

Feminism in the May Fourth Movement

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Abstract. Feminism in the May Fourth Movement is one of the important issues in modern Chinese history. By studying the background and overview of the May Fourth Movement, the situation of women's participation, the rise and development of feminism, and its influence and significance on society, this paper deeply discusses the important role of feminism in Chinese culture during the May Fourth Movement. The May Fourth Movement was a revolutionary movement of great influence in China's modern history, bringing about great political, cultural, and social changes. During this period, the participation of women played an active role, as they organized and participated in the movement in different ways, making important contributions to the struggle for equal rights and interests for women.

Keywords: May 4th Movement, feminism, women's participation, social change, equal rights for women

1. Introduction

The May Fourth Movement, which began in 1919, marked a major turning point in modern Chinese history. It was not only a political protest sparked by national dissatisfaction but also a cultural awakening that challenged traditional values and called for democracy, science, and gender equality. As a starting point for China's modern social reform, it laid the foundation for movements advocating educational modernization and women's rights.

The feudal character of Chinese society is one of the most important factors in the background of the May Fourth Movement. Before the Movement, Chinese society had been under a highly feudal social structure. The family was the basic unit of feudal society and the foundation of feudal rule from the very beginning. The influence of Confucianism led to the formation of an orderly hierarchy, in which peasants, as the bottom class of society, had a low status and lacked power. Feudal land ownership was a central feature of this system. Per capita arable land in feudal China was extremely limited. According to historical estimates, during the mid-Qing period, the average per capita cultivated land declined from about 3.53 mu in 1766 to only 2.09 mu by 1820 (approximately 0.23 to 0.14 hectares) [1]. Although total arable land expanded significantly under Emperor Qianlong, it could not keep pace with the rapidly growing population [2]. Most of the land was still controlled by landlords, and the majority of farmers were tenant cultivators who had little opportunity to own land. Under this oppressive land system, peasants were often deprived of land and forced to rely solely on selling their labor to survive. This feudal economic structure exacerbated class divisions and deepened the social inequities that became a key factor behind the

eruption of the May Fourth Movement. This economic relationship based on the feudal land system exacerbated class contradictions and social inequities and became the crux of the long-standing repression of Chinese society.

The feudal society also had a strict hierarchical system, and women had a low status and lacked autonomy and equal rights. In such a social context, women are bound by male dominance and the family system, unable to obtain their own social status, and lack opportunities for education and career development.

These characteristics of feudal society caused serious inequality and social injustice in Chinese society, which became the fuse of the May Fourth Movement. After the outbreak of the May Fourth Movement, Chinese society was generally dissatisfied with the feudal system, and rebellious emotions were rising, feudal characteristics gradually became one of the core issues of Chinese social reform.

2. Women in the May 4th Movement

2.1. Women's organizations

During the May 4th Movement, the Student Women's Association was one of the important organizations in which women actively participated. The Student Women's Association was dedicated to promoting the social status of women and protesting the oppression of feudal ethics.

The main activities of the Girl Student Association are as follows:

The Student Women's Association has organized a series of lectures and workshops aimed at inspiring women to think independently and have a sense of autonomy. These events covered a wide range of topics, from women's rights to the reform of the modern education system. Through these activities, women actively express their opinions and opinions, contributing to the progress of society and the change of women's status. The Student Women's Association has organized a series of lectures and workshops aimed at inspiring women to think independently and develop a sense of autonomy. These events covered a wide range of topics, from women's rights to the reform of the modern education system. Through these activities, women actively expressed their opinions, contributing to social progress and changes in women's status. As a result, the widespread participation significantly raised awareness among women about their rights and social roles, fostering empowerment and collective identity. This growing engagement helped accelerate the spread of progressive ideas related to gender equality and educational reform throughout society. Consequently, these activities played an important role in advancing the May Fourth Movement's goals by mobilizing women to actively participate in social and political reforms, thereby contributing to the transformation of traditional gender norms in China [3,4].

Moreover, a series of demonstrations and protests were carried out by the Student Women's Association to publicize and emphasize the importance of women's rights in society. They organized marches, rallies, and reports of feudal persecution, sending a message of equality and freedom to the public. These activities not only expressed women's dissatisfaction with unfair treatment but also laid the foundation for the rise of the women's liberation movement.

During the May Fourth Movement, numerous demonstrations and protests were organized by student groups, including women's associations, which played a vital role in mobilizing social participation and spreading progressive ideas across China [5].

The Student Women's Association was not only active in intellectual and political arenas but also deeply involved in community building and charitable activities. Through volunteerism and social practice, they sought to improve the living conditions of women and children, organizing relief

efforts and advocating social concern for vulnerable groups. These grassroots activities helped to extend the influence of the May Fourth Movement beyond academic circles and urban centers into everyday social life. According to historical accounts, during the May Fourth Movement period, student women's groups participated in hundreds of such community and charity projects, mobilizing social resources and raising public awareness of social justice and welfare issues [6]. This engagement illustrated how the movement fostered a new sense of social responsibility and activism among women, aligning with its broader goals of modernization, democratization, and the challenge of traditional Confucian hierarchies.

During the May Fourth Movement, the activities of the Student Women's Association covered many cities across the country and mobilized tens of thousands of women to participate, making important contributions to the social change at that time. Their efforts not only had an important impact on society at that time but also laid the foundation for the later development of the women's liberation movement. According to relevant data,

2.2. Analysis of specific activities involving women

During the May Fourth Movement, women actively participated in various specific activities and made important contributions to the development and promotion of the movement. Women participated extensively in demonstrations and propaganda activities and played an important role in guiding public opinion. By organizing large-scale marches and rallies, and Shouting slogans in public places, the propositions and demands of the May Fourth Movement were conveyed. According to statistics the number of women participating in the demonstration accounted for 45% of the total number of people, which indicates that the scale of women's participation was large and contributed substantially to the publicity of the whole movement.

Women's active participation in the May Fourth Movement extended beyond demonstrations and charitable activities to include significant contributions in literature and the arts. As an important part of student women's associations and other social groups, female creators expressed the movement's ideas and ideals through poems, novels, plays, and other artistic forms. This literary engagement not only spread progressive values and inspired critical thinking but also provided a new channel for advocating social reform and women's rights. According to survey data, female creators accounted for approximately 30% of literary and artistic works related to the movement, highlighting their vital role in promoting its cultural and ideological impact. Thus, literary and artistic creation can be seen as a complementary form of social activism, alongside community-building efforts and public demonstrations, collectively advancing the goals of the May Fourth Movement [3,7,8].

Women also actively participate in the operation and management of the student union and other organizations, improving the effectiveness and influence of the organizations. They held various important positions in the organization, such as ministers and secretaries, participated in decision-making and organizing activities, and actively cooperated and communicated with other organizations, expanding the scope of influence of the May Fourth Movement. These data confirm the importance of women's active participation and leadership within organizations.

During the May Fourth Movement, women participated in a variety of concrete activities that contributed to the movement's dynamism. These included organizing and joining demonstrations, engaging in propaganda and public speeches, participating in community-building and charitable efforts, and contributing creatively through literature and the arts. By expressing their demands and ideals in multiple forms, women helped broaden the scope of the movement, turning it into a multifaceted social and cultural reform effort.

The active involvement of women in these diverse activities played a crucial role in advancing the May Fourth Movement's objectives. Their participation not only helped spread progressive ideas such as democracy, science, and gender equality but also laid important groundwork for the rise of feminism in China. Historically, these contributions have had a profound impact on the transformation of Chinese society, accelerating social reforms and promoting the advancement of women's status.

3. The rise and development of feminist

3.1. The awakening

During the May 4th Movement, the awakening of female participants and the recognition of feminist consciousness played an important role in the movement. Under the impetus of the new thoughts and ideas of the May Fourth Movement, such as democracy, science, individual freedom, gender equality, and the critique of traditional Confucian values, many women began to reflect on the bondage and discrimination of women in the traditional feudal society. They began to pay attention to their social status and rights, and advocated that women should get equal opportunities and treatment. The introduction of feminism helped Chinese women realize the possibility of equality and self-liberation, inspired them to challenge traditional gender roles, and motivated active participation in social and political reforms.

Statistics show that the proportion of female participants in the May 4th Movement has gradually increased. By May 4, 1920, women made up about one-third of the total number of participants in the demonstration held at Peking University, which was a very significant proportion at the time. This shows the scale and influence of women's consciousness awakening during the May Fourth Movement.

The awakening of feminist consciousness in the May Fourth Movement is not only due to the input of western feminist thought, but also inseparable from Chinese women's desire for self-liberation. The influence of Western feminist thought on China cannot be ignored. It provides a new thinking paradigm and social participation model for Chinese women. Chinese women began to see the achievements of Western women in the struggle for equality and rights, as if they saw a possibility that inspired them to think about their own destiny.

However, the core of the awakening of feminist consciousness in the May Fourth Movement is the experience and cognition of Chinese women themselves. As members of the family and society, they personally experienced the bondage and oppression brought by the feudal family system, and also witnessed the impact and change of Western culture on Chinese society. This dual experience made them deeply aware of the unequal status of women and the unreasonable social system, and actively participated in the movement to fight for women's equal rights and interests.

During the May 4th Movement, female participants made speeches and articles calling for the abolition of feudal vices and equal rights in marriage and education. Through publicity and education, they advocate women's independent personality and spiritual pursuit. They raised many important slogans and demands, including women's liberation, women's rights and interests' protection, gender equality, and so on. These views and ideas not only gave broader social significance to the May Fourth Movement but also laid the foundation for the feminist movement in China.

The awakening of feminist consciousness in the May Fourth Movement was not an overnight, but a gradual process. Through participation in campaigns and social research, women gradually became aware of their situation and were not content to accept it passively. They began to reflect on the

suppression and restriction of traditional feudal concepts on women and began to pursue self-liberation and social status promotion. This awakening is of great significance to the rise and development of feminism in China.

3.2. The development

Following the awakening of feminist consciousness during the May Fourth Movement, women increasingly translated their awareness into concrete actions aimed at social and political reform. As Wang Zheng highlights, female participants actively engaged in organizing and attending public lectures, demonstrations, and debates that challenged traditional gender roles and advocated for women's rights in education, marriage, and labor. These activities provided platforms for women to express their demands clearly and collectively.

Gail Hershatter further emphasizes that women utilized print media—writing articles, essays, and poetry—to spread progressive ideas about gender equality and personal emancipation. Through such literary and public activism, women shaped public discourse and mobilized broader societal support. The speeches and writings called for the abolition of feudal customs and promoted ideals of independence and equal opportunities for women.

This developmental stage of women's participation was crucial in transforming feminist consciousness from private reflection to public advocacy and social practice. Their persistent efforts during the movement laid foundational work for China's later feminist movements and contributed significantly to the ongoing reshaping of women's social status in modern Chinese society.

4. Conclusion

This article explores the active participation of women in the May Fourth Movement, focusing on their various activities such as demonstrations, propaganda work, community building, charitable activities, and contributions to literature and art. Through historical analysis, the research indicates that women played a crucial role in promoting the movement's goals of social reform, gender equality, and cultural modernization.

The study examines how women's participation during the May Fourth Movement influenced the spread of progressive ideas and the transformation of traditional gender roles. It concludes that women's multifaceted involvement not only enhanced the movement's influence but also laid the foundation for the rise of modern Chinese feminism.

However, this article has certain limitations. Due to the lack of comprehensive quantitative data, some conclusions mainly rely on qualitative descriptions and secondary sources, which may limit the accuracy of the analysis. Additionally, the focus on female student associations might have overlooked the contributions of other female groups from different regions or social classes.

Future research that incorporates more primary sources, such as archival documents and personal memoirs, will be able to provide a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of women's roles in the movement. Expanding the scope of research to include rural women and a wider range of social participants will also help to gain deeper insights into the social dynamics of that period.

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