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Shaping the New Woman: The Dilemma of *Shen* in China's Republican Period

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Abstract As a response to China's experiences with European colonialism, a number of political and intellectual movements emerged during the late 19th and early 20th century, with the objective to inculcate certain desirable qualities into its citizens, particularly the modern woman. This article compares the modern Chinese concept of the physical body (*shenti* 身體) with that of the traditional ideal Confucian body (*shen* 身). By emphasizing *shenti* as a vessel for objective knowledge amid the construction of a politically-desired social order, Chinese activists adapted a Western, binary mind-body concept. However, this in turn gave rise to a number of social problems. Greed, moral corruption, and prostitution ultimately revealed the modern *shenti* concept to be a volatile construct. Through this process, the female body came to stand for the revolutionary promises of modernity, but also served as a focus for collective delusions, as well as a meeting point for all manners of anxieties.

Keywords *Shenti* 身體 · the New Woman · Female body · Modern sport

1 Introduction

The New Woman (*xinnüxing* 新女性) has long been identified by scholars as one of the most crucial symbols of Chinese modernity in the Republican period (1911–1949). Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the figure of the New Woman permeated almost every strata of life, cutting across social, cultural, and ideological boundaries. Representations of her can be found in avant-garde literature, popular home journals, tabloid journalism, advertising, fashion, sport, and film. Her ubiquity marks an era in which women were envisioned to be equal political participants and given

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public roles as enfranchised citizens in a new China. The New Woman was at the center of a number of crucial debates concerning body politics, modernity, and the future of the nation.

Yet if the New Woman came to stand for the revolutionary promises of modernity, she was also the focus for collective delusions and a meeting point for all manner of anxieties. Conflicting political groups used the New Woman as a catch phrase, and, depending on where they were situated, it meant something different to each. So who, or what, exactly, *was* the New Woman? How do we relate the discussion of the New Woman to the larger cultural discourse of *shenti gongcheng* 身體工程 (body engineering) in China's physical culture, from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th (Huang 2005: 27)? Why did the female body come to figure as a privileged signifier of the modern nation? What problems did the activists encounter in the process of shaping the New Woman? With questions relating to the New Woman as the entry point, this article investigates the process in which modern Chinese intellectuals and political activists readjusted the understanding of the term *shen* 身 (the vital body) in traditional Chinese philosophy through emphasizing the physicality of *shen – shenti* 身體 (the body). Meanwhile, prioritization of the nation as the most meaningful context for citizen self-definition resulted in the development of a more robust, athletic, and disciplined *shenti* for each citizen.[1]

2 The New Woman versus the Traditional Woman

Modern Chinese citizens, especially women, received unprecedented freedom in the culture of experimentalism that accompanied the May Fourth Movement of 1919. As a matter of fact, the term *xinnüxing* (the New Woman, translated literally as "new female sex") first came into use in the 1920s, as part of the May Fourth Movement's drive to modernize China. Tani Barlow notes that, before this time, women were described by the relational term *funü* 婦女, a word which denoted familial roles grounded in Confucian notions of gender rather than sex. The use of this oppositional term involved the adoption of a universal, "scientistic," personal identity based on biological attributes. Barlow writes:

> *Nüxing* [女性] operated as one-half of the Western, exclusionary, male/female binary.… *Nüxing* and its correlate *nanxing* [男性], or male sex, acted as a magnet, attracting around its universal, sexological, scientistic core a psychologized personal identity that allowed its possessor to act as the fulcrum for upending Confucianism and all received categories. … In particular, colloquial fiction established sex as the core of an oppositional personal identity and woman as a sexological category. (Barlow 1994: 266)

The term *nüxing* implied that women began to share men's position as enfranchised citizens.[2] Moreover, it repositioned "woman" so that she came to be understood in

[1] Unless otherwise noted, translations are the author's own.

[2] Information on the rights of women in the Republican Period can be found in Cheuk 1994; Chow 1991; and Brownell, Wasserstrom, and Laqueur 2002.

terms of a Westernized binary opposition, as the equal other of "man" (Barlow 1994: 255–256). Many of the May Fourth reformists regarded the inferior position of Chinese women—fortified by Confucian aphorisms and institutionalized in practices like enforced illiteracy and foot-binding—to be a crucial signpost of national weakness (Barlow 1994). In the words of Louise Edwards, "the logic was that China's women were letting the nation down—while China's women remained weak and crippled by foot-binding and ignorant, unproductive, dependent, and isolated in the domestic sphere, there was no hope for the nation" (Edwards 2000: 126). The reformists argued that China, in mistreating "its women," was being treated like a woman in its turn by stronger Western nations.

Urbanization was a crucial site for the establishment of the New Woman. From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th, the city became home to a new type of cosmopolitanism that was made possible by the development of a public space centered on consumption. In Shanghai 上海, young people congregated around cinemas, bars, and dance halls. This new type of urbanity allowed women to walk out of their interior space, and the public spaces played an important role in the formation of new body cultures. The visibility of the New Woman was made further possible by the rise of the mass media. The number of journals, magazines, newspapers, and novels published in China expanded exponentially over the first three decades of the 20th century. Pictorial magazines such as *The Young Companion* (*Liangyou* 良友) sold a modern lifestyle that consisted of the latest fashions, make-up, Western brand-name products, and Hollywood and Chinese movie stars. More progressive magazines such as the *Ladies Journal* (*Funü Zazhi* 婦女雜誌), a feminist journal published in Shanghai, became a forum for the discussion of such issues as free marriage (*ziyou hunyin* 自由婚姻), free divorce (*ziyou lihun* 自由離婚), female emancipation (*funü jiefang* 婦女解放), education, women in the workplace, birth control, and prostitution (Cheuk 1994: 40). Along with the popularity of sports education, the 1930s also witnessed the emergence of female sports stars such as the swimmer Yang Xiuqiong 楊秀瓊 (1918–1982). "Let women be proud of their own sex," went a popular catchphrase of the time, "and let them enjoy a healthy body" (Fan 1997: 232). Images of women athletes filled newspapers and magazines, and many of the popular sports journals such as *Qinfen Sports Monthly* (*Qinfen Tiyu Yuebao* 勤奮體育月報) carried illustrations which served to emphasize the physical superiority of the "new beauty" over the obsolete "delicate lady," or "obedient lady."

While the Republican activists were invested in the health and the athleticism of the female body, traditional representations of women in China usually fell, by ancient custom, into two categories. One was the portrayal of women as erotic triggers, requiting male romantic longing. The other was the portrayal of women as positive moral models (W. Yang 2005: 19–31). Art patronage was principally the province of elite males; artists, therefore, generally chose subject matter that was appealing to the implied male beholder: the female form, however that ideal happened to be defined at the time. Images of women were meant to bring pleasure to the male viewer, visually and/or psychologically. Inasmuch as the ideal female was usually confined to interior spaces and concealed in beautiful garments, she was principally defined by her feminine charm and spirituality (*qiyun* 氣韻), with the result that the physicality of her body received little attention in traditional artistic representations.

Moreover, at a philosophical level, the relationship and balance between men and women had been expressed in terms of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 —the two indispensable

polarities of the universe. A dualistic dynamic presents itself in both cases, but the binary between *nanxing* and *nüxing* differs from *yin* and *yang* dualism on many different levels. As Barlow points out, *yin* and *yang*, in a social sense, are "a profusion of relational, bound, unequal dyads, each signifying difference and positioning difference and analogically" (Barlow 1994: 259). *Yin/yang* inscribes hierarchy and neither *yin* nor *yang* is a transcendent category. Under the *yin-yang* dynamic, the Confucian patriarch was seen as naturally given, and women's roles were entirely relational to their fathers or husbands. Women were usually associated with the virtues of Earth, such as humility and modesty (*The Classic of Changes*; see Lynn 2004: 131, 144). While texts such as *funü* and *nüxing* are replete with coded meanings, the adoption of the term *nüxing* stands out as a discursive gesture toward helping to overthrow the Confucian canon. In other words, the scientific understanding of the female identity provided a rationale for personal liberation, both physically and psychologically.

The polarity between *yin* and *yang* was also established in Chinese painting tradition as "inner and outer" (*neiwai* 内外). From this standpoint, women were ideally visualized occupying private or enclosed spaces (W. Yang 2005: 7).[3] The ideal of domesticity arose precisely in the context of facilitating family life and service. In classical paintings, women are portrayed performing a variety of tasks defined as female: weaving, spinning, nursing babies, serving their in-laws, and are shown carrying out these tasks in private and concealed spaces.[4] The domestication of women was seen as a corollary to keeping the *yin* and *yang* in harmonious balance in the universe. Overall, women in early figure painting were valued for their symbolization of this ideal, as much as for the way they brought pleasure to a limited number of male viewers. The images of *nüxing*, by contrast, were promoted by both political and commercial culture in the early 20th century (Barlow 2015). Her representations entered the realm of cultural and economic circulation and consumption, and therefore initiated debate on issues such as modernity, Westernization, and commercialism.

3 Reshaping the Chinese Citizen

In turning away from Confucian and patrimonial national discourses, the transformation of the Chinese female was deeply intertwined with the transformation of the whole of Chinese society into a modern nation-state from the middle of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th. Through her metamorphosis, the new woman personified the transformation of Chinese society and the abandonment of the habits of the past. Whereas *funü* 婦女 relates to *jia* 家 (family), *nüxing* acts as a frame of differential nation-state relations, ushering in a new dynamic between a citizen and his/her nation. Similarly, popular terms around the time such as *gongmin* 公民 (public citizen) and *datong* 大同 (Great Unity), suggested that each citizen should be fundamentally the

[3] YANG Wei argues that the dichotomies between *nei* and *wai* became hardened oppositions in the Yuan 元 dynasty as Confucian aesthetics were politicized for the tension between the Mongols and the Han 漢. I intend to use her argument in a different direction: the hierarchy between male and female in Chinese society is responsible for dividing the space between interior and exterior.

[4] The increasing prominence of instruction texts for women, such as *Biographies of Eminent Women* (*Lienü Zhuan* 列女傳) and BAN Zhao's 班昭 *Precepts for Women* (*Nü Jie* 女戒), played a critical role in guiding female representation in classical art (Raphals 1998; Ebrey 2001).

same under a single political and nationalist order, and should therefore be capable of being efficiently organized and mobilized within a nation. A *gongmin* should be directly related to the nation, instead of to his/her family.

Consequently, the period from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th witnessed the emergence of *shenti gongcheng* 身體工程 (body engineering) in China's physical culture (Huang 2005: 27). The goal of s*henti gongcheng* was not only to establish a new relationship between the nation and the individual, but also to reshape each citizen in line with the requirements of the nation. As a result, the traditional concept of the citizen and his/her biological body lost its meaning as the patriarchally-oriented order gave way to a nationally-focused power structure. Upon this issue, HUANG Jinlin 黃金麟 writes:

> For the nation, conquering and organizing the individual body is an act oriented towards the needs of the era. Its developmental track is demonstrated in a series of discourses and practices concerning human bodies. Therefore, if we research the formation of the discourse of modern China, we must explore the developmental pattern of the given and restricted human body. (Huang 2005: 31)

From the late Qing 清 dynasty onward, the Chinese nation experienced more than its share of turmoil. Indeed, the urgency of solving these social problems prompted the project of "remaking Chinese citizens" by means of disciplining and re-shaping them. Political and intellectual movements such as CAI E's 蔡鍔 (1882–1916) "*quanmin jiebing* 全民皆兵 (All Citizens as Soldiers)" movement, the New Life Movement, and elite promotion of physical education aimed at inculcating the desirable qualities of a modern citizen, especially the modern woman. These included hygiene, physical fitness, asceticism, and, most importantly, a sense of patriotic duty.

In the minds of these activists, the development of the nation was deeply connected with the personal development of its citizens. As the late Qing reformer LIANG Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) wrote: "If our race is not physically strong, what can our nation rely on?" (Q. Liang 1902: 1) Liang's comments directly related one's physical well-being to the nation's very survival. For thousands of years prior to this, the relationship between the country and the people had been expressed merely through military recruitment and taxation (Huang 2005: 45). This new relationship between the nation and its citizens therefore constituted an abrupt departure from the old Confucian ideal of "inner cultivation [and then] (becoming) king [yourself] (*neishengwaiwang* 內聖外王)," which proposed self-perfection as the ultimate concern (Zhuangzi 2005: 23).

To LIANG Qichao, under the culture of *neishengwaiwang*, the physical appearance of the standard imperial-era Chinese seemed passive, non-martial, and pale, as traditional Chinese culture was pacifistic and anti-military. As XU Guoqi noted, "The general result was that Chinese society, for nearly one thousand years, was characterized by physical weakness, even frailty. Rarely did Han Chinese elite society encourage physical training. Traditional Chinese novels in early modern times idolized the white-faced bookworm-type and women were praised for being as 'fragile as a willow'" (Xu 2008: 16). Physical qualities valued by traditional Chinese people—tenderness, tranquility, softness, and "bonelessness"—were seen as the major reasons for the nation's weakness.

LIANG Qichao wrote in 1902: "Our Chinese nation shows a lack of active atmosphere, a lack of brave spirit, a lack of masculine and determined force. … If one

person is like this, [he or she] is wasted. [If] people [that are like this] accumulate within a country, this country is wasted, too" (Q. Liang 1902: 2). He also aimed to discourage people from early marriage, which he believed produced negative physical qualities and consequently contributed further to a national weakness. Liang also observed:

> Bad genes have been passed through generations, and the situation gets worse and worse. Although there are a large number of people, [they have only] feeble breath and no lively atmosphere. Even before rival countries gaze at us, [we] already wither and fade because of yellowness and languidness. We cannot survive on our own. (Q. Liang 1902: 3)

Carrying on the family line, or *chuanzong jiedai* 傳宗接代 (promoting the family name forward), had always been considered a sacred mission for individuals and families, and it now became a serious national and ethical concern, with emphasis placed on physical strength and health. By pointing out that "bad genes have been passed through generations," Liang showcased a scientific way of looking at the mission of *chuanzong jiedai*, which became no longer an end in itself but a means of improving the racial stock. Similarly, the Japanese promoter of female education, SHIMODA Utako 下田歌子 (1854–1936) claimed in 1902 that the "yellow race" was weak, whereas Europe and America's women were well educated and strong, and their sons were knowledgeable and their race was powerful (Judge 2001: 772). For both Liang and Shimoda, the individual's physical and intellectual development was seen to play an essential role in national survival. Under the national pressure and influence of Social Darwinism, Chinese women were assigned the mission of saving the nation. *Qiangguo baozhong* 強國保種 (saving the genes of a strong nation) became the crucial way for women to be involved in national political life. It was now essential for women to alter their bodies and minds in order to fulfill their new roles in the national life (You 2008: 13). Thus, the activists saw the urgent need for subjecting the potential of the female body to the examination and exploration of the nation-state.

We can see a depiction of this new ideal physical body in a poster entitled "Swear Not to Give Up," which offers a stark contrast to the traditional vision of the peaceful, passive, and mysterious body (Fig. 1). This poster equates a robust body with the protection of the nation by combining text with imagery. Published by the Political Department of the National Revolutionary Command, it reads "Don't give up; swear not to give up." Beside this inscription, a proletarian Chinese male is depicted, forcibly closing a door on which is written "Congressional Conference." Behind the door, a Westerner is shown wearing a white business suit and a hat inscribed with the word "Imperialism," and carrying a white suitcase inscribed with the words "Unequal Treaties." Tension prevails in the relation of the Chinese male's naked body to that of the richly dressed Westerner.

The content of this poster is quite simple and its nationalist theme straightforward, so as to address a large audience and render the government's political message easily understood: "We should be strong, both physically and psychologically, to resist Western imperialist powers and the unequal treaties they have imposed on us." The figure of the Chinese male is shown as an upright body, standing firmly. He is shirtless and barefoot and dressed only in black shorts, indicating his identity and social class while also informing the audience of his earnestness in pushing back against "Western

Fig. 1. "Swear Not to Give Up." Poster, 31 x 21 inch, ca. 1926–1927. Stanford, Hoover Institution Library and Archives. (public domain)

imperialism" and "unequal treaties." The scene underscores the performative aspects of a strong and forceful human body, with the Chinese figure's awkward facial expression and contorted body implicating the threat to Chinese sovereignty and civil rights.

This poster visualizes the ideal Chinese citizen in the most dramatic and anxious moment of the narrative, and so conveys that the formation of the modern Chinese citizen is contingent upon the crisis of the nation. It differs dramatically from depictions of people in traditional Chinese portraits and popular prints, wherein the body is typically shielded safely under garments denoting social class. The modern nation requested that each citizen be equipped with the qualities necessary to cope with challenges to the nation, and so preferred a body that was robust, healthy, and militaristic.

4 *Shen* as the Vital Body in Traditional Chinese Thought

In the previous two sections, I have examined the concepts behind, and representations of, the modern woman and citizen, whereby the citizen came to exist in direct relation to the nation. Moreover, the emergence of mass media and modern print culture

enabled the definition of a wider audience. Consequently, modern figural representations with ever-increasing emphasis on the healthy physicality of the body gave more consideration to public effects. In terms of an individual's relationship to any larger context or community in imperial China, the principles of familial, ethnic, and gender hierarchies expressed in Confucian value systems enabled the Chinese people to understand themselves as members of a larger social and cultural network (Duara 1995: 5). For example, in the *Daxue* 大學 (*The Great Learning*), it is written:

> Traditionally, if one wants to illustrate his virtue throughout the kingdom, he should first govern well his own state. Wanting to govern well his state, he should start with regulating his own family. Wanting to regulate his family, he should first cultivate himself. Wanting to cultivate himself, he should make sure his heart is in the right direction. Wanting to rectify his heart, he should make his thoughts sincere. Wanting to have sincere thoughts, he should first gain as much knowledge as possible.… Whether he is an emperor or a common person, everything starts with cultivating himself. (Zeng 2000: 5)

It can be challenging to understand the precise implication of the Chinese character *shen* 身, which differs from that of two other characters that convey similar meanings: *ti* 體 and *ji* 己. For example, when grouped together in a compound with *zi* 自, it means "oneself," highlighting its subjective dimension. *Ti* 體, in contrast, emphasizes the carnal qualities and experiences of the body. *Xin* 心 (heart-mind) is also understood as *ti*, the great *ti*. *Ji* 己 is usually translated directly as "self," however with stress placed on its "dynamic social relations with others" (Ames 2011: 107). *Shen*, on the other hand, may be used to refer to a person's physical and biological body, but it can also mean "self," emphasizing a subjective dimension. Therefore, the precise meaning of *zishen* 自身 underlines the character's both corporeal and extra-physical (subjective) qualities. One obstacle to understanding the true meaning of the Chinese concept of the body is the modern tendency to see the body as being in a binary opposition to the mind. In Chinese philosophy, the body and the mind are fused together, and the actions of the body cannot be separated from the actions of consciousness. Roger Ames has translated *shen* as the "lived, vital body" (Rosemont and Ames 2016: 90), corresponding to the phenomenological attitude of non-dualism and ancient China's inclination toward unity. As far as this article is concerned, whenever I use the term *shen* without translation, or the Confucian body, it is to emphasize the fusion between the body and mind that is unique to Chinese philosophy. *Shen*, in this context, denotes both the biological body and the subjective self.

The reason why the *Daxue* places an emphasis on "cultivating oneself / one's *shen*" is because of the close relationship between *shen* and a family. At one level, the corporeal qualities in *shen* are the basis of bloodlines, in that the bodies of the male and female produce a family, which serves as the basis of Chinese social relations. Moreover, *shen* in Chinese philosophy goes much more beyond its physical and biological capacities. As written by Ames:

> In the Confucian tradition, the body is understood as an inheritance we receive from our families, and as a current in a genealogical stream that reaches back to our most remote ancestors. It brings with it a sense of continuity, contribution,

> and belonging, and the religious significance that feelings of felt worth inspire. To show respect for our own bodies—both the physical body and its function as the residence of the cultural corpus that they bequeath to us—is to show reverence for our ancestors and the relationship we have with them, while disregard for our bodies is to bring shame upon our family lineages. (Rosemont and Ames 2016: 91)

Shen carries both the physical and cultural attributes, which would allow oneself to be connected to the larger community at the biological and cultural level. Mengzi 孟子 also wrote about this nation–family–*shen* dynamic: "The root of the country lies in the family; the root of the family lies in the lived-body" (Meng 2006: 94). Here Mengzi fuses the idea of the nation with the concept of *shen* and family. That is to say, familial hierarchies can be extended to social hierarchies. For the Chinese, the nation was not an "imagined community," in an inorganic-yet-rational form with hard territorial boundaries, but rather an extension of the clan-based society, effectively an enlarged family (Anderson 1991). In a similar vein, Mengzi also states that "Ministers regard their Kings as hands and feet; kings regard their ministers as hearts and abdomens," metaphorically describing social relationships in terms of *shen* and familial relations (Meng 2006: 105). In such a view, society itself is perceived in terms of a large family or of a vital body/*shen* tied together through blood and the cultural inheritance.

In addition to representing the bloodline that ties people together at a biological and cultural level, *shen* in Chinese philosophy also represents a microcosm of the universe. Indeed, it can be regarded as a living, experiential appendage of a divine universe.[5] ZHANG Zai 張載 (1020–1077) wrote, "The one that builds my lived-body, [is] the deity of heaven" (Zhang 1980: 46). The cycle of *shen* represents the cycle of nature; the action of *shen* is therefore the constituent element of the movement of the universe. The Confucian body, or *shen*, is considered not only as a body in its corporeal and cultural material sense within its family, but more significantly as a participant in, and epitome of, the universe. For example, the male and female duality represents the universe's *yin* and *yang* polarities. Traditional Chinese culture therefore focused on reinforcing pre-existing orders that were bodily-rendered. To a large extent, *xiushen* 修身 (cultivate one's lived-body) meant recognition of the Confucian body's preexisting orders, rather than a "rectifying" of it.

To this end, *shen* is directly involved in the political field as the subject, investing in various social relations. In *Huainanzi* 淮南子, it is held that "The heart is the essence of *shen*; *shen* is the essence of the country" (A. Liu 2006: 34). The text also states: "[People] have never heard of a case in which *shen* is well-organized but the country is in chaos; [people] have never heard of a case in which *shen* is disorganized but the country is in harmony" (A. Liu 2006: 56). In a vital Tang 唐 dynasty recruitment procedure for public service officers, an institutional process called *quanxuan* 銓選 (assessment and selection), the examination of the candidates' *shen* was given considerable attention in the selection (J. Yang 2007: 153). Which is to say, *shen* was rendered an essential criteria of someone's capacity for leadership. Overall, under the model of traditional Chinese philosophy, identities are bodily- and universally-given, and need to

[5] A discussion of the concept of the body in Confucianism and Daoism can be found in R. Yang 1996 and Schipper 1993. Both share an opinion similar to the one stated above.

be cultivated but not constructed. *Shen* is a powerful productive force and a principle in ethical, gender, and ethnic relations, which evolve into clan-based social relations and define each person symbolically and hierarchically.

In art, the traditional Chinese body is usually depicted as soft, boneless, mysterious, and almost fluid, representing its qualities as divine and close to nature. The image of *daoyintu* 導引圖 (the Mortuary Banner) from Mawangdui 馬王堆 offers a good example of these qualities.[6] A banner found in the tomb of Lady Dai's son in Hunan 湖南 province, ca. 168 BCE, depicts a group of people performing *qigong* 氣功, a traditional practice that involves methods of working with energy flow in the body (Fig. 2). The soft movement of the body follows the energy and movements of the universe (the *qi* 氣) and flows with nature, unconsciously carrying out its principles and cultivating itself in the process. As suggested by YANG Rubin 楊儒賓, the physical movement of the body can become a spiritual practice and means of seeking out the universe's virtue (R. Yang 1996: 116). In this way, a perfect unity of temporal life and spiritual morality can be achieved, ultimately resulting in the perfection of a unitary, orderly society, the highest aspiration of the ancient Chinese. The Confucian ideal envisioned the individual *shen* dissolving into the greater whole. During the late Qing and early Republican periods, however, it became a primary mission of the government to overturn this conceptualization and to focus on the necessity of disciplining and controlling individual bodies/citizens in service of the higher cause of the political nation.

5 Defining and Training the Modern *Shenti* (Body)

China's efforts to promote modernity and nationalism involved a process of redefining and reshaping the overly sanctified bodies of its citizens, with special focus on the female body. The first step was to disengage *shen* from the family unit by connecting it to the nation. In the Confucian tradition, *shen* was usually correlated with and refined by "*li* 禮 (achieved propriety in one's roles and relations)" (Rosemont and Ames 2016: 91). Through cultivating *shen*, the Chinese civilization, in congruence with *li*, is perpetuated. Observing the political situation at the end of the imperial era, a point at which intellectuals were having to turn away from the scholarly heritage or at least reinterpreting its significance in an international setting, WANG Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) wrote:

> The reason that the Zhou 周 dynasty could stabilize the kingdom certainly lay in its social institutions. There is a great difference between the systems of the Shang 商 and the Zhou. The Zhou's first ideal was to crown the son and lineal descendant, and the patriarchal clan system, the mourning system for the deceased, and the system of allotting land came from this. The second ideal was the system of temple numbers, and the third ideal was to forbid marriage between those of the same family names. These were the reasons why the Zhou could govern the kingdom. The goal was to unify the upper and lower classes through

[6] Mawangdui is a famous archaeological sited in Changsha, China, consisting of the tombs of three people from the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE): the first Marquis of Dai, his wife, and their son. For detailed knowledge, see Buck 1975.

Fig. 2. *Daoyintu* (with a modern reconstruction of its image). 100 x 40 cm, ink on silk, ca. 100 BCE, Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE). Mawangdui, the Hunan History Museum. (public domain)

> morality; thus the emperor, lords, officials (*qin* 卿), literati (*daifu* 大夫), soldiers (*shi* 士), and common people were unified into one moral entity. This was the original intention of Zhougong 周公 (The Duke of Zhou). (Wang 2004: 221)

According to Wang Guowei, the pedigree of the Western Zhou dynasty's matrilineal society, placing great emphasis on *li*, had been clarified and politicized so that a political framework based on a patriarchal clan system could blossom and stabilize itself in China. The political systems of the Zhou demonstrate a complete integration between *li* and the governance of the country. Yet, to Wang's grief, a number of intellectuals and political activists aimed at shaping a new citizen through national education and new laws, rather than relying on the more abstract concepts of *li*. For example, immediately after the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), Cai E 蔡鍔 (1862–1916), a famous political activist of the late Qing and subsequently the chief

Republican military leader, launched the "*quanminjiebing* 全民皆兵 (All Citizens as Soldiers)" movement. He expounded repeatedly upon his ideas for military education in newspapers during the late Qing and early Republican periods:

> All the organizations in society must be arranged by the martial laws; all the departments related to national defense must be imbued with military spirit. For the outside, the military organizations are [something] that our nation can rely on for peace. For the inside, military spirit is something the nation can stand up for, and the people can be born with. … our citizens should be military soldiers; [they are] one person. (Cai and Jiang 1902: 34–35)

As Cai saw it, military education would foster an ascetic, obedient, tolerant, and nationalist Chinese citizen. Addressing the urgency of military preparedness, the Department of General Education in 1912 endorsed federal laws to ensure substantial military education. Under the new regulations, students in senior elementary schools would participate in military gymnastics; those in middle and high schools would engage in target practice and attend lectures on war strategy. Calisthenics would form the primary curricula in all schools. These new regulations also imposed requirements on local governments to hold sporting meets on a regular basis and to carry out an educational program to promote military training (X. Chen 1983: 322–327). The popularity of modern sports was also conceived and advanced in Republican China alongside the military campaign.

"Civilize their spirit; barbarize their bodies" (*wenming qi jingshen, yeman qi tipo* 文明其精神, 野蠻其體魄) had become the motto of the moment (Q. Liang 1932: 2). Through this phrase, we not only sense the new requirements of the government for individual citizens, but also the separation between a physical body (*shenti* 身體), on the one hand, and hearts and minds (*jingshen* 精神), on the other. The term *shen* 身 can therefore no longer fit the context of this statement, as it not only carries the physical form, but also the cultural corpus, religious rituals. and social mores. In this phrase, we can sense the Western understanding of the body, which does not include the heart and mind. Yet, with the movement to build physical bodies more suited to the needs of industrial manufacture and military defense, physical education or, more specifically, sport, became an important instrument through which such bodies could be shaped and articulated.

Attention to the training of flesh and bones was given by Republican politicians, who indirectly endorsed the Western concept of the body, or *shenti*. In the words of historian Andrew Morris: "It surely seemed believable that the new physical culture could transform the youth of the Republic, programming into their bodies nationalist reflexes as immediate and unconscious as their muscles' responses to training" (Morris 2004: 14–15). CAI Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) also took on a crucial role in promoting physical education and enabled physical education embedded in the basic school system (X. Chen 1983: 322–327). Interestingly enough, some intellectuals had earlier identified sports with the culture of the treaty-port bourgeoisie, whom they viewed as unscrupulous Chinese-Western hybrids, and some left-wing activists criticized Western sports for their *jinpai zhuyi* 金牌主義 (medals and trophy-ism) (Yeh 1990: 215). This initial resistance did not last long, however, nor did it discourage the Guomindang 國民黨 government from seizing on sports as a political tool for rallying the nation. The

activists promoting modern sports and military education blamed the old, traditional educational system for making Chinese citizens weak: "After a few years [of the old education program], energetic and lively youths turned into eighty-year-old gentlemen, in the shape of a piece of dry wood, their hearts like dead ashes" (Q. Liang 1932: 14). After the May Fourth Movement of 1919, modern sports such as track, field, and ballgames became much more widespread in public and private schools.

The competitive spirit was also encouraged in China's major cities, with numerous sporting groups founded and sports competitions held on a regular basis. In October 1910, the first National Games were launched by the American missionary D. T. Max Esner in Nanjing 南京. These games were conducted in English and utilized Western measurement standards, but by the early 1920s, sporting meets were increasingly conducted and organized by the Chinese themselves. Physical education was seen as one of the most effective ways to inculcate the desirable qualities necessary for a "modern nation," such as responsibility, hygiene, physical fitness, cooperation, and, most importantly, a sense of patriotic duty. In 1927, the Guomindang government established, under the Ministry of Education, a National Physical Education and Sports Committee modeled on Weimar Germany's system so as to educate boys in the spirit and practice of militarism. Girls were also encouraged to participate in sport and physical education, enabling them to play a dramatically different role in society from what had previously been possible.[7]

Chinese athletes began to participate in international events like the Far East Games, and Shanghai was chosen to host these games in 1915, 1921, and 1927. Aside from these, China also held a significant number of domestic sporting meets. The Third National Games, promoted by the Guomindang Party and held in 1924 at Wuchang 武昌 in Hubei 湖北 province, were the first to be conducted exclusively by the Chinese without Western organization. The Fourth Games, held in Hangzhou 杭州 in 1930, attracted even larger attendance and incorporated four women's sports among the ten events in the regular program (Brownell 1995: 50). This was the first sporting meet held under the auspices of the Guomindang government, with CHIANG Kai-shek (JIANG Jieshi) 蒋介石 as the honorary chairman. Speaking at the opening ceremony, Chiang drew a direct link between the regeneration of the nation and the physical well-being of its citizens:

> A healthy body contains a healthy spirit. A healthy citizenship constitutes a healthy nation. A healthy nation produces a healthy culture. Looking at history, weak people and weak nations have never survived. Our Republic understands that Chinese sport needs to be promoted so as to restore our culture and save our country … If we want our country to be as strong and as great as the Western countries we must develop sport. … A strong nation will be capable of competing with other nations in the world. … So develop our sport for our country's sake. (Cited in Fan 1997: 267–268)

Four years later, as part of its New Life Movement, the Government singled out physical education as "the nation's highest priority." In this cultural atmosphere,

[7] Information on sports meets in China during the Republican eriod can be found in Cai and Jiang 1902; Morris 2004; and Jones 1999.

sports-related journals and newspapers, such as *Qinfen Tiyu Yuebao* 勤奮體育月報 (*Qinfen Sports Monthly*), increased in popularity. These sports journals published numerous photos of athletes, with the intention of promoting a modern aesthetic ideal of the human body as a robust and healthy instrument. Although the majority of these movements failed to ever gain currency outside of elite intellectual circles, body engineering for the purposes of political manipulation was readily apparent. Later, this ethic of body politics, aimed at exploring the capacity of the physical body to benefit the political community, became even more prevalent under the Communist regime.

6 Anxieties Surrounding the Female Body

In the climate of *shenti gongcheng*, the female body had received more attention from intellectuals and political activists than the male body had, and the New Woman eventually came to figure as the privileged signifier of the modern Chinese nation. There are a number of reasons behind this. First, as Edwards points out, "Chinese women were traditionally credited with responsibility for saving or destroying the nation, making natural use of the new woman as symbol of national survival for the enlightened intellectual class in the twentieth century" (Edwards 2000: 125). Images of the "new women" were therefore being utilized to resolve national predicaments such as political instability, economic disarray, and social disorder. Second, many of the May Fourth reformists regarded the inferior position of Chinese women to be a crucial signpost of national weakness (L. Liu 2001: 26). The transformation of the female body was therefore more imperative. Third, from a global eugenic point of view, the physical vigor of the female body was necessary to ensure the revitalization of the Chinese race. Yet, the new woman was herself an unstable construct. Much of this nationalist rhetoric was focused on struggling with a clear line of separation between the authentic New Woman and her negative counterpart, the Modern Girl (*modeng xiaojie* 摩登小姐), shaped by superficial Westernization, moral corruption, and greed.[8]

There is perhaps no better example of the compounded debate on the ideal of the female body than the film *Queen of Sports* (*Tiyu Huanghou* 體育皇后), which debuted in Chinese cinemas in 1934. Directed by the renowned SUN Yu 孫瑜 (1900–1990), much of the historical importance of the film resides in the fact that it was one of the first to explore the issue of feminine identity within the realm of competitive women's sport. The film tells the story of LIN Ying 林瓔 (played by LI Lili 黎莉莉), a feisty sprinter from a wealthy rural family who enrolls in a sports college for female athletes in Shanghai. Inspired by her teachers, she initially works hard and achieves impressive results on the field and in the classroom. Alas, however, she gradually becomes spoiled by her early success, neglects her studies, and starts to fraternize with sleazy Westernized college boys who seem to spend all their time smoking, drinking, and dancing. After finding herself in a compromising situation, she is rescued by her handsome and dedicated coach, and vows to change her ways.

The denouement of the film occurs at a large athletic meet where she sees her classmate and best friend, XIAO Qiuhua 蕭秋華, collapse and later die after a grueling

[8] Less popular than the New Woman, the term *modeng gou'er* (or *modeng xiaojie*) made its first appearance in literary criticism. When it was cited, it was most commonly used in English, even within Chinese texts. This highlights the Westernized values attached to the term.

race. Shaken by this event, LIN Ying loses her will to run, but is eventually convinced to compete in the final race at the insistence of her school headmaster, who reminds her of her patriotic duty to perform on the field. LIN Ying loses the final match, but the experience of losing her friend has taught her a valuable lesson: she realizes that the selfish pursuit of individual glory is wrong, and resolves to serve others as an ordinary teacher of physical education.[9]

On one level, this is a film that seeks to uphold the basic idea that a woman should not be ashamed of her body, and should thereby be set free of it. At the sports school, the female athletes are regularly seen performing acts of exercising and cleaning, and an unusual shower-room scene that displays soapy nude bathing and a close-up shot of LIN Ying brushing her teeth attests to the contemporary obsession with hygiene. Such previously inconceivable visibility of the female body corresponded to a new body culture that was increasingly promoted after the fall of the Qing.

More precisely, *Queen of Sports* attempts to show how the female body can be developed in ways that can contribute to collective and national liberation (Pickowicz 1991: 51). As Paul Pickowicz has noted, we can read *Queen of Sports* as a variation on a recurrent theme in 1930s Chinese cinema: the spiritual pollution of China by corrupt foreign influences. Seen in this context, "the unspoiled young woman represents the moral purity and innocence of rural China" while urban Shanghai "is portrayed as unnatural and soulless" (Pickowicz 1991: 55). The vigorous and uninhibited femininity celebrated in the film is dangerously close to the dance hall culture threatening to corrupt the young woman. Images of women in this period circulated within a discourse of illicit sexuality and undomesticated femininity that linked them with the concerns that women with superficial Westernization (the Western "virus"), moral corruption, and greed could threaten to contaminate Chinese society. Ultimately, *Queen of Sports* borrows the female body to illustrate the contested issues and problems surrounding the Chinese experience of nationalism and modernity.

Queen of Sports was produced during a time when Chinese filmmakers of all political persuasions were fascinated by the idea that they could use this new medium to shape the consciousness of the literate and semiliterate population (Pickowicz 1991: 71). Indeed, a number of films in the 1930s engaged in discussions on themes of female liberation and spiritual pollution. The freedom of *shen* from *li* exposed the Chinese female to another form of danger. Images of women during the 1920s–1930s circulated within a discourse of undomesticated femininity tied to illicit sexuality, and this in turn linked them with concerns raised in a substantial array of writings known as "anxiety literature" discussing sexually devious women who threatened to contaminate Chinese society. Much of this anxiety had to associate with the fact that women were no longer bound to the home but free to circulate in public spaces such as racetracks and dance halls.

If the modern city of Shanghai offered women the possibility of physical and social mobility, it also opened them up to the dangers of prostitution. Gail Hershatter mentions

[9] Interestingly, a similar film, *Triumph of the Will*, was produced at this time in Germany. Commissioned by Hitler and directed by Leni Riefenstahl in 1935, it is considered one of the exemplary propaganda films produced in Nazi Germany. In the film, documenting the Sixth Nazi Party Congress Rally in Nuremberg, Hitler is shown addressing members of the Hitler Youth, stressing the necessity of military education and the ideal of sacrifice for the nation's sake. The film also presents the ideal image of German young men and soldiers of the Third Reich, portraying them as healthy, fit, and clean, with numerous shots of them in the act of exercising and cleaning. This perfectly mirrors the underlying ideologies of the New Life Movement.

that in the years of Guomindang rule, Shanghai was popularly known among foreign travelers as "the Whore of the Orient" (Hershatter 1997: 18). Indeed, as early as 1920, the Shanghai Municipal Council calculated that more than 70,000 prostitutes were operating in the foreign concessions, out of a total population of 2,000,000, making the city's ratio of prostitutes to inhabitants the highest among major world cities at the time (Wakeman 1995: 28). The rapid rise in prostitution meant that the private courtesan, previously the emblematic figure of the sex trade, was replaced by the disease-carrying, publicly visible, disorderly, and victimized "peasant" (Hershatter 1997: 18). Unlike courtesans, streetwalkers worked in miserable and dirty conditions, under duress, posing a danger to social order and a threat to public health.

A number of films in the 1930s discussed the issues surrounding prostitutes in Shanghai, among which WU Yonggang's 吳永剛 *Goddess* (*Shennü* 神女) and CAI Chusheng's 蔡楚生 *New Woman* (*Xin Nüxing* 新女性) have received enormous public attention. Coming from dramatically different backgrounds, the heroines of each film, both of whom follow the gloomy life path of the prostitute and face removal from society (by prison or death), reflect an anxiety particular to a Chinese society deprived of the centuries-long tradition of *li* being available to restrict and refine the female *shen*. This new direction for Chinese womanhood was dangerous and worrisome, as *shenti* and *jingshen* 精神 could shear off in drastically different directions, due to the freedom and commercialization of the physical body. Yet the government concerned itself more with rectifying *shenti*, and this pushed the Western concept of body politics ever further in modern Chinese life. With rising concerns over sexually transmitted diseases, the police, hospitals, and courts, extending their authority into new realms in urban life, undertook to curb prostitution by placing a ban on street soliciting. Thus, by the 1930s, prostitutes were clearly marked off from respectable society and relegated to the category of urban criminals.

Under this climate, "body engineering" arguably reached its culmination during the New Life Movement (1934–1937) when CHIANG Kai-shek, collaborating with the Nazi government, began to adopt German Fascist ideology. The New Life Movement linked the elimination of loose morality and prostitution to a complete program of social reform, in which the effective regulation of the physical body, and especially the female body, was to play a crucial part. Mixing Confucianism and Christianity, the campaign endorsed an image of the Chinese citizen that accorded with the ideology of "*chuantong yu xiandai yu yiti* 傳統與現代於一體 (a modern yet traditional person)" (H. Chen and J. Liang 1997: 27). In a departure from the critiques of domestic culture that predominated in the 1920s and 1930s, intellectuals like LIANG Shuming 梁漱溟 now called for a synthesis of Chinese and Western cultures, with Chinese culture providing the spiritual basis.

The New Life Movement actively discouraged the culture of consumption and materialism, and a Confucian-inflected model of the "good wife and good mother" was promoted. In their modern incarnations, such notions emphasized women's roles as mothers of good citizens, much like eugenicists' ideal of healthy and moral women who provided proper genetics and gestation to their children. On appearance, the rhetoric advanced by the New Life Movement extolling dutiful and virtuous womanhood stood in contradiction to the image of the modern and robust female body shaped by physical education under the military and sporting ideologies of the 1920s. In practice, however, both movements highlighted the ways in which a healthy and

responsible female body could contribute to the nation's future, much like the ethos celebrated in *Queen of Sports*. In addition to emphasizing a robust femininity, state discourses on the body in the 1930s linked physical education and sports to the concept of discipline, and the ideological preoccupation with the healthy and dutiful female body was an equal source of fascination to those working for the militarization of the nation. According to Prasenjit Duara,

> The GMD regime of the 1930s "subscribed precisely to such a dualist formulation, and the New Life Movement exemplified the urge to revitalize the material conditions of modernity through a muscular, or rather, ascetic, Confucian moralism … the New Life Movement will inject moral qualities from the essence of Chinese civilization into this effort so that history can be propelled into civilizational perfection—*Datong*, or the Great Unity. (Duara 2000: 343)

Duara's comment points out that the Guomindang policy laid out by the New Life Movement was thus only one aspect of the state's growing control over public life, the other being the revival of feudal ethical principles. This revival was aimed at controlling people's thinking and speech, as well as shifting attention away from political and social problems and toward personal development without alien cultural contamination. Under the culture of the New Life Movement, the ideal of domesticity arose precisely within the context of committing to the higher cause of the nation. During the first three decades of the 20th century, the figure of the New Woman was part of a cultural and political discourse that made possible the imagining of a new nation in China. Thus, if the modern female body could be developed in ways that could contribute to collective and national liberation, it could also represent potential threats to China during this period.

7 Conclusion

Democracy, freedom, and equality were the central goals of Sun Yat-sen's (Sun Zhongshan) 孫中山 (1866–1925) Xinhai 辛亥 Revolution of 1911. In his ideal vision, the Republican citizen would no longer be subject to the tyranny of imperial or patriarchal power, signifying a profound departure from Qing dynasty protocols. From Sun's early revolutions to Chiang's New Life Movement, a modern Chinese citizen was accommodated and shaped to the exigencies of modernization and to the need to develop a nation-state that could compete with others in the world. For the first time in Chinese history, the nation had officially become the "colonizer" of every Chinese citizen, providing both the conceptual and the physical context for human self-definition. In this process, the media and public education played an essential role in establishing the discursive and the practical link between citizen and the nation in early 20th-century China.

Early Confucian models for social ethics had been intrinsic to the Chinese political fabric throughout its history. *Shen*, in traditional Chinese philosophy, was essential as a mediator between heaven and human beings; instead of being the object of knowledge and discipline, *shen* could produce knowledge through its exercise. By this standard, each *shen* was divine, as well as hierarchical, and it was difficult to separate the

physical aspect from the subjective one. In contrast, the modern nation preferred the physical body of its citizens, especially a female body that was robust, healthy, and militaristic; it also preferred a spirit that was patriotic, responsible and obedient. Such an ideal modern citizen could only be created through training and discipline. Undoubtedly, the discourse of the modern nation played a vital role in shaping discourses on *shen*. The notion of an independent citizen demonstrates not only the social dimension of a modern *shen*, but its physical dimension as well.

Upon closer examination, however, we see that things are not so clear-cut. The physical aspect of *shen* can diverge from its social aspect. The adherence to Western modes and ideas of *shenti* also caused a number of social problems. For example, the model of vigorous and uninhibited femininity that *Queen of Sports* celebrates is dangerously close to the culture of the dance hall that threatens to corrupt the young woman. Indeed, we could say that the fundamental contradiction of *Queen of Sports* consists in its inability to separate the athletic body from the sexual body that serves as its flip side. In his writing on the history of sexuality, Michel Foucault examines the various ways in which power relations work to shape the body. This leads him to give particular emphasis on the daily practices of health, hygiene, fitness, beauty, and dress that are trained into the body, the public display of the body, and the power structures that are embedded in the display:

> Mastery and awareness of one's own body can be acquired only through the effect of an investment of power in the body: gymnastics, exercises, muscle-building, nudism, glorification of the body beautiful. All of this belongs to the pathway leading to the desire of one's own body, by way of the insistent, persistent work of power on healthy bodies. But once power produces this effect, there inevitably emerge the responding claims and affirmations, those of one's own body against power, of health against the economic system, of pleasure against the moral norms of sexuality, marriage, decency. Suddenly what has made power strong … is used to attack it. Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counter attack in that same body. (Foucault 1980: 56)

What Foucault is saying here is that every system of power carries within it the seeds of its own perversion. In other words, if the maintenance of power consists in the production of healthy bodies, these bodies also present its most radical threat. Nevertheless, the implied integration between the psychical and spiritual aspects of traditional *shen* had obscured such possible conflicts. The political and social transformations in China after the fall of the Qing dynasty had demonstrated the materiality of power operating on individuals. The inordinate pressure to save China by shaping a disciplined citizen was fully present during the May Fourth Movement, but it was more strongly emphasized during the New Life Movement, when the government perceived that full freedom for the citizen could present a threat to society.

It is this knowledge that accounts for the acute sense of anxiety that surrounds definitions and representations of the modern female in Republican China. From the end of the 19th to the early 20th century, the figure of the new woman was part of a cultural and political discourse that made possible the imagining of a new nation in China. As we have tried to show, however, the image of the nation sought by those who claimed to speak in her name remained a source of constant struggle. The tension

between the contending images of the modern woman reveals not only the contradictions that define the Chinese experience of modernity, but also the problem of signaling out *shenti* from *shen*.

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