” in the genre of revolutionary literature. Scholars such as Tani Barlow comment that Ding Ling’s fictionalization of her mother as the prototype of her revolutionary heroine and protagonist placed the lower-class female masses in a specific relation with the nation-
The conjunction of social reformation and women’s emancipation as historical background for the individual’s life experiences indicates that the formation of a revolutionary female personality is deeply embedded in the modernizing pace of the nation. Ding Ling organized her narrative around the female protagonist’s transformation, both physical and ideological, from a “virtuous widow and good mother” into a revolutionary sister (Barlow “Gender and identity” 126). Mazhen heavily relied on her preconditioned political sensitivity, whereby she came to experience an ideological transformation from traditional to modern without any reluctance or confusion. However, as Barlow also pointed out, what makes “Mother” a distinctive feminist text is that it redefines female subjectivity through the concept of “women” as collective social beings. Stated otherwise, the novel does not thematize the “woman” as an isolated individual awaiting the empowerment of progressive male reformers, but the “women” as collective social agents who empower and in turn, are empowered by an intersubjective political consciousness and emotional bond. From Barlow’s point of view, Ding Ling’s deliberate shift away from the individual female personality towards the shared identity of sisterhood extends the boundary of female sociality and intersubjectivity beyond the patrilineal kinship system (“Gender and identity” 137).

Building upon Barlow’s analysis, my reading approaches this novel in a related, yet different way. Specifically, I focus on how Ding Ling in “Mother” creates a textual

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93 See Barlow’s argument of Ding Ling’s stylistic representation of revolutionary heroine in ‘Gender and Identity in Ding Ling’s “Mother”’. Her argument is built upon Dongfeng weiming’s analysis in “Ding Ling’s Mother”.

94 Barlow’s insightful analysis of “Mother” focuses on the revolutionary sisterhood among schoolmates that binds female students into a collective unity. For example, the plot of oath ceremony between Manzhen and her female friends in her father’s garden.
space to extend the possibility of representing the female masses through a biographical writing strategy. Once Ding Ling gave her own comment about the significance of this novel: “Manzhen represents women of the previous generation and how they struggled to break away from feudalist power” (Dongfang 143). Following the thread of extended representability, I argue that Ding Ling’s writing presents us with a combined image of both the “traditional woman” as the rural woman with bound feet and the “new woman” as a revolutionary, educated heroine. Such representation refuses to correspond in many ways to either the stereotypical image of the “traditional woman” or “new woman” established by May Fourth male discourses. Resonating with and deeply embedded in the lived experiences of the culturally underrepresented female commoners, Ding Ling’s configuration of Manzhen displays various forms of being and ways of living as traditional women in their everyday struggles to survive drastic social changes. Echoing my previous historical exploration of female voices in the fangzu movement, my reading of Ding Ling’s “Mother” unfolds as an alternative representation of those historically forgotten subjects, and her attempt to restore their voices through a novelistic encapsulation of the female masses’ quotidian experiences. I argue that the relation between the intellectual-as-savior and the masses-as-the saved did not define Ding Ling’s connection with the female masses as it did that of her male counterparts, but instead her closeness with her mother, whose life experience resembled that of most of her female counterparts, forged this connection. By centralizing the social experiences of the female with great empathy, she developed an acute sense for understanding and redefining the
agency of socially marginalized women beyond the western modernist notion of individual autonomy.

First of all, the bodily experience of Manzhen’s personal transformation appeared in Ding Ling’s storytelling, in which physical change through unwrapping binding cloths was essential to Manzhen’s journey to acquiring a modern subjectivity. The following passage is selected from chapter 3, in which Manzhen resettles with the Yu family to begin her new life. After earning herself the opportunity for a school education, now she began preparing for the entrance exam, while loosening her binding cloth to follow the fangzu trend:

Writing ideographs was not so difficult. To prepare for the exam, she practiced writing essays at home. In her father’s library, she found volumes of the Four Books, the Historical Records, and other basic books, and read them studiously all day long. Yunqing (her progressive scholar-official brother) found a few volumes of poetry and essays for her…. “Don’t turn into a book worm,” Third Mistress Yu would say to her with a soft laugh. What caused her trouble and pain were her bound feet. Right after she cut the binding cloth shorter, it brought terrible hurt to just put her feet on the ground. Loosening the wrapping cloth did nothing to reduce the pain. But only thinking about her feet could grow bigger quickly, she had to bear it. During the night, she slept with only a pair of socks on her bare feet, and used only five or six feet of cloth to bind her feet loosely during the day. Sometimes, the pain was so severe that she had no courage to touch the ground, which reminded her of the early experiences of binding her feet. She worried that her feet couldn’t support her walk to the school, so she always stood a little longer, then walked round the house again and again (Barlow & Bjorge 226).

Here, Ding Ling juxtaposes Manzhen’s commitment to fangzu practice with her educational pursuit. It connotes that physical transfiguration is not only an integral part of the personal readjustment to a progressive society, but her manifesto that proclaimed her committment to modern civilization. The self-directed fangzu practice should be read as a ritualized physical sacrifice—compromising her physical comfort and enduring another
round of bodily pain—to acquire a new subjecthood. Her motivation to undo the well-shaped body largely derived from her fear of being trapped by her decrepit physical status and eventually being weeded out by the unceasingly progressive society. Ding Ling presents a specific instance to illustrate the dilemma faced by the Chinese female masses: they had to reject and thus abandon part of their body to fit into the new society. I borrow Julia Kristeva’s term “abjection” to better understand Manzhen’s desire for disposing of her old self. Abjection refers to a situation in which a conventional identity is disrupted by the realization that one’s social existence is being cast off, so the once complete self experiences a division between the acceptable self and the abject other (Benjamin & Fletcher 93). Mazhen and many other women during that time were confronted with modern discourses regarding female footbinding as unnatural and barbaric, and thus unwanted and ineligible for modern citizenship. Whether accepting or refusing this stance, a woman with bound feet would find herself experiencing a loss of bodily esteem. Undergoing such an experience would disassociate her sense of self, be that physical or biological, social or cultural, from that which she (and society) consider intolerable (Benjamin & Fletcher 92). Her bound feet, once an integrated part of her body and part of her traditional femininity, had since been rejected, and no longer recognized as part of herself, but rather an object existing separately from her body. Therefore, Menzhen’s self-imposed physical transformation is a strategy for survival before falling into the ultimate abject status. Manzhen’s obsessive preoccupation that part of her body is severely flawed and needs to be fixed by exceptional measures, namely, the excruciating fangzu practice.

95 See Benjamin and Fletcher’s Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: the Work of Julia Kristeva. pp. for more analytic insight into Kristeva’s theory of abjection.
to let her feet grow bigger, is no more than an outgrowth of a male-dictated “new
woman” discourse to produce a novel, physically natural, and ideologically progressive womankind.

With a specific focus on Manzhen’s bodily suffering and her desire to dispose of her old self, Ding Ling’s words bring women’s collective experiences of voluntarily engaging in fangzu discipline into existence. Her narrative not only reconceptualizes the hegemonic message of fangzu as a compulsory modern project wielded by the state to regulate women’s bodies, but also indicates that such violations can be done only with the cooperation of boundfoot women themselves, whose self-discipline both internalized and externalized the idea of fangzu. However, Manzhen’s progressiveness does not necessarily lead to a total negation of the physically conventional self—her bound feet. Surprisingly, I found Manzhen’s perception of her bound feet is not even close to abjection, even while she worries about her temporarily crippled and bleeding feet (due to fangzu) would render physically debilitated. She views her feet as a site for self-empowerment, an integral part of her body that is endowed with the capacity for malleable changes. Rather than simply regarding the boundfoot women’s internalization of and subjugation to the disciplinary fangzu movement as her ultimate passivity and thus lack of agency, we should recognize fangzu practicer’s conformity and self-governance as part of her coping mechanism, and thus, an adaptability that contains her personal motivations, interests, desires and goals, even while articulated in a quite subordinated way (Mahmood 210). The power of modernization secured boundfoot individuals’ subordination, yet also provided the means by which she became a self-conscious agent.
Just as Saba Mahmood acutely pointed out, “agency is not an unruled self that existed prior to the operations of power but is itself the product of those operations” (210).\textsuperscript{96} Stated otherwise, the self-directed fangzu practice is Manzhen’s strategic adjustment to modern society, whereby she is able to reposition herself in complex structures of power and to reorganize her social relations. Her bodily performance of malleability enables her to exist within an overarching modern oppression. In this light, I refuse to regard the boundfoot subject as a mere victim or passive receptacle of modern ideology. Nor do I recognize her agency as synonymous with “enlightened progressive autonomy.” Ding Ling’s narrative provides us an alternative insight that regards the female masses as historical agents whose cooperation with modern corporeal discipline is one strategy to restore bodily esteem and to live a life with dignity.

But we should not talk about the female textual construct only on an individual level, since the subject-position of Chinese women is always situated in a relational context. Every step in the chronicle of Manzhen’s personal transformation is deeply embedded in her familial sphere, and primarily related to her children. Manzhen would never have such resolve to start a new life without her identity as mother and her profound sacrificial love to her children. Ding Ling herself can be envisioned in the figure of Manzhen’s younger daughter, Xiao Han. Before leaving the patrilocal countryside, Manzhen found herself in a state of deep anxiety and uncertainty about the future. After pawning the most valuable possession in the family, Manzhen thought about her children and made the decision to move to Wulin town:

\textsuperscript{96} See Mahmood’s argument of female agency in non-western cultural context and its difference with western feminist notion of agency based on individual autonomy.
She herself hasn’t had a better plan. Except for buying her children some new clothes, she doesn’t have a broader vision. But she has the determination to bear hardships; she would sacrifice anything for her children’s life. This is the trial Heaven designed for her, and she would go through it without fear or hesitation… wherever her children were, that was now her home (Barlow & Bjorge 203).

Manzhen brings her children along to her natal family, where she has to undertake the double burden of childrearing and pursuing modern education. While she attends school in Wulin, her daughter Xiao Han also enters into the school’s kindergarten and grows up in a carefree environment (Barlow & Bjorge 202). When Manzhen’s progressive classmates state that her children are a burden and suggests she leave the parenting duty to her natal relatives, Manzhen claims that after all, her mission to become a modern woman is to bring her children a brighter future. Manzhen says, “for my children, that they may grow up in a good, bright world and not become slaves in a vanished country” (Barlow & Bjorge 203). As a single mother, Manzhen’s maternal power encourages her to endure the pain of the fangzu process, and motivates her to keep working hard in her studies. The author-as-daughter and protagonist-as-mother relationship reflected the close relationship between Ding Ling and her own mother in real life. Such mother-daughter relations in turn enables a full exercise of her authorial agency to create a continuum between traditional motherhood and a revolutionary heroine. Such a continuum embodies the complexity of motherhood that remains unproblematic for individual transformation, while displaying the multifaceted life experiences of those bodily disciplined mothers in the realm of Chinese modern history. Those who subjugated themselves to painful modernization simply hoped to earn a better
future for the next generations. In this light, Manzhen’s identity as a mother and her (un)bounded physicality are integral to her revolutionary journey as a whole.

Ding Ling’s narrative also steps aside from judging other boundfoot female figures who remain indifferent to fangzu and modern education. As the progressive heroine figure, Manzhen does not belittle other women who refused to unbind their feet as backward-minded and ignorant. I think the reason is primarily due to Manzhen’s intimacy with tradition, especially her close relationships and emotional bonds with her female relatives in the Yu family. Manzhen’s resettlement in her natal family not only reorients her life trajectory from that of widowhood to that of a female student, but also allows her to live in a female homosocial space where female relatives take care for each other. Her interactions with her father’s concubines, their daughters and female servants, with whom she could find a sense of home and belonging, provided her with profound emotional support as she faced the pressure brought by the transforming outside world. She thereby is able to empathize and understand women who live within the realm of tradition. The following passage describes Manzhen’s interaction with Third Mistress, Lady Yu:

“You aren’t going to be asked to climb mountains or ford rivers. You’ll only be reading books for school, and everyone there will be very refined. If your feet unbind well, you’ll be all right. But what if they end up half-way inbetween, shaped to neither fish nor fowl? That would be no improvement at all. I’m worried about what to do with Zhuer’s feet (Mistress Yu’s daughter). Her father prohibits me from binding her feet, so she can go abroad for study, but if I don’t bind at all they’ll be as ugly as a man’s. I think in a few years, I’ll probably have to bind them just a little bit.” Third Mistress had a good pair of bound feet. She suffered a lot for those feet, and the fame had cost her dearly. If all of a sudden no one wanted women’s tiny feet, she would feel unspeakable remorse (Barlow & Bjorge 227).
Third Mistress is a conventional motherly figure more than other concubines of
Manzhen’s father, but she does not object to Manzhen’s progressive practice of fangzu or
her ambition for modern education. Here, we can see Third Lady’s concern lies with
whether Manzhen’s fangzu strategy—loosening and cutting off her binding cloth—would keep her feet in a good shape. Then, her concern shifts from Manzhen’s feet to her own
daughter’s feet. She seems to be indecisive about what she will do with her daughter’s feet. Her hesitation between binding her daughter’s feet or not epitomizes many women’s bewilderment during this reform era, and their unwillingness to give up an intergenerational female tradition. The third lady Yu found herself in a perplexing and conflicting situation where her maternity and matrilineal convention were suppressed by the paternalistic power of the reforming patriarch, causing her to lose her disciplinary matriarchal power over her own daughter’s body, marriageability, and future. To terminate the footbinding tradition meant to sever the ritual bound between mother and daughter, and to compel the elder generations to reconfigure their subject position of mother-as-footbinder and readjust their way of mothering from a traditional model to a modern one.

Ding Ling’s textual construct of subject relationship reveals her great empathy toward diverse female experiences in the transforming microcosmic surrounding, situated in a broader sociopolitical transition. The authorial consciousness and conscience are reflected through Manzhen’s capacity to recognize bodily feelings in the traditional perception of the third lady. She understands the profound cultural significance of
footbinding conventions in women’s lives, and how flummoxing and excruciating it would be to give up a tradition that cost women so much to preserve their womanly virtue and reputable social status. Manzhen’s empathetic concern also projects Ding Ling’s feminist consciousness based on her own deep connection with her mother that allowed her to identify the viewpoint of female commoners with whom her mother shared similar experiences. Manzhen’s revolutionary subjecthood thus co-exists with and becomes inseparable from traditional female embodiments and their collective social experiences. The formation of Manzhen’s revolutionary heroine does not necessarily lead to either victimization or stigmatization of the female others. The affective bond between mother and daughter in both real life and the novelistic world plays a significant role in engendering a feminist viewpoint rooted in women’s collective social experiences, and which challenged the derogatory male representation of traditional womanhood by restoring historically unheard female voices.

As such, Ding Ling’s “Mother” indicates that a woman’s tradition is not only a component of her identity and positionality, but a lens for understanding that a woman’s essence cannot be stripped from the culture within which she exists. Ding Ling’s textual representation of motherly figures in this novel does not disqualify their maternity nor culturally degrade them to an inferior status for their “problematic” corporeality. Instead of condemning traditional motherhood, Ding Ling’s writing to a large extent sanctifies traditional motherhood—the mother with bound feet—who, progressive or not, embody a profound affect to their children and other female subjects. Ding Ling’s text also presents a world close to the female lived experience in which boundfoot women can be as
progressive as male intellectual elites. The female capacity for coping with drastic social transformation subverts the hegemonic representation of the “passive and silent victim” inscribed by male intellectuals’ textual representations, while embodying the courage and resolution that many male intellectuals did not write about. Instead of being beaten by the progress of modernization that aggressively controlled a woman’s body, Manzhen’s personal transformation is invigorating enough to question native male intellectuals’ modern superior subjecthood: as a woman with bound feet, her textual embodiment rejects both the degradation described by male intellectuals and the universal salvation discourse that their modern masculinity relied upon. Ding Ling’s narrative therefore runs against both patriarchal tradition and nationalist masculinity by asking a provocative question: whether women’s emancipation needed to be led by male intellectuals who saw the female masses as a depository for male modern fantasy.

*Ling Shuhua: Maternal Power and a Self-Defining Feminist Viewpoint*

Ling Shuhua (1900-1990), also known as Su Hua Ling Chen, was born to a prestigious family in Beijing, and her father was a high-ranking official in Beijing. Her mother, the fourth of her father’s six wives, was frustrated by not having a son from her unhappy marriage. Ling was sent to study in Japan for three years at the age of ten, and later attended higher education at the foreign language department of Yanjing University (Dooling & Torgeson 175-176). After graduation, Ling spent a year in Japan in 1927 to study modern Japanese literature. Also deeply influenced by British feminist literature,

97 See Dooling and Torgeson edited *Writing Women in Modern China*, pp.175-177, for more biographic information of Ling Shuhua.
Ling made acquaintance with a group of British novelists and poets, and maintained a
ten-year communication with Virginia Woolf via mail from the late 1930s till Woolf’s
suicide in 1941 (Ibid). With Woolf’s encouragement, Ling wrote down her English-
language autobiography, *Ancient Melodies*, and sent the manuscript to Woolf to review
(Wu 27). Woolf left her notes and comments on Ling’s manuscript, and returned it to
Ling to revise and publish (Ibid). Ling’s academic interest in comparative literature and
her mentorship from Woolf, a feminist writer, situate her feminist position within
transnational and translingual contexts. As Wu Luqin and Shu-mei Shih argue, the
intertextual relationship between the works of Ling and Woolf enabled a mutual and
empathetic connectedness based on their feminist positionality within different
patriarchal systems (Shih 216, Wu 28). Such intertextual intimacy between two feminist
viewpoints explores the transnational nature of feminism and the potentialities of feminist
cultural practices and political alliance in a transnational landscape.

Ling Shuhua’s most well-known and acclaimed works are a series of short stories
written from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s, in which her subtle psychological portraits
and subjective sentiments reflect a feminist sensibility deeply rooted in her personal
interactions with women from different social classes—including both bourgeois elites
and lower-class servants—in her own family (Shih 221). This tendency was in someways
coincident with the thematic domesticity and feminine sentimentalism in Virginia
Woolf’s work (Ibid). However, because of her insight into women’s domestic lives, many
male critics of her time and thereafter categorized her work under the genre of “New

98 See Wu’s “Virginia Woolf and Ling Shuhua” for more information about the mentorship and
friendship between Woolf and Ling.
Boudoir Writing,” for dealing with the trivial matters surrounding a modern woman’s life. Criticism from these May Fourth male intellectuals credited Ling’s writing style to her well-bred yet conventional family background, while degrading her feminine motifs as “minor writing,” peripheral to modernist literature with an avant-garde stance against the status quo (Shih 222). These male intellectuals refused to recognize the significance of feminist representation from within the domestic sphere. Consequently, Ling Shuhua’s specific mode of textual arrangement, which foregrounds indirection, obliquity, and triviality in women’s quotidian lives, and the underlying profound sociocultural meaning remains under-theorized and left out of the May Fourth literature.

The male bias against Ling’s works partly results from an inadequate understanding of her unique but diverse textual representations that changed over time, and partly from the misogynist attitude that deems “femininity as subject matter” inherently trivial. As a modern female writer, Ling’s access to feminist textual representations was unique and simultaneously modeled by both her academic pursuit of foreign modern literature and her family education that allowed her a closer look at the female writing tradition in Chinese classic literature (Shih 223). Therefore, the female subjects in her storytelling, more or less, are associated with traditional femininity situated within conventional ethical contexts. Yet, Ling’s narrative approach seeks to center, situate, value, and respect each and every subject and experience by means of her feminist perspicacity, or more precisely, a deployment of her shrewdness, self-awareness and conscience in sensing and understanding the subject and her world. The writing I
selected from Ling’s work is her 1934 short story “Sayoko” (qian dai zi, 千代子), which is not listed in her better-known collection, nor has it been extensively considered in previous literary critiques. This work, however, is the most distinctive expression of Ling’s feminist standpoint: her unique and careful account of transnational female experiences—those of a boundfoot Chinese native woman as well as an immigrant mother in imperial Japan. My reading of this short story focuses on both her textual construct of Chinese traditional womanhood in a cross-cultural context and her strategy and tactics deployed to recuperate the subaltern voice and subjectivity. While being sensitive to the quotidian female experience, Ling exposed the social and ideological implications of an underrepresented womanly embodiment in a transnational colonial context. Through taking an Occidental perspective (that of a young Japanese girl), Ling retrieved the commonality of feminine experiences rooted in maternal love and affect, which though taking various forms, exists universally across lines of geography, race, and nationality. I argue that Ling’s feminist consciousness is both anti-imperialist and anti-patriarchal, and that both the Japanese imperialist and its complicitous Oriental Other—Chinese native intellectuals—are subjected to her subtle criticism. Ling’s astute feminist sensibility offer a different way of understanding the problematic construction of a gendered modernity in the specific semi-colonial context of her time.

“Sayoko” is narrated from the third-person perspective of a young Japanese girl, who grew up in an environment where Japanese militaristic imperialism had reached its

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99 This work is included in The collection of Ling Shuhua Classics (Ling Shuhua Jingdian zuopin, 凌叔华经典作品). Dangdai shijie, 2004. pp. 175-181.
height. The story is set in a Japanese town, Daimonjicho, in Kyoto City in 1931, the year before the 1931 Shanghai incident, when the whole country faced a serious economic depression and was preparing for its invasion of China. The local residents of Daimonjicho are critical of their new neighbors, a Shina (zhina, 支那, Japanese way of pronouncing “China”) family that had just moved in and opened a restaurant. Some local gossip, both malicious and inquisitive, spread that specifically targeted the shop owner’s wife, a boundfoot woman who usually carried her child around the town. The protagonist, 12-year-old Sayoko, a daughter of the owners of the local candy store was as curious as other teenagers about the peculiar body part—the pair of small feet—of this alien woman and the mysterious country she came from. But all she was told, either by her school teacher or her parents, is how backward and barbarian the Shina country is, where all men were opium addicts and all women had disabled bodies, both too feeble to withstand a foreign invasion. Animosity against China was instilled through patriotic education among Japanese commoners. Influenced by the imperialist patriotic education that propagated the colonization of Shina so as to “civilize” its people, Sayoko and her friend Yuriko schemed to humiliate this Shina woman in the sento house (the communal Japanese bath house), where the Shina woman’s ungainly feet would be exposed to the public. But when they arrived in the local sento, they saw the small-footed woman cradling her little baby in the bath, while warmly chatting with other female bathers. Later, Sayoko was attracted to and later joined in the cheerful interactions with the toddler and her modest and genuine mother. In the end, she and her friends forgot their mischievous plan.
In order to replicate a Japanese imperialist perspective in configuring a Chinese native female subject, Ling mimics what Edward Said has called “Orientalist representation,” a stylistic discursive construct for the Occident to (re)produce the stereotypical images of the Oriental Other” (Said 3). By organizing her narrative in accordance with the Orientalist framework of thinking about and interpreting the non-western other, Ling strategically imitates an Orientalist mindset and reenacts the epistemological violence generated by Western/Japanese imperialists on Chinese native others. The following passage describes Sayoko’s perception of her new neighbor, the bound-feet Shina woman:

“Yesterday, I asked Yuriko, why do Shina women bind their feet? Aren’t they afraid of pain? My Sensen (teacher) said Shina men all like tiny feet, so women bound their feet. Sensen also said, that Shina women are fools and only know to obey men’s orders. Those women with bound feet are not free to move around, so men can do whatever they want…..” Her talking stopped, Sayoko falls into her imagination, and tries to picture the image of a Shina woman in her mind: an unearthly creature soft as a piece of raw jellyfish, soaking up water and sitting flaccidly in her home; when she begins to walk, she behaves like a horse stepping in a limp but a fast pace, “ta-ta, ta-ta”. She snuggles in her father’s arm without a word; she really wants to see that uncanny exotic body, that pair of tiny feet (Ling 177).

Sayoko’s encounter with the Shina strangers engenders a complex process of recognition and identification in which the asymmetry between Occidental as self and the Oriental as other is formed. Looking at the unfamiliar body, the young Sayoko could only read it as different, grotesque and thus less human or not human at all. Ling’s narration portrays the curious but also voyeuristic gaze of the local residents, whose active watching, to borrow Ray Chow’s phrase, “is essentially an aggressive and pornographic that enacts as the primary agency of violence” (Chow “Where” 133). The reductive gaze strips the Oriental
native other, whose exposed body inhabits the place of the object in silence. The body of
the native woman thus becomes a crucial site for projecting the Occidental’s
misrecognition. The Occidentalized Japanese sees the Chinese native as the ultimate
Oriental Other who occupies a place of backwardness and primitiveness, reducing her
physicality to an abnormal and disabled status, while stripping her whole being from the
culture within which she exists. Ling’s blatant mimicry of this classic Orientalist writing
and representation nevertheless aims to exemplify how modern hegemony is exercised
through western imperialism in the name of civilization and modernization to relegate the
non-western, racialized, and gendered body to the status of less than human. From the
Occidental’s perspective, the extraordinary physicality of the Shina woman always
symbolizes an authentic nativeness and cultural backwardness seen as passive,
incomplete, silent, and thus an object to study, and subjected to the imperialist gaze.

However, aggressive misrepresentation is neither Sayoko nor her local neighbors’
fault. Rather, the fictive conceptualization of Chineseness as physically debilitated and
mentally weak is the nature of modernity that inheres in Japanese and many other
westernized societies. Meiji Japan’s obsessive enthusiasm about the western civilization
also positioned their own native culture as the particular and Western culture as the
universal. Japanese modernists applied Orientalism, as a self-consolidating strategy, to
reaffirm an inextricable linkage between their own identity and western modernity.
Japanese Orientalism, as an integral part of the indigenized Western imperialist and
colonialist project, nourished its own nationalist sentiments and provided justification for
its colonial expansion. Ling’s story illustrates how Japanese patriotic education
indoctrinated aggression to the masses in general, and to some generations in particular. For example, Sayoko’s school teacher, Yamamoto-San, compared Shina people to a “dying camel,” claiming that Shina people’s feeble bodies, just like their territory, were doomed to be conquered. From this point of view, we could see how imperialist elites passed on the hegemonic message—the racialized and gendered stereotypes of Chinese men and women—down to commoners to gain the cooperation and “consent” of the masses. Underpinned by xenophobic sentiments, Shina as “the sick man of East Asia” became common sense taken for granted by the Japanese.

Moreover, the cultivation of an Orientalist mindset is also what Chinese native male intellectuals had been dedicated to doing through their own adoption of Western/Japanese civilization. Ling herself, as a May Fourth intellectual and an overseas student close to Japanese modern culture, was aware of the problematic presented by native “Occidentalism.” As Chen Xiao-Mei defined it, “Occidentalism” refers to a specific cultural and linguistic practice that employs the imaginaries of “the West” for a specific discursive purpose—namely, as a means to (re)produce symbolic power. According to Chen, it is an “ideological and discursive practice of constructing its superior Western Other that allows the Oriental Self with his indigenous creativity to partake in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others” (2). As a tool for self-empowerment, Occidentalism is a discursive practice

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100 See Chen, pp. 2-7 for the original definition of “Occidentalism”. Also, see Shih’s *The Lure of Modern*, Chapter 5 “Loving The Other”, pp. 129-136 in which she further develops this concept through her discussion about modern male intellectuals’ cultural intimacy with Japan. I will adopt and elaborate the native intellectuals’ self-appropriation of Orientalism in my analysis of Ling Shuhua’s work.
deployed by Oriental natives to construct a universal Western Other, and to appropriate its prerogative modernity and misrepresentation about the Orientals into the native modernization project (Shih 136). Chinese masculinist intellectuals were empowered by their active engagement in the appropriation of western Orientalist discourse. Through conversion to, and self-identification with his Occidental Other, these male intellectuals were able to give themselves a subject position of heroic polyglot and the agent of universal knowledge (Barlow “The question” 211).

Concomitant with this self-empowerment is the ultimate othering of the misrepresented female masses. The native impetus to demonize a gendered embodiment of the past as regressive and infectious comes from the negation of an intolerable part of the old Chinese self, or in Tani Barlow’s language, from that which “makes native tradition an internal other” (Barlow “Chinese” 211-213). As I demonstrated before, when the native Occidentalist representation resorts to an idealized construction of Western/Japanese modernity, it becomes a form of hegemony wielded by intellectuals to debunk tradition and its lower-class gendered masses. The May Fourth Occidentalists (intellectuals like Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu) might have experienced racism and a masculine crisis in Japan, but at home they recentered their authority to dictate universal Western knowledge as a means to distance themselves from the unenlightened masses. In this case, Ling’s writing suggests that Japanese Orientalist hegemony and Chinese native Occidentalism, though two different discursive practices, nevertheless shared commonalities with each other. Moving from a westernized imperialist social context to a not-yet westernized one, the process of othering native women who lived these traditions
instituted a multilayered power asymmetry, whereby the boundfoot women, as the vestiges of obsolescent tradition, were simultaneously subjugated to both the gaze of western/Japanese imperialists and that of native Occidentalists. In effect, the thematic Orientalist writing about native gendered beings highlights the irreconcilable differences and the conceptual dualism between the Occidental Self and Oriental Other, which has constantly been reinforced by both Japanese imperialist and native intellectual discourse in their local modernization projects.

Yet, Ling’s imitative Orientalist tone strategically avoids the victimization of the Shina boundfoot woman, even as the subject herself remains silent throughout the whole storyline. Gayatri Spivak once explained that in some specific contexts, the native woman is what she calls “subaltern,” the excluded or “mastered” subject created by the discourse of western power. The subaltern is denied access to any power to speak, and thus is unable to produce her own discourse, or simply to be “heard” by those in power. But the absence of the Shina woman’s voice in Ling’s narrative does not mean the absence of her agency, which should be seen as the ability to bear witness to epistemological violence that denies her humanity. To use Rey Chow’s language, even if the Shina mother seems to be a passive and silent object, her silence is “at once the evidence of imperialist oppression, and that which bears the witness to its own demolition” (Chow, 342). Here, I argue that Ling’s narrative restores the defiled image and violated identity of the Shina woman by restoring to her the power of womanhood. The motherhood of the Shina woman secretly sabotages and destabilizes Sayoko and her friend’s xenophobic

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101 See Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak” for further expatiation of “subaltern”.
sentiments based on the conceptual dualism between the Occidental Self and the Oriental Other. The native female figure is both the silent victim and the active saboteur whose body performatively enacts her motherhood, an embodiment that disrupts and destabilizes Orientalist assumptions about her. The following passage is the scene in which Sayoko and her friend Yuriko have a close interaction with their Shina neighbor in the Sento house.

Sayoko bathed in hot water; the warmth reminded her mother’s arm. There were three or four women in the corner of the hot tub chatting and laughing around the Shina woman and her chubby child. The child must be really interesting, Sayoko thought, and she could not help but walk close to them to see what they were laughing at. It turned out that the child was amusing the surrounding ladies with grimaces. He grinned with his little teeth, which was adorable and innocent. The mother sitting behind was smiling, proudly and fondly. She knelt down on the ground and put her child in the water to paddle. The surrounding women stared at them with fondness; their tender smiling face showed warmth and affection. Unwittingly, Sayoko was attracted to the mother and her baby, too, and soon joined in their laughter….The Shina woman dried her baby and then herself quickly, smiling to everyone with no shame, and walking out of the door. Sayoko forgot to mock the Shina woman’s small feet, and just watched her leaving as did everyone else (Ling 180).

In the bath scene, Ling highlights interactions between the local Japanese women and their new neighbors. The gaze of female locals in this scene no longer shows hostility; neither does it reductively read the body under their gaze as an abnormal nor disabled physical being. Rather, they recognize her maternal subjectivity and a profound affect devoted to her child. The maternal subjectivity in this scene does not limit itself at an individual level, but rather as collective and intersubjective experiences shared by the Shina mother and the surrounding female spectators. The interactions between the Shina woman and her child embody a universal theme of human being—the maternal bond —
which is inclusive and is capable of reaching out to others. Encompassed by such profound emotion, Sayoko’s imaginaries of the Shina woman predicated upon the exclusion of the subject’s body, affectivity, and subjectivity, is now deterritorialized. Such deterritorialization happens at the very moment when Sayoko comes to realize that this Shina woman is not an alien existence laying outside her intelligibility, but a mother, a kind human being whom she is capable of recognizing. The woman is no longer perceived through a distorted Orientalist lens that frames her as a warped and objectified image to deny her meaningful social existence. Her bound feet are no longer reduced to a disabled, fragmentary and abnormal corporeality, but rather as part of a maternal embodiment inviting the spectators to gaze, and thus, to re-recognize her subjectivity as a mother.

In this scene, Ling also inserts dynamic eye contact, both looking and watching, between female subjects. The Shina woman’s body is open to public scrutiny but without the fear or shame of being defiled or objectified. Her ability to look back at the surrounding spectators enables a “speaking look” that makes the spectators feel ashamed for their potentially aggressive and objectifying gaze. Sitting in front of the Japanese women, the Shina woman is composed enough to confront the spectators’ curious gaze. She doesn’t speak, but looks back at the viewers with polite smile, as if to say, “I am not shamed for exposing my body.” The dynamic looks of the Shina mother engender an emotional resonance back and forth between her and other female spectators. An intersubjectivity based on motherly affect destabilizes the power asymmetry between the gazer and the gazed, and in turn renders Sayoko and her friend, the Orientalist outsiders,
to the status of silence. The Shina woman’s tranquil countenance with her affective expression is powerful enough to transcended the intolerance and prejudice of the Orientalist bigots. Her gaze embodies her own agency to de-objectify herself and deterritorializing stereotypical projections upon her body. In the moment gaze are exchanged between subjects, the other-as-object restores her subjectivity through an intersubjective consciousness and the agency of motherly affect. In this light, Ling’s narrative mediates the tension between female subjects from different sociocultural backgrounds and discovers the potential intimate alliance therein that has the power to undercut a Western subject-object dualism and its Orientalist representation.

Centering both the mother subject-position and maternal affect as a universal human experience, the structure of Ling’s narrative honors the complexity and diversity of motherhood as a commonality of women’s experience but lived in a heterogenous way. The commonality of women’s experience highlighted in this story demonstrates the inherently fictiveness and fabulation of Orientalism, while sabotaging the seemingly irreconcilable dualisms dividing modernity and tradition, the West and non-white. Maternal embodiment and the motherhood of the boundfoot woman, performatively enacted through Ling’s narrative, serve to ridicule both Orientalism and Occidentalism by challenging their appropriation and misrepresentation of native women’s traditional existence. Without reducing or romanticizing the heterogeneity of women’s lived experiences across cultures, Ling crafts a textual space that extends the representability of Chinese women whose femininity existed in a traditional cultural context. Moverover, Ling’s writing explores the potentiality of feminist solidarity in a transnational context
where the universal affect of motherly love can be shared and experienced in different forms by women from different sociocultural contexts. The story “Sayoko” exemplifies how Ling’s Third World feminist position may have required a process of voluntary self-Orientalization in order to cohere with and subsequently deconstruct the framework of hegemonic Orientalism by recuperating female affect and intersubjective experiences.

One could say that Ling’s transnational and Third World feminist voice has a clear agenda to not only interrogate native androcentric cultural politics and Japanese/Western Orientalist epistemology, but also to strategically avoid a problematic western feminism that rejected native female agency in order to reproduce the knowledge of western imperialism.

Comparing the representation of women in Ding Ling’s biographical novel with that in Ling Shuhua’s short story, we find that the textual embodiment of maternity is employed by both authors to reconfigure traditional womanhood in modern contexts. The conflict between the modern progressive Self and the traditional Other embodied in motherly figure of Manzhen is in fact a prominent theme in many modern Chinese fictional works. However, Ding Ling’s strategic writing does not let her protagonist fear her conventional body. Instead, she redefines her boundfoot physicality as a malleable and adaptable organic being that is fully capable of enduring the painful transformation process. The boundfoot woman’s maternal agency works to recontextualize her multifaceted subject-position in both the changing macrocosmic environment and the microcosmic surroundings contoured by the emotional bound between mother and children, and the intimacy among female relatives. In Ding Ling’s work, the conventional
body and revolutionary motherhood co-exist in a continuum of female experiences. Similar to Ding Ling, Ling Shuhua’s textual treatment of traditional womanhood restores the universal valence of maternal love to a defiled Chinese native woman. Her writing reenacts the mother-child attachment and the affective interaction between subjects, reconceptualizing Oriental “motherhood” as a performative identity that could embody the universal value of maternal affect, (inter)subjectivity and collective female agency. Such performative representation of motherhood forced the Japanese Occidental women to reconsider the Chinese native female’s body not as a site where a silent victim is on the display under the imperialist gaze, but instead as an integral whole that assembles universal affect and maternal power. Her literary practice enables an intersubjective identification among women, even despite sociocultural differences displaying the irreducible power disparity between imperialist Japan and semicolonial China. These two phenomenal female writers not only present us the complex and diverse experiences of boundfoot subjects in their encounter with modernity, but also indicates a potential field for polyphonic feminist representations and discloses that the stigma against “traditional woman” in masculinist writing is nothing but a fabulation. As a modern misogynist femininism presided over the interpretation and representation of the female masses and female writings, this self-defined viewpoint from modern feminist writings ensured a body of knowledge produced by and for women. Self-defined knowledge became even more fundamental to produce narratives, interpretations, and representations that provided alternatives to a hegemonic nationalist paradigm, and the controlling images of what it means to be a Chinese woman as prescribed by a phallocentric symbolic order. In
this manner, the feminist writing by Ding Ling and Ling Shuhua opened the possibility
for a native feminist ideology to counter the oppression of nationalist patriarchy,
masculinist intellectual hegemony, and western imperialism.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

The social experiences of female subjects with bound feet during early twentieth-century China’s anti-footbinding movement spans across a broad array of diversity and complexity. This spectrum of experiences includes the case of women committed suicide for physical liberation from footbinding traditions on the one end, and the case of female suicide led by the coercive violence of fangzu campaigns on the other. In-between, women struggled everyday to adapt to, negotiate with, and above all, survive the anti-footbinding movement and state modernization as a whole. While it is almost impossible to find extensively recorded and well-preserved textual records of the personal narratives of women with bound feet, the female narratives that appeared in public media can only reveal the tip of an enormous iceberg. Women with bound feet who survived this coercive disciplinary movement, willing to comply or not, had experienced a process of transformation on both a physical and a subjective level. Fangzu practicers’ personal stories demonstrate that these bound-feet subjects were neither the victims nor residue of a tradition, but historical actors who made every effort to decouple themselves from a marginalized social status. The hegemonic reformist discourse that cast women as either victims or passive objects foreclosed the very possibility of acknowledging and recognizing the multifaceted experience of fangzu and the polyphonic subaltern voices that rose in evidence of their exercise of historical agency. Regulatory and disciplinary as the fangzu movement was, the disciplined women nevertheless found their way out and made pragmatic adjustments and compromises to cope with the overwhelming forces of
national modernization. Acquiring an ideal gendered modern subjecthood via various forms of physical changes thus is itself a strategy, though one always in-process. From bound-feet women’s activities of consuming wester-style footwear, we see that bound-feet subjects played an active role in conceptualizing modern fashion. Despite being marginalized by the discourse of “natural feet,” bound-feet subjects, whether they went through the physical transformation or not, were part of the body of potential consumers of a cosmopolitan fashion economy. As their feet became more socially visible and were subjected to a public and voyeuristic gaze, bound-feet women followed the trend to partake of the creation, formation and distribution of western fashion knowledge and made it up their own version of modern feminine expression. They were the creators, designers and consumers, whose social appearance complicated and altered the dominant public representation of “traditional woman”. Through the activities of fangzu and modern footwear consumption, women with both bound feet and natural feet, embodied the diverse concepts of the “new woman” exercising their sociopolitical agency in the form of collective efforts.

The limitation of this research is obvious. My primary sources are quantitatively limited. Neither does my research cover legal archives to consider civil lawsuits or trials about the local conflicts caused by the enforcement of fangzu decrees. Historical resources about the personal stories of women with bound feet are also notoriously scarce, which leads to a narrower exploration and analysis of their subjective experiences. However, this scarcity—but not absence—of the voices of women with bound feet itself demonstrates two points: first, socially marginalized women had less access to, and in
some context, were foreclosed from the power of producing their own discourse; and second, this occlusion still does not indicate that these women were muted and remained absolute silent. They did speak, in fact, and sometimes even expressed themselves in a direct way. They attempted to produce their own discourse through various forms of self-narration, ranging from suicide notes, to reminiscent and exhortative fangzu monologues, to the innovation of lotus shoes as the nonverbal and nonliteral expression of demands for fashion for women with bound feet. Resonating with Gail Hersheter’s argument that “the subaltern talks back,” my research situates women with bound feet as a specific category of social beings, and considers their modes of perceiving modern social changes via physical transformations. It is important for me, as a feminist scholar, to develop an acute sense of subaltern women’s utterances, even if their voices and bodily existence exhibit total subjugation to a hegemonic modernist discourse. My primary concerns thus rest on the possible and potential subaltern utterances through which these female subjects spoke their oppression, even while abiding to the hegemonic language of state reform as a whole. The subaltern narratives and discourse of women with bound feet were articulated as an endorsement of emancipatory ideology, but nevertheless, remained self-reflexive to their bodily experiences and subject formation at every stage of their fangzu journey.

When it comes to the cultural representations of boundfoot women in the May Fourth New Literature Movement, I argue that the body of boundfoot women was reduced to a mere embodiment of feudalistic remains by male modernist intellectuals, who nevertheless relied on the (mis)representation of those non-normative bodies to manage their own masculine crisis and to acquire a modern subjecthood. This point is
substantiated by my critical reading of Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu’s autobiographical writings, in which both authors recount a period of their life in a close relationship with women with bound feet. Through the iconographical description of the boundfoot women’s misery, Guo and Yu conceptualized traditional femininity exclusively in terms of victimhood within an unwanted physicality. Such a narrative mode ghettoized the textual existence of the boundfoot subjects by expelling them to a domain of nonlife, and the role of an ultimately silent Other that only existed as subjected to the male modernist gaze. The epistemological violence of male intellectuals’ misrecognition nevertheless reflects not only their fears of and anxieties about being constrained by the shackle of paternalistic Confucian traditions or being emasculated by Western modern hegemony, but also their dependence on, attachment to, and above all inseparable relation with their boundfoot Other. The image of boundfoot women thus is an indispensable trope for native male intellectuals to articulate their desire for dictating and authorizing China’s modernization and to claim for themselves a transcendent stance through which they took the credit for saving the oppressed and debilitated female masses.

The male intellectuals’ literary representation of boundfoot women in the cultural discursive realm stand in stark contrast to the socio-historical documentation of boundfoot women’s various form of participation in social transformation and ways of being and living. When it comes to feminist textual configurations of traditional female bodies, my analysis reveals that feminist writing engendered alternative representations embedded in the everyday experiences of socially and culturally marginalized females who made every effort to negotiate with and adapt to the speeding social changes.
Through a close reading of the novelistic writings of two prominent May Fourth feminist writers, Ding Ling and Ling Shuhua, I argue that their specific narrative organization reclaims the diverse and complex historical experiences and agency of boundfoot women. By developing feminist perspicacity and great empathy towards marginalized female experiences, Ding Ling and Ling Shuhua situated boundfoot women in their specific cultural context, while opening the possibility of destabilizing and sabotaging the existing model generated by a modern masculine hegemony. In this light, female authorial agency constructed feminist models of textual representation that reconceptualized the historically forgotten women in their own cultural and social context where their femininity and gendered ways of being and living persisted. Such a mode of writing left an invaluable legacy to the field of Chinese feminist cultural politics and helps us to recognize an extended feminist representability of women in Chinese modern cultural history.
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