

Chinese Women in the Early Twentieth Century:  
Activists and Rebels

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## Abstract

It is said that women hold up half the sky, but what roles do women really play and how do they interact with politics and society? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Chinese women reacted in a variety of ways to the social and political changes of the era. Some women were actively engaged in politics while others were not. Some women became revolutionaries and fought for reform in China, other women were more willing to work with and within the established cultural framework. Discussion of reforms and reformers in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries are primarily focused on men and male activism; however, some women felt very strongly about reform and were willing to die in order to help China modernize. This thesis explores the life experiences and activism of five women who lived at the end of China's imperial period and saw the birth of the Republican period. By analyzing and comparing the experiences of Zheng Yuxiu, Yang Buwei, Xie Bingying, Wang Su Chun, and Ning Lao Taitai, this thesis helps to unlock the complex and often hidden lives of Chinese women in modern Chinese history.

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## **Introduction**

“I looked at the faces of these women, [...] and I realized that nothing — absolutely nothing— could ever stop them. [...] These people were truly the heart of new China, and in their hands the future could not fail to be great.” ~Zheng Yuxiu, activist and revolutionary.<sup>1</sup>

The twentieth century was a tumultuous period in Chinese history. The first half of the century saw the fall of a dynasty and the end of imperial Chinese rule, the birth and decline of a short-lived Republic, and various reform campaigns.<sup>2</sup> The second half of the 1900s saw the establishment of a new system of government, several more social, economic, and political campaigns,<sup>3</sup> as well as rapid industrialization. Recent decades have seen a renewal in American interest in China, and as the country continues to develop into one of the world’s preeminent powers, this trend of interest in China’s history and culture is likely to expand further. Popular history books such as Stephen Platt’s *Imperial Twilight*, Rana Mitter’s *Forgotten Ally*, or Evan Osnos’s *Age of Ambition*,<sup>4</sup> exemplify American interest in Chinese history; however, while these are all valuable and interesting histories, they tend to focus on the politics of certain events and/or the experiences of men. Few people today will question the importance of women in history, but there are proportionally fewer books that discuss how and to what degree women participated in history and the events that shaped their lives. What was the involvement of women in the

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<sup>1</sup> Musings of Zheng Yuxiu while considering a group of women in Chongqing, circa 1941 (Zheng Yuxiu, *My Revolutionary Years: The Autobiography of Madame Wei Tao-Ming*, (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1943), 136-7).

<sup>2</sup> In 1912 the Qing Dynasty officially ended and was replaced by the Republic of China. Social reform movements and rebellions included the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), the anti-footbinding campaign, the campaign for *xiao jiating* (small family), and the call for free marriage; an influx of Western ideas resulted in other trends such as the “New Girl” movement and the push for greater gender equality. Furthermore, the conflict between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party in China also contributed to social unrest and violence (for example, the breaking of the First United Front in 1927 resulted in a purging of Communists by the Nationalist Party, and the Long March, led to many deaths).

<sup>3</sup> In 1949, the Communist-led People’s Republic of China replaced the Republic of China. Political campaigns included the Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, the Hundred flowers movement, purging of “rightists,” intellectuals, party members, etc. Most of these “social revolutions” were disruptive and ultimately harmful for many people, however, they did mark a change in Chinese policy/politics, industry, finances/economy, and culture.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Platt, *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China’s Last Golden Age*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018); Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China’s World War II: 1937-1945*; Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth and Faith in the New China*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

social and political movements of twentieth century China? How did Chinese women react to and engage in the modernization and nationalist movements of the late Qing and early Republican period? How aware were they of ideas about independence, human rights, and gender equality, and how did they respond to those ideas? How politically active were Chinese women at in the early twentieth century, and how did the activities of rural and non-elite women contrast with those of the urban elite? In response to these questions, this thesis highlights and analyzes the stories of a select number of individuals to spotlight individual experiences and demonstrate the importance of local and previously unnamed or under-recognized Chinese revolutionaries of the modern period.

This thesis analyzes several autobiographies as well as two biographies of Chinese women who lived around the turn of the twentieth century. The first section discusses the historical context of the period to better contextualize the life stories that will be highlighted in the thesis. The second section includes brief biographical information of the five women discussed in this thesis (Zheng Yuxiu, Wang Su Chun, Xie Bingyin, Yang Buwei, and Ning Lao Taitai) as well as an analysis of their life accounts, including the similarities and differences in their life paths. A final section includes a discussion of connections between the women discussed in the thesis as well as how they compare with dominant perceptions about Chinese women at the end of the imperial period.

## **Part 1**

### **Historiography**

The study of Chinese women is no longer a new field, yet, the significance of women in history continues to be underrepresented in general history textbooks. Between the 1930s and 1980, there was a notable lacuna of work published in English focused on Chinese women. Kazuko Ono's *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution 1850-1950* was the first significant work to reintroduce the study of Chinese women in English.<sup>5</sup> Consecutive leaders in the field of Chinese women's history include Joan Judge, Gail Hershatter, Susan Mann, Wang Zheng, and Dorothy Ko. The 1960s civil rights movement in the U.S., and the emergence of social history as a field, fostered the study of women's history. This coupled with a revived interest in China following the end of the Cold war, saw a renewed interest in Chinese women's history in the English-speaking world. The number of scholars currently researching Chinese women is now extensive, and is characterized by increased international cooperation and coordination. For example, it is not uncommon for English books and articles to now include Chinese and Japanese sources. However, while many people have devoted a great deal of time and energy into researching Chinese women, there is still much more to study and learn. The study of Chinese women's history is still a burgeoning field and there are many gaps yet to be filled. Many of the published works regarding Chinese women tend to be broad in scope or only mention female activism in context of "the bigger picture" of events occurring in China at the time. Additionally, many sources have yet to be discovered or lack adequate analysis. The release of previously private materials and the opening of Chinese libraries and archives to foreigners has increased

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<sup>5</sup> Kazuko Ono, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

the amount of source materials to draw from. It is the intent of this thesis to analyze the work of a few such under-analyzed sources. These include the autobiographies of Zheng Yuxiu, Buewei Yang Chao, and Xie Bingying, the short biography of a girl named Wang Su Chun, and the biography of Ning Lao Taitai as told to Ida Pruitt.

The study of Chinese history in America during the middle decades of the twentieth century was limited. The Cultural Revolution, in particular had a large impact on the study of Chinese history. The social tumult in the (later) “Mao years” and the persecution of educated individuals, resulted in several decades during which no one studied history in China and records were closed to the outside world. As a result, this situation coupled with a sense of Western superiority towards China, led Western scholars to become accustomed to ignoring Chinese scholarship.<sup>6</sup> This is no longer the case, with many scholars actively engaged in cross-cultural research and collaboration with Chinese scholars. The first notable work on Chinese women’s history was Chen Dongyuan’s *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi* (A history of the life of Chinese women), published in 1927. This was followed by a period of several decades with virtually no scholarship about Chinese women in English.<sup>7</sup> (Political conflict in China and internationally contributed to this cessation.) Then, in the 1970s, the rise of gender studies led to a revival in the study of Chinese women with a greater increase following the 1980s and Kazuko Ono’s *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*, published in 1989. However, scholarship on

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<sup>6</sup> “This situation” being the political upheavals that wracked China between ~1930-1980. The view of Europeans and Americans of being superior to China, emerged during the nineteenth century. This was partly an effect of the decline in the Manchu Qing government’s influence and power, which happened to coincide with Europe’s technological development (the Industrial Revolution) and consequent military edge. In the nineteenth century, China lost two Opium Wars, its territory was being carving-up by Western imperial powers through spheres of influence, and it lost a war against Japan which resulted in further loss of territory and influence. As the balance of political power shifted, so did European (and American) views of China. (Hinsch Bret, “Ten Chinese Books that Hanged Our View of Women’s History,” *NAN NÜ — Men, Women & Gender in Early & Imperial China*, 20, no. 1 (2018): p153-167; Stephen Platt, *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), 192).

<sup>7</sup> Ono, xiii.

women still remains limited compared to other subjects in modern Chinese history. This paper aims to help fill the gaps in scholarship on Chinese women of the early twentieth century by discussing and analyzing the stories of a select number of Chinese women.

Among the pioneers in the field of Chinese gender studies are Kazuko Ono, Susan Mann, Joan Judge, and Gail Hershatter, all of whom have devoted significant time and effort into researching and writing about Chinese women at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Ko has also contributed significantly to our understanding of women of the Qing dynasty and early reform activity such as the anti-footbinding movement. Judge, Ko, and Mann have contributed several essays and books in English on the topic of women's roles and expectations for this period in China. In addition to these scholars and researchers, Gail Hershatter, Mary Sheridan, Janet Salaff, and Wang Zheng have conducted many interviews with Chinese women discussing their experiences and memories of the early and mid-twentieth century, and their involvement in the various movements and campaigns of the time.<sup>9</sup> Although this thesis focuses on the political aspects of women's experiences, other researchers are exploring the ways Chinese women have

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<sup>8</sup> Joan Judge is currently a member of a group working investigating the complexity of the periodical press and women's involvement in it. There is a database project that makes available most of editions of four periodicals of the early twentieth century period: Funü Shibao, Nüzi Shijie, Funü Zazhi, and Linglong. See, [https://kjc-sv034.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/frauenzeitschriften/public/project/project\\_history.php](https://kjc-sv034.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/frauenzeitschriften/public/project/project_history.php). Judge's most recent book is *Women and the Periodical Press in China's Long Twentieth Century* (2018); *Republican Lens* (2015) is another recent book by Judge that discusses women and the periodical press.

Susan Mann is a historian that specializes in Qing dynasty history; many of her books and articles have been about women during this time period. Kazuko Ono is a Japanese historian and an early scholar of Chinese women.

<sup>9</sup> See Gail Hershatter's *Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), wherein, Hershatter investigates the lives of rural women from Shaanxi province; and *Lives*, edited by Mary Sheridan and Janet Salaff, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), which compiles some of the interviews conducted by them and other researchers in recent decades, as well as included some biographies written by earlier journalists, historians, biographers, and researchers. Wang Zheng's *Women In the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999), explores the lives of five women who grew up and participated in the various campaigns and movements of the first several decades of the twentieth century. For Ko and Mann: Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng, *Translating Feminisms in China* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) and Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles : University of California Press, 2005); Susan L. Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).



been portrayed in fiction, the periodical press, and propaganda, as well as some discussions of Chinese women's biographies.<sup>10</sup>

As global relations change and more sources are uncovered from Chinese archives, academic study of Chinese history (both Chinese and foreign) continues to expand. At this juncture, in regard to research on individuals, male political figures such as Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong, Chiang Kai-shek, Yuan Shikai, or Liang Qichao continue to remain most popular. Comparatively little research has focused on the women involved in China's twentieth century nationalist and modernist movements, especially the experiences of rural and working-class urban women. Did such women support and engage with the various social, political, and economic movements in China at the turn of the twentieth century, and if so, how? The dominant narrative is that such campaigns as the support of female education, the anti-footbinding movement, the desire for free marriage, and the push for Chinese modernization were largely driven by male activists; in most narratives, women are seldom or insufficiently recognized for their contributions. However, in addition to male reformers, there were also female activists and women who supported change both actively and more indirectly. While the majority of Chinese women were not activists, there were some who contributed directly to social, political, and cultural movements in China during the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. Many of these women activists were educated, urban, and elite, but some women were not. This thesis aims to explore the ways some Chinese women embodied and transformed contemporary politics and

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<sup>10</sup> For women and the periodical press for example, see Joan Judge's *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), *Print and Politics: 'Shibao' and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) or *Republican Lens: Gender Visuality, and Experience in the Early Chinese Periodical Press*, (California Press, 2015); For women and literature, some examples include: *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History*, edited by Joan Judge and Hu Ying (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), Amy D. Dooling's *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and Grace S. Fong's *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

society, and how, despite differing socioeconomic status, women actively contributed to modernization efforts.

## Historical Context

The primary setting for this thesis is China in the 1910s and 20s but the experiences of the five women span a roughly fifty year period from 1886 to 1935. Several important political events occurred during this period which influenced and affected the lives of Chinese women (activists and non-activists). The First Opium War (1839-42) spurred many Chinese intellectuals to advocate for the modernization of Chinese industry and society, and included campaigns for women's liberation and education. However, such advocates remained in the minority until later 1890s. The 1895 Sino-Japanese War again highlighted weaknesses in established Chinese policies and procedures. The Hundred Days Reform, or 1898 Reform, which occurred during the summer months of 1898, embodied a period of hope and optimism for China which saw efforts to reform aspects of Chinese politics, economy, and culture. Unfortunately this effort was crushed by the Dowager Empress Cixi, who seized power from the Guangxu emperor, thereby ending the brief period of reform and the best hope for China's smooth entry into the "modern world." Many intellectuals were dissatisfied with the reform efforts made by Cixi's government, and advocated for greater reform and change.<sup>11</sup> Resistance by Han Chinese to Manchu rule and a

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<sup>11</sup> One such individual was the revolutionary woman Qiu Jin, who was martyred in her attempts to initiate and bring change to China. Qiu Jin (秋瑾) defied tradition by deserting her arranged marriage (and the children produced from that union) to study abroad in Japan. She unbound her feet and became involved in politics. Qiu Jin often dressed as a man and was a strong advocate for reform and revolution. She wrote and gave speeches and eventually became a teacher at the Datong School for women in Shaoxing, while simultaneously organizing a Restoration Army in preparation for an uprising. Unfortunately, the plans were leaked and on 15 July 1907, Qiu was executed at the age of 32. Qiu Jin is today recognized as a martyr in the cause for Chinese modernization (Ono, 59-65). Qiu Jin is only briefly mentioned in this thesis (due to time and quality constraints); however, her story is also interesting and worthy of further analysis.

desire to modernize China ultimately led to the 1911 Revolution, which overthrew the Manchu Qing government and ended centuries of imperial rule in China.

The 1911 Revolution and the establishment of the Republic of China brought about many changes; but, this was neither the beginning nor end of activism in China. After the revolution, China faced continued conflict in the form of further reform efforts, civil wars, invasions (political and geographical), and political inconstancy. Prior to the 1911 Revolution, revolutionary activists worked hard to bring about the end of the Qing dynasty. The majority of revolutionary activists were men, however, there were some women among them, including Qiu Jin and Zheng Yuxiu (whose story is discussed in greater depth later in this paper). Both men and women were involved in reform efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Most of the reform campaigns from this period were related to modernization, and an early and key aspect of China's modernization movement was women's liberation and education.

In the twentieth century, the status of women came to be seen as a marker of a country's level of civilization, and Chinese women and their bodies came to symbolize the Chinese nation. At the time, modernity was correlated with the West; and in order to be more modern, Chinese women were targeted as an aspect of society that required improvement in order to be more like the West. The rhetoric was, that in order to modernize, Chinese women first needed to be released from oppressive Confucian practices. In the effort to modernize and compete with the West, reformists attacked several aspects of traditional culture and customs, and it was during this time that the image of "poor oppressed Chinese women" emerged and was used for political

purposes.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to this twentieth-century perception, however, Chinese women were not universally oppressed, passive victims of Confucianism. In China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, footbinding was viewed by many reformers as a central cause for women's lower status. Bound feet were a physical example of women's weakness which in turn had a negative impact on the strength of the nation.<sup>13</sup> Campaigns against footbinding were sponsored and supported by both men and women. Anti-footbinding societies were formed wherein, men pledged to only marry women without bound feet and to not bind their daughters' feet. While this movement did not eradicate the practice of footbinding, it did help to slowly make it more acceptable for women not to have bound feet. As the century drew on, it gradually became more respectable for Chinese women to have "natural feet," though the practice continued into the mid twentieth century (it was effectively halted forever after the CCP came to power on October 1, 1949).

Another aspect of elevating women, and consequently the nation, was through education. There has long been a history and culture of respect for education in China, however, for most of Chinese history, education has effectively been reserved for the elite and wealthy members of society.<sup>14</sup> This began to change in the nineteenth century as educational opportunities expanded

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<sup>12</sup> For example, in an essay written in 1897, Liang Qichao argued that all Chinese women were consumers unable to support themselves. He described Chinese women as "ignorant, apathetic, and sequestered" beings raised by men as "livestock or slaves . . ." and heralded America as the country with the most advanced education for women. Liang completely disregarded the accomplishments of Chinese women in poetic literary works and the contributions of women in housekeeping and domestic production of textile work or sericulture, etc. (Barbaray Molony, Janet Theiss, and Hyaewool Choi, *Gender in Modern East Asia: China Korea, Japan: An Integrated History*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2016), 167).

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Ko, "The Body Inside Out," in *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles : University of California Press, 2005). Ko's "The Body Inside and Out" highlights the struggle of the anti-footbinding movement in China. As part of the national movement to modernize China (and to resist Western imperialism) this movement sought to elevate the status of women through the "liberation" of their feet. Yet, while the eradication of the practice of footbinding may have been beneficial to Chinese women in the long-run, the methods used to obtain this result were humiliating and victimizing to women (with bound feet). As described by Ko, although there were women supporters and advocates, the movement was dominated by male rhetoric and an overly simplified idea that the cessation of binding could (immediately) result in the return of a natural foot shape. Humiliation tactics were employed to expose women's bare feet (previously, something that was considered as an intensely private part of a woman's body) and the physical harm footbinding engendered on the body—and consequently society. Unfortunately, efforts to elevate women's status in society through the elimination of footbinding, served more to objectify and reduce Chinese women.

<sup>14</sup> Note: Not all elite women were educated. Although some elite women were literate, education was primarily a male privilege.

for both men and women, aided by missionary efforts to spread the gospel. Education for women in imperial China was complimentary to Confucian texts studied by men. Like the four main Confucian texts studied by men,<sup>15</sup> there emerged four didactic texts for women (the *nüisishu* 女四书) that supplemented and influenced Confucian thought and culture in China.<sup>16</sup> Biographical accounts such as that of Yang Buwei provide evidence that the early education of elite women was the same as that of men until the age of around seven or eight, whereupon boys and girls were separated and the boys began a rigorous study of the Confucian classics, and the girls were taught domestic duties and the female classics.<sup>17</sup> The Four Books for Women included the *Nüjie* (女誡 Lessons for Women), the *Nü lunyu* (女論語 Analects for Women), the *Neixun* (內訓 Teachings for the Inner Chamber), and *Nüfan jielu* (女範捷錄 Short Records of Models for Women). These books, written by women over a period of approximately 1600 years, provided instruction for proper behavior, primarily through the medium of narrative stories. While defining women's roles as primarily presiding over domestic life, they also provided guidelines for navigating the social and political spheres. Together, these texts supplemented and reinforced Confucian ideals for women, and demonstrate the extended history of Chinese women's scholarship and culture.<sup>18</sup>

A primary avenue of change was education. The campaign to modernize China and the Women's liberation movement in China both advocated for female education as a primary

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<sup>15</sup> 1) the *Analects* 2) the *Mencius* 3) the *Great Learning* 4) the *Book of the Mean* (*The Confucian Four Books for Women: A New Translation of the Nü Sishu and the Commentary of Wang Xiang*, translated by Ann A. Pang-White, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2).

<sup>16</sup> Pang-White, 2-3.

<sup>17</sup> Buwei Yang, *Autobiography of a Chinese Woman*, translated by Yuenren Chao, (New York: The John Day Company, 1947), 27-8.

<sup>18</sup> Pang-White, 3.

method of advancing the nation. An effect of this ideology was to increase the appeal of educated girls. Literate daughters with some knowledge of classics and foreign studies increased their marriageability and improved their prospects. As social perceptions changed, influenced by European values, it became fashionable for wives to be literate. Although there was resistance to educating women too much, in general, women with some education were seen as more desirable for the growing number of Western-educated Chinese men.<sup>19</sup> The first missionary school for girls in China was established by Miss Aldersey in Ningbo, 1844.<sup>20</sup> Initially restricted to port cities, after 1858, foreigners and Christian missionaries were allowed to venture into China's interior; and by 1864, missionary schools were established throughout China.<sup>21</sup> Missionary schools were primarily created to spread Christianity (typically Catholicism or Protestantism), but they also provided more opportunities for women and girls to receive an education.<sup>22</sup> Initially, missionary schools for girls were small, often fewer than ten students.<sup>23</sup> This was due in part to Neo-Confucian ideas of female seclusion, but also due to Chinese superstition and mistrust of foreigners. Missionaries were often viewed with suspicion. Foreigners were still a novelty in most parts of China at this time, and rumors abounded about Caucasians. Among the more

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<sup>19</sup> Bailey, 5; Gail Hershatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Global Area, and International Archive University of California Press, 2007), 65. Women who had gone to school were believed to be more capable in running a household and a better companion to their prospective educated husband, an educated girl could bring honor to her natal family if she could marry-up. (This was actually a continuation of trend that emerged during the High Qing, (Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 58).

<sup>20</sup> Paul Bailey, *Gender and Education in China: Gender discourses and women's schooling in the early twentieth century*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 4, 12.

<sup>21</sup> The 1858 Treaty of Tianjin (天津条约) opened 6 more treaty ports to foreigners (for a total of 11) and asserted legal permission for foreigners to travel to China's interior. It also permitted the establishment and residence of diplomatic missions in Beijing, allowed foreign merchant and naval ships to travel up the Yangzi River, set the import tariff to 5%, and stipulated the payment of reparations (Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual, Fifth Edition*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2018), 964); Bingham and Gross, *Women in China: Transition, Revolution and Contemporary Times*, (St. Louis Park: Gary E. McCuen Publications Inc., 1980), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Chinese women did have opportunities to be educated before the mid-nineteenth century; however, such opportunities were not widely available. Furthermore, women did not traditionally leave and go away from home to study. Instead, tutors were typically brought in to an elite family's home. (Bingham and Gross, *Women in China*, 16)

<sup>23</sup> At first, the students missionaries were able to recruit were limited to orphans, daughters of the very poor (destitute), and daughters of converts. (Paul Bailey, *Gender and Education in China*, 12)

extreme rumors, was the belief that foreigners wanted to harvest or sacrifice young Chinese girls (to their demonic god), and a common fear was the corruption of girls by foreigners.<sup>24</sup> Over time, sending girls to school became more common, and missionary schools helped to change the attitudes towards young girls.<sup>25</sup> As perceptions changed in the late 1800s-early 1900s more and more Chinese families were willing to send their daughters to missionary schools, and in 1898 (during the Hundred Days Reform Period), the first Chinese-run girls' school opened in Shanghai.<sup>26</sup> By 1916, there were about 3,461 schools, and in 1923, it is estimated that there were 417,820 Chinese girls attending official and non-official schools.<sup>27</sup> However, despite the increase in schools that accepted girls in China, the number of female students in China still constituted a small minority. Many families remained resistant to sending their daughters to be educated by missionaries, and many girls of upper-class families continued to be educated at home by privately hired tutors that taught all the children of a family, as was the case for Yang Buwei and Zheng Yuxiu.<sup>28</sup> Notwithstanding the persistent belief that a woman should not be too educated or that education was wasted on a woman, increased educational opportunities for women is one trait that ties together the stories of Zheng Yuxiu, Yang Buwei, Xie Bingying and Wang Su Chun.

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<sup>24</sup> In addition to general concern about female exposure to the outside world, many people associated female students, especially those who were self-confident and unafraid to associate with men, as prostitutes or women of loose morals. There was pervasive concern that schools and the education of women “harmed customs” (Bailey, 43). The negative perception of female students was enhanced by their appearance, which often was characterized by short hair, unbound feet, and (comparatively) short skirts (Bailey, 48-9).; Bingham and Gross

<sup>25</sup> Bingham and Gross, *Women in China*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> The school's name was the “Chinese Girls' School” (*Zhongguo nüxuetang* 中國女學堂) or “Classic Uprightness Girls' School (*jingzhengnüshu* 經正女塾) and had an initial enrollment of 20 girls (Bailey, 21).

<sup>27</sup> Bailey, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Zheng did attend a missionary school for a time, but Yang's father was of the opinion that “Nobody of good family goes to a missionary school” (Yang, 62).

## **Part 2 — Analysis**

### **Life Stories**

This thesis analyzes several primary sources, among them are the autobiographies of Zheng Yuxiu, Yang Buwei, and Xie Bingying, as well as the biographies of Wang Su Chun and Ning Lao Taitai. Biographies and autobiographies are useful and oft-used primary sources. Yet they also have some drawbacks. Autobiographies lack some of the cultural biases that might be expected from written interviews conducted by Westerners (as with Anna Strong's *China's Millions*). They also have the advantage of presenting more clearly the views and ideas of the individuals whose stories they describe (Xie's autobiography includes many interjections of opinions among the narration of her life). However, autobiographies lack the clarity of situation and interpretation that an outside source might bring. An outside or simply an alternative perspective can offer clarity to a situation that is unclear to someone who experienced an event; an outsider's different cultural and life experiences might also provide information and background that allows an event to be seen in another interesting light. An additional drawback is that autobiographies like those of Zheng, Yang, and Xie were written with the benefit of hindsight and with an eye to polishing (they are not as raw as a diary might be). Furthermore, it is impossible to record every minute detail of a person's life. Abridged versions that highlight key points in a person's life are easier to absorb and appreciate; however, the autobiographies consulted for this thesis often lack some important details, especially dates. While such limitations can be frustrating, they can also be enlightening. Analyzing the details that are or are not included in an autobiography or biography can shed light on the cultural and/or personal values of the author. (A direction of analysis that this thesis will not cover.) Alternately, the



source could be analyzed based on its form and writing style; however, for this paper, it is sufficient to acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages and reliability of utilizing an autobiography as a primary source.

A final point about the the autobiographies of Chinese persons is that some information or meanings can be lost in translation. Whether occurring during the interview or writing process, or afterwards translated from Chinese to English (as with Xie's autobiography), all of the primary sources consulted for this thesis experienced this transition. The people who translate Chinese sources into English necessarily do their utmost to stay true to the original source; however, there are some cultural inferences and subtext that are difficult or impossible to accurately translate. In such cases, translators are forced to make slight alterations to preserve the meaning, or can use literal translations that may further confuse the wording of a text. In the case of Xie's autobiography, the translators were Xie's daughter and son-in-law, and the group worked closely in the translation process, so much of the original meanings and phrasings should be similar, and are in any case, approved by the original author. Yang's autobiography was similarly translated by her husband, Yuenren Chao (赵元任), and Yang's English skills were sufficient to provide objections or insert notes that clarify events in Yang's life that may have been confused or misinterpreted in the process of translation. In cases without such author-input, one must trust in the good-intentions and skill of the translator.

*Zheng Yuxiu* (鄭毓秀)

Written in 1943, *My Revolutionary Years* by Madame Wei Tao-Ming<sup>29</sup> is an autobiography of China's first female lawyer. Madame Wei, also known as Zheng Yuxiu, was an interesting and unusual figure. Although perhaps not as influential or famous as some other figures,<sup>30</sup> Zheng was one of a select number of Chinese women who played a prominent role in Chinese politics in the early twentieth century. A revolutionary and political activist, Zheng was born in Canton in 1896 and grew up at a time when important political and social changes were occurring.<sup>31</sup> The youngest of four children (with two older brothers and an older sister), Zheng came from a large family of some wealth and importance. Her father was an official in the Ministry of Finance and was generally conservative,<sup>32</sup> but also embraced some aspects of modernization and liberalism. From a young age, Zheng exhibited a strong personality and was not afraid to fight for what she wanted. As a young child, she spent much of her time accompanying her father around Peking (Beijing; Beiping); it is from this experience that Zheng likely gained an interest in politics and world affairs.<sup>33</sup>

Zheng was not free from the constraints of traditional expectations for Chinese girls (of wealthy and elite families); however, she was also privileged with many opportunities

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<sup>29</sup> Madame Wei Tao-Ming is the name used in her autobiography, however, she was also referred to as Soumay Cheng, or Zheng Yuxiu (the name used in this thesis).

<sup>30</sup> —such as Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, Yuan Shikai, Liang Qichao, Dingling, or Qiuqin, to name a few.

<sup>31</sup> The Chinese had just lost the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) whereupon they were forced to give up both land and power. The Treaty of Shimonoseki was a humiliating treaty wherein Japan seized control of Taiwan, demanded the right to open factories in Japanese port cities, and China was compelled to pay reparations. Soon after, China faced the danger of foreign powers dividing up its vast territories (not completely unlike the scramble for Africa, everyone wanted a piece of the China pie) (Ono, 47). Foreign countries from Europe were encroaching upon Chinese sovereignty, and the Manchu Qing government was slowly losing its hold on the empire it had ruled for almost three centuries. Corruption and civil unrest were rampant, and the country was threatened with more advanced technology and revolutionary ideas from the West. China was, inevitably, on the threshold of change.

<sup>32</sup> Zheng, *My Revolutionary Years*, 19, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Madame Wei Tao-Ming (Zheng Yuxiu), *My Revolutionary Years*, 3, 14.

unavailable to other girls. Zheng Yuxiu was the youngest of four children, and “having a great deal of energy, curiosity, and high spirit” she was purportedly “problem child,” to use modern terminology.<sup>34</sup> She was brought up in a large home filled with extended family, servants, and the servant’s children, all dominated by Zheng’s Paternal Grandmother, “an ultra-conservative, rather talented (she wrote Chinese well), iron willed woman.”<sup>35</sup> As a young girl Zheng learned proper etiquette and traditions. She was expected to show respect to her elders (she always had to kowtow to her Paternal Grandmother), and often accompanied her mother on “ceremonial calls” to friends, during which she was expected to sit quietly.<sup>36</sup> When she was old enough, along with all the other little girls in the household, Zheng was subjected to the painful processes of having her feet bound.<sup>37</sup> In these ways, Zheng’s life followed many of the conventions of generations of traditional elite girls; yet, liberal and reformist ideas did penetrate the cloistered confines of the Zheng home and allowed her some freedoms not previously offered or widely allowed to Chinese girls.

Zheng’s divergence from the “traditional path” for Chinese girls was a product of her family’s liberal leanings<sup>38</sup> and the transitional period during which she grew up. In regards to education, as the daughter of a scholar-official, Zheng, along with the rest of the Zheng children, was taught at home by a private tutor —a privilege not offered to most Chinese girls. Traditional

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<sup>34</sup> Zheng, 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>36</sup> Zheng recalls being “terribly bored” by talk of servants, clothes, and other “trivial matters.” She would have much rather been accompanying her father or studying (Zheng, 21-2).

<sup>37</sup> While Zheng began the process of having her feet bound, she did not complete it. With silent support from her mother, Zheng was grudgingly allowed to discontinue the binding process (Zheng, 9-11).

<sup>38</sup> In addition to her father’s open-mindedness on several matters, Zheng’s grandfather was also somewhat unconventional. In departure to “the tradition of the Mandarin class,” Zheng’s grandfather went into commercial enterprise and built “a great deal of the city of Hongkong” (Zheng, 5).

education for elite girls tended to be limited to the *Four Confucian Books for Women* (*nüshu* 女四书) and other such didactic texts; however, Zheng's family was somewhat liberal and her education was not limited to the classics for women. As a child, she was allowed to accompany her father as he traversed the city and discussed business and politics with his "confrères." In acknowledgement of her inquisitiveness, Zheng's father sent her for further schooling at a public school for girls in Peking. A bright, though not always diligent student, Zheng's education continued at the Zhong-Xi missionary boarding school in Tianjin and schools abroad in Japan and France.<sup>39</sup> She "could not and would not grow up in the traditional manner," and felt she "had a special role of my own to play in this transitional period which had already begun, and the proper education was essential preparation for my future work."<sup>40</sup> Zheng credits the outings with her father, and the conversations she heard, as the spark that set off her revolutionary spirit.

Zheng's rebelliousness was evident from a young age and continued to develop as she grew up. Her childhood was peppered with conflicts with her conservative Paternal Grandmother, one of the first instances occurring when Zheng was about six years old,<sup>41</sup> and another occurred when Zheng began and then rejected the process of footbinding.<sup>42</sup> Her revolutionary spirit was fueled by her experiences in Japan and France. Zheng's teen years were

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<sup>39</sup> Zheng, *My Revolutionary Years*, p19, 28. It was likely these excursions that kindled Zheng Yuxiu's revolutionary spirit, which she also acknowledges in her autobiography. It was also at this time when Zheng's desire to study abroad emerged (She was about 12 years old at this time, (p20)). This desire developed and was realized when Zheng was 15 and convinced her family to send her to study in Japan.

<sup>40</sup> Zheng, *My Revolutionary Years*, p31.

<sup>41</sup> In the incident, Zheng defended one of the servant's children who had gotten into a fight with one of Zheng's cousins. Zheng's Paternal Grandmother happened to pass by and, outraged that a serving child "had had the temerity to strike her grandchild," ordered the child punished. Zheng thought this response to be unjust. She denounced her cousin and defended the serving child with her words and body. Despite efforts to control and calm her, Zheng was adamant in her defense of the servant child. She only relented after her grandmother scolded her mother's, whereupon Zheng "quieted down immediately, and in a very short time was led from the courtyard, subdued and frightened (p6-8). It is unknown what happened to the servant child.

<sup>42</sup> Zheng initially subtitled to the binding process, but after a few days, could not endure it anymore. On the third day, during class, Zheng had a tantrum. She kicked and screamed herself hoarse, and after an entire morning of disturbance, Zheng's Paternal Grandmother finally relented with "great distaste" (p10-11).

engaged with revolutionary activity (associated with the Nationalists). At the age of fifteen, Zheng convinced her family to send her to Japan to study and quickly became involved with the Chinese revolutionary group the —*Tongmenghui*— headed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan 孫中山). After attending several secret meetings, it was determined that Zheng could be more useful to the group if she were to return to the mainland China. She promptly did so, and in the face of her father's disapproval, cited the flightiness and capriciousness of a young girl.<sup>43</sup>

Assigned to the Political Department of the Nationalist Guomintang (GMD)<sup>44</sup> party, Zheng soon turned her house into “a regular revolutionary headquarters.” To ward off her mother's suspicion and to explain for the frequent comings-and-goings of strangers, Zheng claimed to have started a Society with some friends with the aim to “open schools and further learning in China.”<sup>45</sup> Rather than helping to open schools in China, however, Zheng occupied herself at this time by helping to carry dynamite and explosives from Tianjin to Beijing as part of a plot to assassinate Yuan Shikai. A volunteer of the “dare-to-die” unit of the Guomintang (GMD), Zheng took advantage of her position as a girl and daughter of an official, which enabled her to act in ways that would have raised suspicion if carryout out by a man or someone without her family's status.<sup>46</sup>

Zheng participated in revolutionary actions both in China and abroad. After the Guomintang succeeded in overthrowing the Manchu government and ending the Qing dynasty,

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<sup>43</sup> Zheng, *My Revolutionary Years*, 49.

<sup>44</sup> Note: The *Tongmenghui* merged with four other political groups in August 1912 to form the Guomintang (Wade-Giles: Kuomintang) (“Party's History: 1894-1935,” Kuomintang News Network, Kuomintang Official Website, last accessed October 27, 2019, <http://www1.kmt.org.tw/english/page.aspx?type=para&mnum=108>). Dates are unclear throughout most of Zheng's autobiography, and Zheng begins to use the term “Kuomintang” while still describing events that seem to occur before the 1912 merging.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*; (She did not actually do so at this time, but would contribute more actively towards education later on).

<sup>46</sup> Zheng's father's status as an official meant exempted them from certain close scrutiny and as a daughter from a wealthy family, it was not so odd for her to travel frequently between the two cities. Furthermore, as a girl, Zheng was subject to be underestimated by men and society at large and it was less likely that she would be suspected of revolutionary activity. Zheng's account of her early revolutionary activity in Japan and then the Tianjin-Beijing “Dynamite Shuttle” is described in chapters four and five (Zheng, 41-62).

the younger members of the GMD, such as Zheng, were left with little to do. The revolution had apparently been successful, and the older (adult) members of the GMD were taking charge. Mr. Li Yuying encouraged the youth to study abroad in order to help fulfill Dr. Sun's vision/plan for establishing and developing the new republic.<sup>47</sup> Although it was concluded that Zheng would not go abroad at this time, she continued to be politically active by contributing to the youth-run newspaper *The Love of Country*.<sup>48</sup> In fact, her revolutionary activities were enough to mark her as a target. One day while in Tianjin (date not given in source), Zheng was informed by a friend that her home in Beijing was searched for incriminating evidence of Zheng's revolutionary activities. Her father's position was compromised and the rest of her family returned to Canton while she was forced to flee abroad to Japan. While in Japan, Zheng attempted to follow the advise of Mr. Li. to study for the good of her country; but, she "soon lost interest."<sup>49</sup> It was then arranged, with hearty support from her family, that Zheng would go and study abroad in France. In 1913, Zheng sailed to Europe (Marseilles, France), and in April 1914 she took up residence in a small Paris *pension*.<sup>50</sup> This was Zheng's first time in France, but it would not be her last. While in France, Zheng's revolutionary activity began to shift from activism to a more diplomatic approach using law.

Zheng was a very patriotic individual who always held the interests of her country close at heart. She chose to study law believing that "legal training would best fit me for service to my

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<sup>47</sup> Zheng, *My Revolutionary Years*, 73-4.

<sup>48</sup> Zheng, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Zheng, 81.

<sup>50</sup> Zheng, 104.

Note: I don't believe she was enrolled in a school at this time, it seems she spent her time learning the language, exploring Paris, and associating with the French and Chinese in the area; (she said it took about 3 months to gain enough French linguistic skills to successfully maneuver around Paris).

country,”<sup>51</sup> and in 1915, Zheng entered “the Law school of the University of Paris, the Sorbonne.”<sup>52</sup> She had not let go of politics, however, and when the first World War broke out, Zheng made sure she was in the thick of things. In her autobiography, Zheng states that she was very interested in the contemporary politics of Europe at the time and fully supported China joining the war (China declared war against Germany on Aug 14). She attended a mass meeting of the Chinese in Europe (in Paris, July 1917), and as the students’ delegate, “made an impassioned speech in French to the huge mixed audience in which I advocated that China join the Allies.”<sup>53</sup> Zheng later served as a delegate for, or member in, several Chinese-foreign interactions, including as a member of the Chinese delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1918 (and played a role in China’s non-signing of the Peace Treaty of Versailles), and as an official envoy of the (Republic of China’s) Nanjing government to France.<sup>54</sup> Zheng’s desire to make a difference and aid her country was a life-long endeavor, and as illustrated above, her efforts were not insignificant.

Zheng Yuxiu was a revolutionary woman of particular interest. From her youth, Zheng demonstrated rebelliousness and determination of will —both traits that would develop and aid her in later endeavors— and as a teenager and adult, Zheng worked to advance herself and her nation and evoke change in China. “The forces of the modern world drew me to them with an

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<sup>51</sup> Zheng, 106.

<sup>52</sup> Zheng, 106. Her decision to study law would indeed prove useful in Zheng’s efforts to serve her country. Zheng later went back to France to get her doctorate in Law in 1924 (Zheng, 138). She became the first Chinese woman lawyer and judge in Chinese history, would be one of the delegates to the Paris Peace Conference, and served as a Shanghai judge and was on the Shanghai council (Liu Dian, “Tcheng Yu-hsiu: China’s First Female Judge,” *Women in History*. All China Women’s Federation (中华全国妇女联合会), last modified August 6, 2013, <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html/people/history/15/2822-1.htm>). She served in the national Legislative Yuan, was president of University of Shanghai School of Law from 1931-1937, chose her own marriage, and started a law firm with her lawyer-husband Dr. Wei Taoming. She was also involved in the drafting of the Civil Code of the Republic of China promulgated in 1930 (*The Civil Code of the Republic of China*, translated by Ching-Lin Hsia, James L. E. Chow, and Yukon Chang, (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Limited, 1930), xiv).

<sup>53</sup> Zheng, 107.

<sup>54</sup> Zheng, 112, 160.

irresistible power, and nothing could stop me from attaining my goal.”<sup>55</sup> Zheng’s life was by no means representative of the average experience of Chinese girls at the turn of the century; however, this should not preclude Zheng’s accomplishments from being recognized and appreciated. Her privileges enabled her to act and participate in ways most Chinese girls could not; however, there were also other Chinese girls of similar means and background who led lives quite different from Zheng’s and did not achieve the same kinds of accomplishments.<sup>56</sup>

### *Yang Buwei* (楊步偉)

Coming from a similar background and social standing, the story of Yang Buwei comes mainly from her *Autobiography of a Chinese Woman*, written by Yang with the aid and encouragement of her husband Yuenren Chao (趙元任).<sup>57</sup> Yang’s life embodies the changes that were occurring and being fought for in China in the early twentieth-century. She was not socially or politically or active, but her personality and life choices marked her as unconventional and even revolutionary. Yang was not a demure wallflower. She was comfortable interacting with both women and men. Yang Buwei came from a traditionally elite family, but they did not cling to the past. Her marriage was arranged before she was born, but as a young woman she was allowed to break off her engagement.<sup>58</sup> She acquired a basic education, but then pursued it

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<sup>55</sup> Zheng, 31.

<sup>56</sup> For Yang was of a similar background and social class, yet she did not become politically active and her life path was quite different from Zheng’s.

<sup>57</sup> The edition used in this thesis was produced by the John Day Company, an imprint of the Asia Press, and published in 1947. Also, Yang’s name is written as “Buwei Yang Chao,” however, for the sake of consistency, I decided to use form “Yang Buwei” in this thesis.

Second Note: Yang had several names in her lifetime, including “Chuandi” (傳弟) and “Yunch’ing” (*Yunqing*, 韻卿).

<sup>58</sup> Proposed by her grandmother, Yang’s engagement was made before she was even born to her cousin who was also still in the womb. The match was justified as a means of further strengthening the ties between the two families of Yang and Ch’eng (Cheng), and was dependent upon one child being born a boy and one a girl (Yang, 9-13).



further, learning above and beyond what was expected of most Chinese girls. She married and had children, but she chose her own partner and had a simple, modern-style wedding. She published written work, but it was not the traditional poetry of most imperial women whose work was published; instead, Yang published a couple of cookbooks and an autobiography. Additionally, her work was published in English, unlike most Chinese women (who wrote and published in Chinese). She was conventional in some ways and revolutionary in others.

Yang grew up in a family with liberal-leanings, and the trajectory of her life was somewhat unusual. Yang Buwei was born to a scholarly family from Nanjing in 1889. The child of a large, wealthy family, Yang was not in want of playmates as a young child. Together, the children of the Yang family lived a carefree life until the age of five, whereby they began to be educated in the Chinese classics.<sup>59</sup> As an infant, Yang was adopted by her childless aunt and uncle and raised as their own. Unlike most children, the roles of aunt and mother were, for Yang, switched, and she referred to her aunt as “mother,” and her birth mother as “aunt.”<sup>60</sup> In addition to this quirk in Yang’s early life, according to her autobiography, in her youth, Yang was dressed and treated as a boy. Clearly a favorite, Yang or “Little Master Three” as she was often called, was given more freedoms and opportunities than her other female siblings and cousins.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, as the granddaughter of a revolutionary (Yang’s description) and the adopted “son”

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<sup>59</sup> Girls and boys studied together with a home-tutor until the age of twelve. At that time, the boys continued their education and training in the classics in preparation to take the Civil Service Exams and (hopefully) become government officials (or, failing that, scholars and teachers); the girls were separated and taught domestic matters of home and childcare etc. in preparation for futures as wives and mothers.

<sup>60</sup> Likewise, her birth-father was known to Yang as her “Big Uncle” and her actual uncle she called “father.” Interesting: one of her actual brothers was also adopted by her “mother” and “father” (this pair did not conceive any children, and both the son and daughter were adopted from the eldest brother of the family).

<sup>61</sup> On page 32 of her autobiography, Yang states “I was privileged to do things which none of my sisters or female cousins would dream of doing.” It is unclear how much of this privilege was due to her personality and how much was due to her being youngest (or another reason altogether); however, her status as a special favorite can be surmised by the many allowances she was given, including not having her feet bound and the permission to break her engagement.

of a like-minded father, Yang enjoyed an “unlimited range of activities.”<sup>62</sup> A mark of the times and demonstrative of her family’s liberal-modern leanings, Yang was not forced to bind her feet.<sup>63</sup> Feeling that he had adopted a “son,” Yang’s “father” felt no need to pressure her to have her feet bound. Furthermore, according to Yang, unbound feet were not so unusual among the working women of the lower Yangtze regions though for a family of Yang’s standing and background it was unusual.<sup>64</sup> Yang’s unbound feet not only saved her from a lifetime of physical pain and facilitated greater physical freedom of abilities, they were also a tangible mark of rebellion against a long-standing traditional (Han) Chinese (elite) custom, and a rejection of the past (practices, society, dynasty). They were a sign of both her father and grandfather’s rebelliousness; and they served her adjustment to and integration to the changing times, and no doubt were an asset in fitting in after she immigrated to the United States.

Yang may not have been a revolutionary, but she can be considered a rebel who deviated from traditional Chinese customs. In addition to declining to have her feet bound, Yang broke off her unwanted engagement to her cousin. Her early education marked her as a member of the elite; but, her continued education in schools, particularly her time abroad, marked her as one of the dozens (and later hundreds) of young, modern girls of the new era.<sup>65</sup> She was educated at a time when an increasing number of girls were being taught how to be “virtuous wives” and “good mothers,” but she wanted more than to simply be a “model mother” that could train future

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<sup>62</sup> Buwei Yang Chao, *Autobiography of a Chinese Woman*, p33.

<sup>63</sup> Yang did not want her feet bound and her grandfather and father were willing to let her feet “go where they wanted,” despite the disapproval from her prospective mother-in-law (Yang, 33). Her “natural feet” were in opposition to bound feet where, in order to make a foot “smaller and narrower,” the foot was broken so that the toes were bound back towards the heel of the foot (Dorothy Ko, *Every Step a Lotus*, 23-24, 54-63).

<sup>64</sup> Since the time of the Song dynasty (~960–1279), elite women had bound their feet as a symbol of their exalted status and circumstances. Bound feet were considered attractive and desirable and increased a girl’s marriage prospects. To not bind was seen as a sign of motherly neglect (Hershatter, *Women and China’s Revolutions*, (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 10).

<sup>65</sup> “the female student became a highly visible discursive object” and became a symbol of modernity (Bailey, 10-11).

citizens.<sup>66</sup> In addition to getting a higher education, Yang's chosen field of study (Western medicine) was a mark of the changing times, the opportunities available to her (because of her family circumstances and the era), and her silent/passive activism. Yang was literate and educated in the Chinese Classics, but she wanted and was able to attain more. In May 1914 she was accepted into the Tokyo Women's Medical School and chose to pursue Western medicine, and became one of the first Chinese women to study and practice Western medicine. This unconventional choice of career was accompanied by the rebellious, even revolutionary, action of choosing her husband. At a time when arranged marriages were still prevalent, Yang Buwei not only broke off her arranged-engagement but married a man in a match that was not arranged by their parents. Furthermore, it was a modern-style, simple wedding, in contrast to the typically elaborate and expensive ceremonies and processions of traditional style weddings.<sup>67</sup> In regard to marriage, Yang remarked that she "knew what correct manners were, but did not care to observe them; he [Yuanren Chao] did not even bother to know them."<sup>68</sup> As a further mark of Yang's unconventionality, contrary to most Chinese women of the time, Yang was comfortable socializing with both women and men. Among her acquaintances and friends as an adult, was the liberal writer-activist Hu Shi, who was also a witness in her and Yuanren Chao's wedding ceremony.<sup>69</sup> Finally, Yang was untraditional in her migration to and settlement in the U.S.A, where she had four daughters, published multiple books, and eventually died.

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<sup>66</sup> Bailey 25, 28; Hershatler, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> Note: On page 192 of her autobiography, Yang wrote: "Our wedding did consist largely of a change of address." They spent most of the day getting settled in their new house. For their wedding ceremony, Yang and Chao were accompanied by a female friend of Yang and the now-famous philosopher and diplomat, Hu Sh. Both of whom signed as witnesses on Yang and Chao's wedding certificate (Yang, 191-4).

<sup>68</sup> Yang, *Autobiography of a Chinese Woman*, 191.

<sup>69</sup> Hu was one of two witnesses to their non-wedding ceremony, the other witness being Yang's friend Miss Chu Chünkuo (Zhu Juguo), or Sister Hsiang (Yang, *Autobiography of a Chinese Woman*, 192-3).

*Xie Bingying* (謝冰瑩)

In a similar fashion to Zheng and Yang, this thesis relies heavily on Xie Bingying's autobiographical account of her life and experiences.<sup>70</sup> Born in 1906, in Xietuoshan in Hunan Province, Xie was younger than both Zheng and Yang. Like Zheng Yuxiu and Yang Buwei, Xie Bingying was the daughter of an educated man; however, unlike Zheng and Yang, Xie did not come from a line of scholars and her family was not quite as rich or as large. Xie's grandfather and great-grandfather were poor tenant farmers who worked the land. In her autobiography, Xie recounts that when her grandmother married her grandfather, the couple was so poor that Xie's grandfather had only one bowl from which to eat.<sup>71</sup> Despite their poverty, Xie's grandfather was honest and hard-working. Slowly, he saved enough money to buy his own farming implements and a cow with the aid of a small loan.<sup>72</sup> When their son (Xie's father) exhibited a love of learning, they managed to afford to support his studies until he successfully took and passed the provincial exams in 1903. Learned as he was in the traditional Chinese classics, Xie's father subscribed to the teachings of old sages such as Confucius and Mencius and was quite traditional in his thinking and mannerisms. He was gentle and kind as well as learned, a good example of a gentleman-scholar. Despite this traditionalism, Xie's father was not completely opposed to all

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<sup>70</sup> There are multiple versions of Xie's autobiography that are available including English and Chinese versions. This thesis primarily consulted the 2001 edition of *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*, translated by Lily Chia Brissman and Barry Brissman, (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2001), but I also looked at Xie Bingying's, *Autobiography of a Chinese Girl*, translated by Tsui Chi, (London, Boston, and Henley: Pandora Press, 1986) and *Girl Rebel: The Autobiography of Hsieh Pingying, With Extracts from her New War Diaries*, translated by Adet and Anor Lin, (New York: The John Day Company, 1940); as well as the Chinese copy 謝冰瑩 (*Xie Bingying*), *女兵自傳* (*Nübing zizhuan*, *Autobiography of a Female Soldier*), (成都 (*Chengdu*): 四川文艺出版社 (*Sichuan Wenyi Chubanshe*, Sichuan Literature and Arts Publishing Press), 1985).

<sup>71</sup> Xie, *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Such were the circumstances when Xie's father was born. Originally tasked with caring for the family oxen, it soon became apparent that Xie's father was destined for another fate. A born scholar, Xie's father developed a love of reading and learning by the time he was seven or eight and this caused him to be inattentive in his other duties. When he nearly lost the family ox due to becoming absorbed in a book, his parents became determined to save enough money to enable him to take the civil service exam (Xie, 2001, 5). When he went to the city to take the exam, this poor, largely self-taught man, accompanied by his ragged-clothed father who was mistakenly assumed to be his porter/servant, placed in the state/provincial exams, elevating his family's status and means. Now recognized as a scholar, Xie's father became the principle of the Xin Fa County Middle School, a post which he held for 27 years (Xie, 2001, 6).

things new or Western. He taught all of his children to read and write and encouraged them to be diligent in their studies, including foreign subjects such as English or mathematics.<sup>73</sup>

Although Xie's father proved to be quite conservative, he was not irrevocably bound to tradition. Xie's father was born to a working-class, peasant family, but was able to elevate himself and his family by way of the ancient system of Imperial Exams. He valued education and intelligence and passed on his scholarly ways to his children—all were initially taught by him and two of his sons became teachers, with Xie briefly teaching as well. Xie, who began her education “when still a child in my father's bosom,”<sup>74</sup> was later allowed to go to school to further her education. It can be supposed that Xie's father's intellectualism contributed to his allowing Xie to attend school (including a missionary school) and learn, despite this not being a particularly prevalent or popular practice at the time. In fact, Xie's mother and one of their neighbors was particularly against Xie going to school initially. Xie's mother thought that it was enough if a girl could recognize a few characters, keep accounts, and read contracts, there was no need for a girl to go to school and be formally educated.<sup>75</sup> A “flat-nosed” old neighbor claimed that if Xie attended the local private boys school, it would not only be unconventional, but she would steal all the knowledge from the boys so that they would become “stupid, staring, and dumb.”<sup>76</sup> Despite such resistance, Xie did end up going to the local private school, and several

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<sup>73</sup> Xie, 6, 21-22.

<sup>74</sup> Xie, *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*, 6. It cannot be known for certain what motivated Xie's father and what his opinions were on the current events or politics of the time, however, it seems he was not completely opposed to all of the new and European influences that were affecting China in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. For example, in her autobiography, Xie Bingying mentions that her father encouraged her brother to learn English and be diligent in his foreign subjects classes.

<sup>75</sup> Xie, 19.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

others during her lifetime. Revolution was in the air, and Xie would not be deterred in her desires.

Following her time at the local private boys school Xie soon enrolled in the Da Tong Girls School. Xie was a boarder at this school and, out from her mother's watchful eye, undid and threw away the bindings that her mother had begun to wrap around her feet.<sup>77</sup> Against her mother's wishes and societal conventions Xie began her revolutionary career by unbinding her feet and supporting other girls who had also had their feet bound.

At this point, Xie's revolutionary ideas were still developing; however, it is during this period that we begin to see her revolutionary spirit and the lengths Xie was willing to go to in order to achieve her aims. In releasing her feet, Xie risked her mother's displeasure and societal scorn/shame; it could have also affected the outlook for her marriage. Nevertheless, Xie was determined to do as she pleased—that is, endorse the revolutionary movement for change and to fight against traditional “feudal” society. An additional example of Xie's early activism is her participation in the parade/march at her school in remembrance of China's “Day of National Shame.”<sup>78</sup> These small, more local efforts were not enough for Xie, and in 1926 she applied to and entered the Central Military and Political School in Wuhan as a female cadet. There, she trained and fought as a soldier for the Nationalist Revolutionary Army until her corps was disbanded in 1927 and she returned home to face a different struggle with her family who attempted to force her to fulfill an arranged marriage. Becoming a soldier exemplified Xie's activism and revolutionary spirit, as well as her courage and determination in the face of great

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>78</sup> The school she was attending at this time was Xinhua Girls' School; China's “Day of National Shame” was the anniversary of the day in 1915 when China was forced to cede Shandong to Japan as well as accept Japan's “Twenty-One Demands” (Xie, 33).

odds and societal disapproval. Her resistance to customs such as footbinding and arranged marriages demonstrates her disregard for tradition and her embrace of Western ideas of modernity. Xie endured many trials but was unwilling to succumb to the traditional practices of a “feudal society.” Reading her autobiography, Xie’s words and thoughts are couched in military phraseology; everything is a fight for her: traditionalism or modernization, enemy or comrade. These terms underscore Xie’s upbringing during a time of political and military conflict, and demonstrate Xie’s belief in and championship of Nationalist rhetoric of modernization and change for China.

### *Wang Su Chun*

Wang’s story is told only briefly in a single chapter titled “Wang Su Chun dies for Freedom,” in Anna Strong’s *China’s Millions*, which contains a collection of stories gathered by Strong during her travels in China in 1926-7. The chapter is a mere 17 pages long and also includes other accounts of other young Chinese women of the time, that aim to contextualize Wang’s story and help readers understand the social and political climate of the time. I found only two sources for Wang’s story, both by Anna Strong, and there is much information that is missing, including details about her family, upbringing, activism, affiliation, and the Chinese characters for her name.<sup>79</sup> The record of her activism is also brief, covering about seven months during the spring and summer of 1927. However, Wang’s story stands out because of her activism and because she is an example of an early female martyr of China’s modernization

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<sup>79</sup> While it is not explicitly clear what her political affiliation was, the source mentions an association with the Kuomintang (GMD) (Anna Louise Strong, *China’s Millions*, (New York: Coward McCann Inc., 1928), 152). Also, it is unknown whether feet were bound or not. The only family we hear anything about is Wang’s father who is described as a Christian and a farmer. However, it is unknown if Wang’s father had any affiliation with either the Nationalist or Chinese Communist Party. It does seem that he was liberal-minded enough, or sufficiently influenced by Western or Christian ideology, that he sent his daughter to school, first at the Zierner Memorial School and then to a missionary school in Fujian.

movement. In particular, hers is the story of a rural girl whose father was not an official or member of the Chinese gentry; she did not study abroad; and as far as can be discerned, her activities did not greatly affect the Nationalist Movement. This is in contrast to more well-known martyrs and activists such as Qiu Jin, Xie Bingying, and Zheng Yuxiu (Madame Wei Tao-Ming) who came from urban areas and whose families were part of the educated elite, held a government position, or who found a way to study abroad and had greater contact with Western ideas of freedom, independence, and change.

Wang Su Chun was the daughter of a Christian farmer in rural Hunan. Born in a small village some 100 *li* away from Yueyang,<sup>80</sup> one cannot be faulted for the assumption that Wang would grow up uneducated and steeped in ancient Chinese traditions. However, this was not the case. To begin, Wang Su Chun was the daughter of a Christian farmer, an uncommon practice that would have altered Wang's upbringing from other Chinese girls. Being Chinese, Wang's father believed in education, as a Christian he believed that daughters should also be educated.<sup>81</sup> As a result, Wang was sent to an American missionary school, the Ziemer Memorial School for primary education and later studied at a secondary school in Fujian. Although more and more girls in China were receiving an education, sending girls to school was at this point, still not the norm. The fact that Wang was educated not only at a primary school level, but also went to a secondary school in Fujian—far from her village—marks her as non-typical and non-representative of most Chinese women; and yet, the fact that she came from such a rural area also precludes her inclusion into the ranks of the Chinese modernist archetype of a modern, educated, urbanite. Upon finishing her education, Wang returned to her village and was

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<sup>80</sup> Strong states that Wang's village was called "Lingsiang" (143).

<sup>81</sup> Strong, 143.



surrounded by a community that still clung to many old customs and beliefs. It is through Wang's actions and the reception of her actions, that we can infer the views of more "average" rural Chinese.

Upon returning to her village, Wang's Western education and absorption of modernist ideas immediately made huge waves in her community. Isolated as it may have been, it appears that Wang's village, despite the presence of Chinese Christian-converts, was largely untouched by many of the ideas that were circulating in the cities. The community was still heavily influenced by Confucianism and patriarchal customs that had been practiced for centuries. Wang's refusal to properly comply with those traditions and her activism ultimately led to her demise.<sup>82</sup> Upon her return home, Wang announced that she was engaged and that she would choose her own husband (unheard of in a culture with arranged marriages where girls especially had no voice). In addition to this, Wang joined the local Hunan Woman's organization and soon became a prominent figure within the group. This may all have eventually been accepted to an extent; however, as described by Strong's Chinese student informant, Wang went too far when she became involved with the ousting, trial, and shooting of a local grafter. In the end, when a group of "reactionary soldiers" passed through the village, Wang's neighbors pointed to her as a "girl agitator" and Wang was dismembered and shot multiple times in a gruesome death.<sup>83</sup> From this account, one can get a feel for the struggle of both young revolutionary activists and the communities in which they rebelled. Culture and traditions are strong, not easily mutable institutions, and ultimately, the strong spirit of this young girl was snuffed out.

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<sup>82</sup> Wang's actions and beliefs were heavily influenced by her Western and high-level of education. Separated from rural community beliefs and instilled with Western values of independence, individual rights, and equality, it is not surprising that Wang was not content to conform with old customs that were inherently unequal.

<sup>83</sup> The soldiers surrounded her, "shouted many bad words at her" and "cut her to pieces with knives and bayonets." As a grand finale, they fired "seventeen shots into what was left" (Strong, 152).

*Ning Lao Taitai*

The story of Ning Lao Taitai can be found in the biography titled *A Daughter of Han* written by Ida Pruitt. Pruitt was the daughter of Christian missionaries and got to know Ning Lao Taitai through weekly conversations over the course of several years.<sup>84</sup> Although not a true primary source as it was not written by Ning, Ning's biography is something of a collaboration as it is based on her personal oral narrative which was recoded by Pruitt. While some similarities can be found between Ning's story and those of Zheng, Yang, Xie, or Wang, Ning's story is by far the most different. Ning Lao Taitai (meaning Old Aunt Ning) was born in 1867 in a town called P'englai, a town on the peninsula of Shandong Province. She was the youngest child born to her mother and the third to survive childhood. Called "little Tiger" by her mother, Ning is the oldest of the five women here discussed in this thesis; and her life story is also the most different. Born a generation before Zheng, Yang, Xie, and Wang, Ning Lao Taitai's life was much more strongly dominated by imperial-era values and Confucian traditions. Once wealthier overseers of the Ch'i (Pinyin: Qi) family gardens (the Qi family being one of the most preeminent families in P'englai,) by the time Ning Lao Taitai was born, the family had lost much of its wealth and fallen on hard times. When she was three or four years old, Ning's family moved out of their private courtyard into the three northern *chien* of a shared courtyard, and when she was eleven years old, Ning's family moved to a house "in the corner of the garden" where Ning's father was employed for a time.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ida Pruitt and Ning Lao Tai Tai, *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 1-4; Marjorie King, "A Daughter of Two Nations," originally in *Women of China*, September 1986, reproduced by the Ida Pruitt Fund, accessed October 27, 2019, <https://www.idapruittfund.org/ida.htm>.

<sup>85</sup> The "three-chien house" was located in the Chou Wang Temple neighborhood and had a thatched roof, where before they had lived in a house with a tile roof (Pruitt, 11, 20).

Although she had a fairly strict upbringing, as the youngest, Ning was especially favored by her parents and given many liberties. She had a wild spirit and loved to play outside. “There was nothing that I did not dare to do.”<sup>86</sup> She played often with the neighborhood children, a favorite game was jumping over open wells. No matter how favored she was, however, Ning could not escape tradition. When she was nine, Ning Lao Taitai’s feet were bound in the centuries-old tradition of elite and wealthy girls.<sup>87</sup> Her hairstyles was changed from the half-shaved head of a child and let grow and styled in the way of a young unmarried girl. When she was fifteen, her marriage was arranged through a matchmaker to a man in the next village away, and celebrated with a traditional wedding procession and celebration.

Ning, like many other women in her family, was unfortunate in her marriage. While she did not have to contend with a cruel mother-in-law or a physically abusive husband like her sister, Ning’s husband was an opium addict and “did not bring home food.”<sup>88</sup> She often relied on her family to provide food, and in the early years of her marriage, Ning often return to her natal home for long visits. Although many people in Ning’s life helped her, her husband was not much use through most of their marriage. The best thing he did for Ning was to provide her with a son near the end of their time together. When she was first married, Ning did not work outside her home, but rather cooked and cleaned and took care of the house as was considered proper; but, because her husband was an opium addict, Ning was eventually compelled to find work outside of home. During her life she worked in several occupations. In addition to the care-duties of a

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<sup>86</sup> Pruitt, 22.

<sup>87</sup> Because her parents favored her, started binding process later than usual, at seven. This was soon paused because she got “the heavenly blooms,” (smallpox) and the binding process for Ning did not start again until she was age 9. Ning recalls that her feet hurt terribly the first two years, but after two years they did not hurt and, by age 13 they were finished and were quite small (Pruitt, 22).

<sup>88</sup> Pruitt, 42.

mother (and eventually grandmother), Ning spent a lot of time working as an amah (maid, servant, or care-taker) to several Yamens and missionaries; at one point she was a beggar, and at another a peddler of wares. Ning's life was not an easy one, but she persevered and survived to become an old woman.

While in some ways, Ning's life was more typical of an average Chinese woman, in other ways her life was distinct. Her life shared some traits with more elite children: she had bound feet and was not supposed to play with boys after a certain age. Like many other girls, she was held to traditional expectations for women<sup>89</sup> and had an arranged marriage. In other ways, Ning Lao Taitai was quite atypical. She had a strong personality and fiery temper which often got her into trouble, but also endeared her to most people. Largely because of her unfortunate marriage, she did not live a cloistered life, but was forced to go outside her home to work; she held various occupations, most often as an amah. Not unlike other women, Ning raised her children, however, she did it primarily by herself. Although she was not educated, Ning's son and grandchildren attended a missionary school and received some education. Always thinking of others, Ning wanted to provide her son and granddaughters with some of the opportunities denied to her. Ning did not become a revolutionary or activist, but she was nonetheless divergent to the traditional ideals of a good Chinese woman and involved in her community.

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<sup>89</sup> For example, exhibiting traits of a good wife: cooking, cleaning, childcare.

## Comparisons

### *Zheng Yuxiu vs. Xie Bingying*

In many ways Zheng Yuxiu and Xie Bingying are the most similar of the women discussed in this thesis. Although Zheng was a little older than Xie, both were similarly drawn to education and politics. While their upbringing and opportunities were quite different, Zheng and Xie both had strong personalities and the desire to support and fight for China. Both Zheng and Xie rejected many aspects of tradition, including the practice of foot binding and arranged marriages; and both sought and achieved higher education, which was still somewhat unusual for most girls at the time (at least in achieving a higher education, if not the desire for it). In regards to education, Zheng was more fortunate than Xie. Zheng's family was wealthy enough that they could afford to send her to a variety of schools, including ones abroad, and they were liberal-minded enough to support female education, despite many families maintaining that girls should not be too educated.<sup>90</sup> In contrast, Xie had to fight for her education. Her mother was initially against her going to school and many people in her village also disapproved of Xie attending the local private boys school.<sup>91</sup> Yet, through her determination, Xie succeeded in attending first the local school, followed by several others. In regards to politics, both Zheng and Xie became involved in politics at an early age. In Zheng's case, her adventures accompanying her father around Beijing are credited with instilling and inspiring in her an interest in politics. This interest was supplemented by discussions on various topics with both her grandfather and father, as well as some of the many freedoms permitted to Zheng (going to Japan, loose supervision, etc.). Xie

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<sup>90</sup> For example, Zheng's fiancé's family did not believe that women should be educated. In her autobiography, Zheng recalls that her prospective father-in-law did not approve of "modern, educated women" and believed that she was already too educated (Zheng, *My Revolutionary Years*, 25).

<sup>91</sup> Xie, *A woman Soldier's Own Story*, 19-21.

did not have the opportunities that Zheng did; however, she was likewise exposed to Nationalist and Western ideas early on through her attendance of public and missionary schools. She was also encouraged to think of her nation by her second older brother (who was also a revolutionary and fought as a soldier).<sup>92</sup> It was Xie's second older brother and younger brother who convinced her mother to allow her to take the entrance exam to the First Provincial Girls Teacher Training School, and her second older brother who helped her get into the Wuhan Central Military and Political School.

While both Zheng and Xie desired to contribute to their nation, their methods for political participation differed. In her youth, Zheng took a violent approach that shared some similarity to Xie. She joined the *Tongmenghui* and aided in an assassination attempt on Yuan Shikai; when in France, she liked to be “in the thick of things” and did not hesitate to threaten the chief secretary of the Chinese Paris Peace Conference delegation with a rosebush gun.<sup>93</sup> Later, however, Zheng took a more diplomatic approach to aiding her country. She got a PhD in law from the Sorbonne and became China's first female lawyer. She contributed to the writing of the Nationalist's 1931 Civil Code of the Republic of China, served on the Shanghai Council, and worked to improve Chinese women's rights through the law. In contrast, Xie decided to become a soldier in order to fight for her country. At the Wuhan Central Military and Political School, Xie trained as a soldier in the school's female company, and in 1926 she fought with the National Revolutionary Army in

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<sup>92</sup> In her autobiography, Xie directly credits her second brother as the reason she became a soldier (Xie, 51).

<sup>93</sup> This was in an effort to appeal the head of the delegation, Mr. Lou Tseng Tsiang, against signing the 1919 Versailles Treaty in which Japan aimed to gain large portions of China. When peaceful discussions failed to persuade Lou to listen to their opinions, (of which the other two head delegates Dr. V.K. Wellington Koo and Dr. C.T. Wang were of like mind not to sign,) a large group of Chinese students in France, including Zheng, laid siege to the house Lou was hiding in. The Chief secretary was threatened because it was believed that he carried a signed copy of the 1919 Versailles Treaty. (Alternate names for Lou are: Lu Zhengxiang, 陆征祥, René Lou, Pierre-Célestin ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lou\\_Tseng-Tsiang](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lou_Tseng-Tsiang).) Zheng's experiences in France during period are recorded in the chapters “Peace Conference” and “Rosebush Gun” on pages 114-125 in Zheng's autobiography *My Revolutionary Years*.

the North Expedition.<sup>94</sup> Yet, similarly to Zheng, Xie's later life, while still political, was more reserved. She became a writer, publishing a variety of content between 1938 and 1948, before moving to Taiwan, and eventually, San Francisco in America.<sup>95</sup> Overall, despite their dissimilar circumstances, both Zheng and Xie were drawn to politics and became revolutionary activists. Their lives are suggestive of the pervasive appeal of Nationalist rhetoric during this period.

*Zheng and Xie vs. Yang Buwei*

Although Yang was not a revolutionary activist like Zheng Yuxiu or Xie Bingying, she nevertheless was an advocate for change and modernization. She was not politically active;<sup>96</sup> she did not fight as a soldier, she did not partake in Nationalist or Communist political activities, she was not part of a terrorist cell, nor did she become a martyr; yet, through her actions and life, Yang represents change for and in China. Even though Yang did not fight for change, she did take advantage of changes that were occurring in China as she grew up. Fostered and aided by the support of her liberal-minded (male) relatives, Yang was educated and given options that were traditionally unheard-of for girls. Through her non-activism, she represents numerous named and unnamed Chinese girls of the early twentieth-century; while her education and achievements typify the desires and goals of many Chinese in the late-Qing and post-imperial era.

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<sup>94</sup> Later, in the 1930s-40s during China's resistance against Japan, Xie organized and led the Hunan Women's War Zone Service Corps to fight against the Japanese (Xie., xi).

<sup>95</sup> Xie, x.

<sup>96</sup> Actually, Yang had joined the *Tongmenghui* as a girl, but she never joined the Guomindang and generally wanted to "avoid having too close connections with the government" (Yang, 164).

Several aspects of Yang's childhood resemble Zheng and Xie's. Like Zheng Yuxiu, Xie Bingying, and the woman martyr Qiu Jin, Yang fought against bound feet and succeeded in her efforts. Interestingly, while Zheng, Xie, and Qiu all experienced binding to some extent, it seems Yang managed to escape without undergoing any part of the painful procedure.<sup>97</sup> Although Yang's unbound feet were more a product of her grandfather and father's revolutionary spirit than her own, they nevertheless marked her as a rebel and were a tangible symbol of resistance against countless centuries of tradition. Her "natural feet" were in defiance of traditional cultural expectations and ideals, and in embrace of modern and Western ideas and values. Also similar to Zheng and Xie, Yang was educated and attended primary and middle school, followed eventually with attendance at a school for higher education. Furthermore, like Zheng and Xie, Yang's education included time abroad and she eventually settled in the United States. Though she may not have been an active revolutionary, Yang was certainly not conventional.

While Zheng, Xie, and Yang's lives shared many similarities, there were also some differences. Unlike Zheng and Xie, Yang was not active in the political and social movements of her time; her resistance to footbinding is possibly the most actively rebellious undertaking of her life. Additionally, Yang did not attend any missionary schools (her grandfather didn't believe in them), and the careers of the three women varied considerably. Whereas Zheng, who became a lawyer, and Xie, who was a soldier and later a writer, both wanted to do something for their nation and were willing to take physical, violent action to achieve change, Yang expressed no such sentiment in her autobiography. Yang may not have involved herself in politics or actively

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<sup>97</sup> Zheng and Xie both began the process of foot binding. Zheng stopped after 3 days and Xie undid her bindings not long after she started attending Xinhua Girls' School. Qiu Jin's feet were bound, but later in life she undid her bindings.



fought for change as Zheng Yuxiu or Xie Bingying did, yet it is undeniable that she was divergent and did not conform to traditional expectations for Chinese women.

*Zheng, Xie, and Yang vs. Wang Su Chun*

Of the women canvased in this thesis, the least amount is known about Wang Su Chun. Little is known about Wang's family and upbringing. It is unknown who her parents were and what kind of standing they had in their community. It is unknown if Wang had any siblings, if they also attended schools, if they supported Wang's activism, or if they also partook in or subscribed to new, modernist ideas. It is unknown whether Wang was affiliated with the CCP or the Nationalist, or if she was simply inspired by Western notions of independence and human rights. What is known, is that like Zheng, Xie, and Yang, Wang received an education and was influenced by what she learned while in school. Like Zheng and Xiu, Wang became an activist. Upon returning to her native village, Wang not only represented modernism in her appearance and manner, but also joined the local Women's Union, tried to educate local women about their rights, and encouraged other women to resist poor treatment. Unlike Xie, Zheng, and Yang, however, Wang's activism led to her sudden and violent death at a young age. Unlike Zheng and Yang, Wang was not born to a wealthy or elite family; rather, her father was a Christian farmer. Furthermore, while Zheng and Yang were born and raised in big, cosmopolitan cities (which are home to a variety of people and ideas), Wang appears to have spent the majority of her life in small, rural towns and villages. Although Xie was likewise born and raised in a rural town, she traveled to many parts of China (and was exposed to greater diversity), and her mother was a

person of some influence in her community.<sup>98</sup> Wang's abrupt and tragic end suggests that her family was not one of the community's more powerful families; and certainly indicates that Wang lacked the support of the other women. Zheng and Xie both had brothers who supported their activism, and Yang and Zheng's families were both supportive of some modern ideas and practices. Furthermore, the political and social influence and wealth of Yang and Zheng's families enabled Yang and Zheng to be more divergent with fewer consequences, or at the very least, their families were better able to help them get out of difficult situations.<sup>99</sup> Zheng, Yang, and Xie's support networks also included friends or other revolutionaries that could be turned to for inspiration, encouragement, and help; it is unknown whether Wang had a similar support network.

Another difference is that while Zheng and Xie's activism was political (as revolutionaries), fueled by nationalism, and directed more towards China at large, Wang's activism is described as more local and it is unclear whether she was motivated by nationalism or not. Wang not only represented but advocated change in the rural region where she grew up. Furthermore, she was a constant presence, rather than a transient figure whose ideology may be ignored once they've moved on. Zheng and Xie's revolutionary activism took place in big cities or places far away from their hometown, and their actions are more detached from their personal reputations and images. In contrast, Wang's reputation was closely tied with her activism, and this made it easier for her to be targeted by those in her community who were fearful of or rejected the changes Wang represented. Unlike the other women canvased in this thesis (all of

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<sup>98</sup> Xie describes her mother as the Mussolini of their hometown of Xietuoshan (Xie, *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*, 6).

<sup>99</sup> For example, Zheng's family moved back to Canton and sent her to Japan after their home in Beijing was searched because of Zheng's political activities. In so removing Zheng from the scene of conflict, the Zheng family was able to remove Zheng from the government's radar of suspicion that she was a political threat.

whom lived long lives), Wang's life was cut short and it is unknown who she might have grown to be and what she might have accomplished had she lived. Wang's story has the most holes and is the shortest, yet, it is also the most dramatic.

*Zheng, Xie, Yang, and Wang vs. Ning Lao Taitai*

At first glance, there seems to be almost no similarities between Ning and the four other women featured in this thesis. In contrast to Zheng, Yang, Xie, and Wang, Ning was born in the North in 1867. Of the five women discussed in this thesis, Ning is the only one to be born in the North and she is also the oldest. Furthermore, her life is arguably the least exciting, in as far as activism and new opportunities are concerned. Ning grew up before the period of reforms and revolution (1890s on), as a consequence, her life experiences are significantly different from the other women discussed in this thesis. Yet, beyond the very broad terms of all of them being Chinese women who lived around the turn of the twentieth century, there are some similarities to be found,.

There are many differences between Ning and the other four women. Unlike Zheng or Yang, Ning did not grow up in a wealthy family. Although her family had at one point been among the more wealthy and respected peasant families of P'englai, Ning's experience with such families was the various yamen houses she worked in during her lifetime. Unlike Zheng, Xie, and Yang, Ning's feet were bound and remained so throughout her life. Additionally, she was denied an education as a child, despite the fact that a missionary couple were willing to teach

her.<sup>100</sup> Rather than receive an education from missionaries, Ning worked in a few missionary homes.

Upon closer examination, there are some similarities between Ning Lao Taitai and the four other women. Like Zheng, Xie, Yang, and, Wang, Ning Lao Taitai was strong in character and will; despite many hardships, she persevered and survived. She was not a revolutionary, but she did not conform to the ideal. From an early age, Ning's account of her life to Ida Pruitt, reveals her to be a child full of energy and not given to submissiveness. In many ways, she was a "good girl" that people liked, but she also had a temper that sometimes caused problems for her. Sometimes, her temper lent her strength. When she was pregnant with her second child, was the first time Ning Lao Taitai left her husband. She had a certain amount of self-respect and did not allow others to demean her beyond a certain point. (She did believe in hierarchy and manners, and was willing to accept some criticism from others if she had done wrong.) Although she mostly seemed to accept the misfortune of her marriage as part of her fate, she had the fortitude to work and provide for herself and her children and grandchildren. Repeatedly in her life, Ning acted and thought in ways that were contrary to expectation and were rather rebellious.

Ning Lao Taitai was not educated, nor was she a revolutionary or activist, but she was not a passive or submissive woman. Ning's temper often got her into trouble, and it is easy to imagine that, if born a little later and in different circumstances, Ning could easily have become a revolutionary or activist like Xie Bingying or Zheng Yuxiu. Instead, Ning's strong character and open-mindedness meant that she was receptive to many reformist/Nationalist supported ideas and made sure her grandchildren and son were educated.

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<sup>100</sup> Ning would't have been the only student, and it was really mostly the wife of Pastor Deemster who would have taught young Ning.

### **Part 3 — Conclusion**

Not everyone was compelled to fight for reform during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in China; however, these sources demonstrate the strong reactions of some Chinese to the growing movement of change in China. As illuminated here and in other research,<sup>101</sup> Chinese women were not an insignificant part in the modernization process. Whether they were activists or not, Chinese women consistently engaged with their communities. The circumstances of a woman's birth affected whether a woman became an activist or rebel;<sup>102</sup> however, as can be seen from the five women discussed here, a person's upbringing and community did not necessarily determine her life path. Rebellion and activism was not restricted to a particular class or region. Rebels could be found at all levels of society and there were many ways to be a rebel; activism did not always equal being politically active. Modern ideas about nationalism, human rights, and equality were spread by the Nationalists and Communists in the early 1900s, and inspired many young people, including women, to activism. While many activists were from more elite circumstances (e.g. Zheng and Yang), others were not (e.g. Wang and Xie). Even if a woman was not an activist, she could exhibit divergent traits that rebelled against tradition and established customs (e.g. Yang and Ning).

My work in this thesis opens up new avenues to explore. As a continuation of this thesis' research, it would be interesting to explore more fully the significance of these five women's experiences. How they fit into the larger picture of contemporary Chinese politics and society at the turn of the twentieth century; the significance of female activism, or non-activism; how their participation or non-participation in political activities compares to their male counterparts; and

<sup>101</sup> For example, the work of Hershatter, Ono, Salaf, Wang, Spence, or Zheng Wang.

<sup>102</sup> Circumstances such as a woman's family's socioeconomic situation, education level, values, traditions, etc., were all powerful institutions.

how these five women's activities and experiences compare with other women internationally at the time, are all engaging considerations meriting further study.

Although this topic is quite interesting, there are some limitations to researching female involvement and support of the various movements to beset Chinese society in the early decades of the twentieth-century. Among these limitations is a paucity of source materials. The study of subaltern groups is not always straightforward or easy. For example, research on rural and lower-class women is usually difficult, due to a scarcity of primary sources from such individuals. The reasons for this are manifold, but are in part due to their stories not previously being valued, and partly due to the general lack of literacy among rural and lower-class Chinese women.<sup>103</sup> For sources that do exist, there are often details that are missing, or the work is incomplete. The work of those such as Zhao Ma or Jonathan Spence are illustrative of this difficulty.<sup>104</sup> Working with few primary accounts, Zhao and Spence must often extrapolate the experiences of women through extant evidence such as government documents. Even among the extant biographies and interviews of Chinese women who lived at the turn of the twentieth century, few women tend to dwell on their educative and formative years, or the impact of and response to social and cultural movements of the time.<sup>105</sup> What were the thoughts of factory girls, migrant workers, and prostitutes about the political climate of the early twentieth century, and were they aware of New

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<sup>103</sup> While many Chinese people had some degree of education in China in the later decades of the Qing dynasty, the majority of the Chinese population remained illiterate; the percentage of women who were literate and had the time and resources to write was even lower. The number of women who wrote about their beliefs and experiences in relation to political and social modernization movements further decreases the body of source materials interested parties have to draw on. The daily lives of peasant and working class women were seldom recorded (not seen as particularly interesting; and such women typically lacked the means and motivation to record such things); as a result, the majority of extant sources available to historians are largely records of the experiences of more privileged women.

<sup>104</sup> Here I am referring to: Jonathan D. Spence's *The Death of Woman Wang* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978) and Zhao Ma's *Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937-1949* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015). A another, similar example of narrative construction from scant material is Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983). In this source, the extraordinary trial and case of identity fraud, Davis utilizes court documents and records, and contemporary research to reconstruct the story of the Frenchman Martin Guerre.

<sup>105</sup> One of the few primary sources that describe some of the views and lives of women in the early twentieth century, is Xie Bingying's *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*.

Culture ideas and reforms? Did they support Western values about individuality and human rights, or were they more supportive of the traditional values they likely grew up with? Although it would be fascinating to gain answers to such questions, unfortunately, the answers to most of these questions will remain unanswered because such women tended to leave few written sources that reveal what their lives were like and how they felt. As a result, the stories of most of China's women were never written down and are now lost to us.

The scarcity of primary documents that record the experiences and thoughts of Chinese women make the work of historians such as Gail Hershatter all the more valuable. Hershatter, Mary Sheridan, Janet Salaff, and Wang Zheng among others have conducted and collected interviews and investigations into the lives of rural and lower-class Chinese women that would otherwise have been lost. Unfortunately, undergraduates in American universities are limited by location, time, and resources, and such research is typically impossible to conduct. Further barriers to researchers include language barriers, generational gaps, and the effects of time. Historians of Chinese women are increasingly consulting Chinese sources and incorporating the research of Chinese scholars, however, access to Chinese sources is still a challenge for many researchers. Moreover, interviews conducted in present times about women's experiences in the early 1900s, rely on memories of experiences long past and accounts could be influenced by later events, hindsight, or the ravages of time on a person's memory. First-hand accounts by people who have lived through events are infinitely valuable; however, they are also flawed. Human memory is imperfect; culture and life experiences can affect a person's perspective and memory, hindsight can alter opinions, and information gathered through interviews, biographies, and autobiographies must necessarily be edited/abridged, and so, cannot provide a full picture of

events or society. Yet, such primary sources are also valuable for the perspectives they bring and the limited information they provide. From scraps of biography and government documents, newspapers, censuses, etc. one can begin to piece together the culture and events and experiences of people of the past. While researchers scramble to collect as many life-stories as possible, those who were alive at the turn of the twentieth century grow older, and their numbers fewer.

Although many stories are lost, it is important to protect those that we have. By analyzing Chinese women's stories, we can gain a greater appreciation for their lives and experiences, and gain a deeper understanding and respect for Chinese history in general.

History is complex, intricate, and filled with innumerable stories. While it is impossible to tell every story, it is worth trying to uncover and tell as many as possible, especially when it comes to the stories of traditionally underrepresented groups. In particular, it is worth exploring the stories of women. Women constitute roughly half the human population, yet, throughout history their ideas and experiences have been consistently ignored and their actions and importance taken for granted. The field of women's studies is working to reverse this trend. In line with this goal, my thesis highlights the experiences and contributions of five women in modern Chinese history. In analyzing the circumstances and life experiences of these women, I broaden the platform from which historians can understand and further evaluate the participation and contributions of Chinese women in history.



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