

Breast Revolution—Analysis of the Natural Breast Movement during the Republic of China

Yier Chen

The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

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Abstract: Breast-binding was a trend that only became popular in the Republican era. This paper will analyse texts on the Natural Breast Movement from three periods, with 1927 as a watershed year, to explore how it liberated women and what impact it had on them. The advanced intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement, represented by Hu Shi and Zhang Jingsheng, raised and criticized the breast-binding. Zhu Jiahua published a proposal that led to the climax of the Natural Breast Movement in 1927. Scholars like Lu Xun reflected on women's free will in the Natural Breast Movement. While men dominated the Natural Breast Movement, women also made brave choices in the body revolution.

1. Introduction

While foot-binding has been criticised by the radicals of the May Fourth Movement since the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican era as a corrupt custom, breast-binding, also an oppressive custom for women, has not been taken seriously along with foot-binding. Unlike foot-binding, a traditional custom, breast-binding was a trend that only became popular in the Republican era. In Lin Shuhua's 1915 article 'Reform of Female Body Mutilation', published in *Women's Magazine*, she pointed out that while the harm of foot-binding was gradually diminishing, the hidden dangers of breast-binding began before foot-binding could be completely eradicated. Breast-binding was a way for women to suppress their breasts to conceal their sexuality and was just as harmful to their physical health as foot-binding. Yu depicted the appearance of the corseted vest and argued that the invention of the corseted, tight-fitting vest became popular with young women and even became a marker to distinguish urban women from rural women. The reasons for the birth of breast-binding in China are complex and contradictory. One of the objects of Chinese emulation was the United States, where women were given the right to vote in 1920, and women's dress fashions began to weaken the lines of femininity. Female masculinities became a popular fashion in the United States at the time. As Doan said, "Cross-dressing is about gender confusion. Cross-dressing is about the phallus as constitutively veiled. Cross-dressing is about the power of women." The use of the corset by the women of the Republic of China reflects their desire for gender equality, the equality of men and women sought by advanced urban women by weakening the femininity of their bodies. Women hoped to achieve similarity in status by resembling men in appearance. However, the corset also had the opposite meaning of gender equality and may have been a product of sexual shame in a sexually conservative context. During the May Fourth Movement, women were advised to wear long masculine robes to achieve equality in appearance. Still, no one could have foreseen that the male dressing resulting from gender equality would eventually become a corset detrimental to women's health. Before 1927, the advanced members in May Fourth Movement, Hu Shih and Zhang Jingsheng, had been the first to attack the disadvantages of the corset and advocate the natural beauty of women's breasts. In 1927, Zhu Jiahua's proposal pushed the Guangdong government to enact a regulation banning breast-binding. After the government promulgated this regulation, Lu Xun, one of the leaders of the May Fourth Movement, criticised and reflected on the Natural Breast Movement. This essay will analyse texts on the Natural Breast Movement from three periods, with 1927 as a watershed year, to explore how it liberated women and what impact it had on them.

2. The views of Hu Shih and Zhang Jingsheng before 1927

In 1921, Hu Shih gave a speech on women's issues at the Anqing Youth Association. He divided the women's issue into two parts, women's emancipation and women's transformation. He considered women's emancipation to be negative because emancipation included the meaning of fettered treatment. The bondage in female emancipation is also divided into two parts, namely the physical and spiritual aspects. In his speech, Hu Shih said, "A friend of mine once said to me that if all women bound their breasts, they would not be able to be human mothers in the future!" Hu Shih focused his discussion of the breast-binding on women's duties and responsibilities as mothers, using his friend's words to imply that women's corsets affected breastfeeding and the reproduction of offspring. Zhang Jingsheng expressed similar views in his article "Philosophy of Beauty", but he thought more about the aesthetics of the female body than Hu Shih. Compared to Hu Shih, Zhang Jingsheng was not as famous, but he had the exciting title of being the 'first person in Chinese sexology', and in 1926 he published an article entitled "Nude Studies" in the *New Culture*, an influential newspaper of the May Fourth Movement. The article discussed the need for nude painting and emphasised the beauty of the female body. Zhang Jingsheng talked about the nude image because the 1920s was a period of rapid development in the production of naked visual culture. Both academic artists, commercial artists, and intellectuals were competing to enter the production of naked visual culture. Zhang Jingsheng believed that nude paintings should not focus on the female body but rather on the fullness of the buttocks and the curves of the breasts. While praising the curves of women's breasts, Zhang Jingsheng critiqued the damage that corseting can do to a woman's lungs from a medical perspective and the potential pitfalls it can cause for breastfeeding later in life. He argued that the corset turned women into men and that the sight of breasts did not impel men, so the corset was a feudal rite of passage. Zhang Jingsheng's study of the nude body attempted to refocus women's "facial beauty" on "breast beauty" and "hip beauty", thus allowing them to accept their curves rather than hiding them. Zhang Jingsheng also supported the idea that women with hypoplastic and sagging breasts can use external forces to lift their breasts. This idea is somewhat limited, as it goes against the natural laws of the female breast, as does the corset. It is noteworthy that Zhang Jingsheng, a sexologist, does not use the more written term 'Xiongbu' when referring to women's breasts, but the more vulgar and colloquial 'Naibu'. In another of his essays, 'Philosophy of Beauty', Zhang also used 'Naibu'. In 1924, Zhang's lecture notes on 'Philosophy of Beauty' were printed at Peking University, where he advocated the universalisation of nudity in the section on "Sexual Education of Beauty". In 'Philosophy of Beauty', Zhang Jingsheng criticised Chinese women's practice of binding their breasts by praising the openness of women's clothing in Europe and America. In addition to his discussion of beautiful curves, Zhang Jingsheng argued that breast-binding caused difficulties for women in breastfeeding, thus affecting the health and development of the race. The nude illustrations used in Zhang Jingsheng's "Nude Studies" were modelled on Western women, suggesting that he wanted to reconstruct the reader's aesthetic perception of the nude through images of Western women with full breasts and buttocks. While helping to free women from the moral constraints of traditional aesthetics, the Western aesthetic template adopted by Zhang Jingsheng also had the disadvantage of ignoring ethnic disparities. His association of 'voluptuous curves' with female health weakens the validity of women's natural curves, including hypogenesis and sagging.

3. The Natural Breast Movement reached its climax in 1927 with the promotion of Zhu Jiahua

In 1927 Zhu Jiahua, the head of the Guangdong Provincial Civil Affairs Department brought the Natural Breast Movement to a climax with his "A Proposal to Ban Breast-Binding for Women". Even though the intellectual elite who led the May Fourth Movement published articles decrying the dangers of breast-binding, radicals like Zhang Jingsheng could not wait for everyone to March naked in the streets overnight. However, the fact is that there were just a few people who supported the liberation of women's breasts. There was still an invisible gulf between the public and the intellectuals, and the words in the press could not break through the deep-rooted feudal ideology. In contrast to Hu Shih and others, Zhu Jiahua was aware of the problem, so he used the power of the government to enforce

chastisement, in addition to expounding on the dangers of breast-binding. He wrote, "Within three months from the date of the announcement, all women in the province are forbidden to girdle their breasts, and all women's organs and prefects in the province are to be allowed to propagate the idea so that it is forbidden by the deadline. Suppose any woman still wears a brassiere after the deadline. In that case, she will be punished by a fine of fifty yuan or more once the case is confirmed." Zhu Jiahua realised that the reason why women could not take off their corsets did not lie in themselves, but the "feudal elders". Using searches and fines by the women's authorities, he forced the feudal parents behind the women to relinquish their right to manage women's bodies. Although this decree did not end to breast-binding within three months, Zhu Jinhua's forceful approach fundamentally changed the culture of breast-binding. Therefore, 1927 can be called a watershed year for the Natural Breast Movement.

4. Lu Xun's Reflections on the Natural Breast Movement

By analysing the writings on female breasts and breast-binding in the first two periods, it was obvious that the Natural Breast movement was not only a process of eradication of bad habits and ideological liberation but also represented the will of male power that always permeated and acted on the process of women's body liberation. Different thinkers and politicians, each with their views, analysed and criticised the issue of women's breast-binding in terms of ethnographic health, body aesthetics and feudal rituals. In 1927, after the Guangdong government had imposed a ban on women's breasts, Lu Xun published "Worry about "Natural Breasts"", expressing his thoughts on the cutting of women's hair, foot-binding and breast-binding. Lu Xun's writing style was not as straightforward as Zhang Jing sheng's, and he did not mention breast-binding in the first half of his article but first discussed women's haircutting. He quoted a passage from the news that girls with haircuts were not allowed to apply for school, satirising the headmaster for excluding advanced girls who cut their hair. Lu Xun's frequent use of irony in his writing had led him to say the opposite sarcasm. Although he said in his article that 'I do not approve of women cutting their hair, he actually approved progressive practices such as women cutting their hair and freeing their feet. From the point of view of social reform, Lu Xun believed that women's haircutting was like any other reform; once reformed too radically, it would become another extreme, making women who did not cut their hair alternative and heretical. This idea was something that Zhang Jing sheng and Hu Shi did not think about specifically, as male intellectuals attributed the popularity of the corset simply to the influence of moral decency. In considering they ignored the beauty of the curves of the Western female body, the female masculinities fashions of the West. From the perspective of official advocacy, Lu Xun argued that the alternation of power in the Republican government made decrees change so often that people were confused, so government-enforced decrees and chastisements became a burden to the people. Lu Xun agreed that the corset was harmful to women, but he believed it was ineffective to criticise it alone. He wrote that "firstly, to improve social thinking, we should be generous about the breasts; secondly, we should improve clothing by tying the blouse into the skirt. The cheongsam and the Chinese short clothes are not suitable for the liberation of the breasts, because at that time it means that the breasts are lifted up below, which is inconvenient and unattractive." From the social ostracism suffered by women with short hair, Lu Xun associated and worried whether women who liberate their breasts and feet would face the same dilemma in the future. According to the Guangzhou newspapers, many women adopted various breast enlargement measures to meet the trend of the Natural Breast Movement. In addition to the concern for the nation's health, which was to help women liberate their breasts, there was also the domination and gaze of male power over women's bodies.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay takes 1927 as the watershed to analyse the influence and evaluation of the Natural Breast movement in three different periods. The advanced intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement, represented by Hu Shi and Zhang Jing sheng, raised and criticised the breast-binding. Zhu Jiahua published a proposal that led to the climax of the Natural Breast Movement in 1927. Scholars

like Lu Xun reflected on women's free will in the Natural Breast Movement. While men dominated the Natural Breast Movement, women also made brave choices in the body revolution.

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