The Birth of Chinese Feminism

ESSENTIAL TEXTS IN TRANSNATIONAL THEORY

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Liang Qichao 梁启超 (aka Liang Rengong 梁任公, 1873–1929) was the foremost modern intellectual of China in the first two decades of the twentieth century. He was born in Xinhui, Guangdong Province, and became a disciple of the New Text Confucian scholar Kang Youwei. Liang was involved in the Hundred Days' Reform led by the young Guangxu emperor in 1898. Following a coup d'état by Empress Dowager Cixi's powerful conservative opponents, he and the other leaders of the movement were forced into exile in Japan, where his iconoclastic journalism and scholarly searchings began to shape the minds of a whole generation of Chinese students.

Liang was the first modern intellectual in China to achieve public stature through a systematic exploitation of journalism. While still in China, he founded and was editor of two prominent newspapers, Sino-Foreign News (Zhongwai gongbao) and The Chinese Progress (Shiwu bao), which advocated sweeping reforms to China's society and polity. While in exile, he was editor-in-chief of Journal of Pure Critique (Qingyi bao) and New Citizen Miscellany (Xinmin congbao), where he published many of his influential political essays and translations and inspired young Chinese with progressive new ideas in the last decade of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).

Liang's essay "On Women's Education" was first published in The Chinese Progress in Shanghai in 1897. It was one of a dozen essays Liang wrote in response to China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1895). He called for revamping the country's education system and the need to enlighten women and children. These
essays form a single collection called "On Institutional Reform" (Bianfa tongyi), which spearheaded the country's school reform, modern education programs, and national self-strengthening. An important historical document, "On Women's Education" represents the voice of progressive male intellectuals who sought to put women on the agenda of national salvation. It is translated in this volume for the first time.

"On Women's Education"

Liang Qichao (1897)

It was said in Mencius, "[But men possess a moral nature; and if they are well fed, warmly clad, and comfortably lodged,] without being taught at the same time, they become almost like the beasts." Such pithy and truthful words! If any man were treated like an animal, we would certainly expect him to be enraged. Yet if what Ziyushi [Mencius] said above is true, then there are innumerable people today who are like beasts.

In this great wide world, there are some four hundred million people who have round heads and square toes [and are thus Chinese]. Among them, nearly one hundred and ninety million are peasants, artisans, merchants, and soldiers, who have lived their entire lives without being educated. Among those who are called officials or scholars, several million actually have no learning although they claim to have. And in China, there are also nearly two hundred million who have round heads but bent toes [i.e., women], among whom there are no officials, scholars, peasants, artisans, merchants, or soldiers; since ancient times, they have never been educated. What is more, those officials, scholars, peasants, artisans,

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Notes:


*In Chinese mythology, heaven is a dome-shaped canopy over the square earth. Embodifying this perfect cosmic pattern, a human being is said to have a round head and square toes.

*By "round heads but bent toes," Liang refers to the harm that footbinding inflicted on the natural bodies of Chinese women.
and merchants whose lives are almost like those of beasts are nevertheless ashamed of that fact; but women who are not officials, scholars, peasants, artisans, or merchants and are almost like beasts feel no such shame! Not only is this so, but all of humanity simply takes this state of affairs to be the natural, fixed order of things. Alas! How painful it is! How painful it is!

Liang Qichao says that if one were to bring up the problem of women's education in China today, the reply would certainly be that there are innumerable issues that are of greater urgency now. The listener would respond that with so many other important reforms having yet to be implemented, the discussion of women's education is a distraction from the most pressing and fundamental problems. However, when I seek out the root causes of national weakness, I find that they inevitably lie in women's lack of education. Please allow me to offer four reasons why I believe this to be true.

The first reason is that philosophers (gōnghūa公理家) say that it is necessary that everyone in a country have his own occupation and be able to support himself. Only then will the country prosper. Indeed, the strength of a nation is directly related to the proportion of its people who are without work. Why is this so? People without work must be supported by people with work. If they are not supported, then people without work are endangered; yet if they are supported, then those with work are themselves imperiled. Translated Western texts have referred to this idea as the principle of profit making and profit sharing (生利, 分利), which is similar to the principle found in our [classic] *The Great Learning* (Daxue): “[T]hose who produce should be many, while those who consume should be few” [to consume is to eat and to deplete]. It is said in Guanzi that “if a man fails to plough, someone will starve; if a woman fails to spin, someone will freeze.”

These are not empty words; instead, it is the practical conclusion reached by considering the nation’s labor force and material production as a whole and as they relate proportionally to national profit. In China, even if we consider only the men, the number of those who only consume comes to roughly half of those who produce. According to the philosophers, this situation alone already makes a stable national government impossible, let alone when we consider the nation's two hundred million women, among whom all are consumers and none are producers. Owing to women's inability to support themselves and their dependence on other people, men raise women as livestock or slaves. Thus women live harsh lives. Since women are wholly dependent and men have no choice but to support them, even those men who work for the entire year cannot afford to care for their wives and children. Men [thus] also live harsh lives. Based on what I have observed, regardless of social status, neither upper-class officials, nor middle-class scholars, nor lower-class peasants, artisans, merchants, or soldiers can ever enjoy a time without panic and anxiety. And it is even more difficult to count the number of those who suffer from poverty—those who endure cold and hunger and whose dead bodies are discarded in ditches. In fact, based simply on the aforementioned principle of proportion, there would be no possibility of poverty if everyone worked with his own body to provide for his own sustenance.

Today, everyone worries about poverty in China. Poverty is caused when one person is forced to support several people. Although there are indeed several factors that have caused multiple people to become dependent upon one person, I would argue that the lack of employment of women is the original factor. Men and women are equally human—how is it that one works and the other does not? For all professions, there are necessary principles and practices that cannot be acquired without learning. We can see this clearly in the experience of men—an educated man who is conversant with the nature of things can easily find a job, whereas the less learned have much greater difficulty seeking employment. We might conclude, then, that education is the mother of occupations. The reason for women's lack of employment is not rooted in any natural principles or reason. Instead, it is a relic from the chaotic time in our past when humans struggled for power and to dominate each other by force. These values accorded with the natural abilities of men; women were unable to compete. As a result, women were seen as insignificant and were not to be educated. And without education, it was not possible for women to have occupations. After such a long time, the origins of women's lack of employment have gradually been forgotten by most people. It is now taken for granted that women are born without occupation and that they should depend on other people. Hence, men have become superior while women have become inferior. Women sit in idleness while men toil. But leading a life of leisure and being despised as inferior is by no means a naturally happy life, nor is being taken as superior while leading a life of toil.

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1A convention of the time was to write in the third person. The author, Liang Qichao, does so here.

2This term's individual components are as follows: gōng (公), typically translated as "public"; lǐ (理), variously meaning "reason," "principle," or "logic"; and jū (居), literally, "expert" but in this context meaning "philosopher." The most direct translation might render this term "experts of public principle"; we translate it here simply as "philosopher."
How, then, would it be if we were to balance out this relationship of superiority and inferiority between men and women? How would it be if we were to make equal their proportions of work and leisure? This solution is consistent with principle but contrary to reality in current practice. One might ask: How can a country become strong? It is strong when its people are wealthy. How can a country’s people become wealthy? They will be wealthy when everyone can support himself or herself and only himself or herself rather than several people. If the number of employed people doubles in a country, then the amount of the local products and goods produced will quickly double as well. This increased quantity is exactly what we once wasted property and to use it to enrich the people. Hence, there is no reason to reject women’s education.

The second reason is that what has commonly been said of women’s virtue—namely, that “in women, lack of talent is a virtue”—is entirely untrue. Our shortsighted scholars have held fast to this notion and have dedicated untold efforts toward keeping all women illiterate and unschooled. These scholars claim that such ignorance is the very foundation of women’s virtue, when in fact the path to national disaster. In ancient times there were so-called talented women whose best achievements were nothing more than several stanzas of ditties upon the beauty of the wind and moon, verses describing the flowers and the grasses, or poems lamenting the passage of spring or the loss of a friend. Such activities cannot be called learning. Even a man would be despised as frivolous and trifling if he knew nothing else and were to pursue fame in this kind of writing, let alone a woman.

What I mean by education is twofold: it should open one’s inner mind while also teaching a person skills to earn his or her livelihood (shengji). In this one pursuit, multiple good results are achieved, and I see in it no harm posed to women’s virtue. If one says that ignorance is women’s virtue, then why do illiterate women in the remote villages, of whom there are no not a few in the entire country, never become more virtuous because of their ignorance? Instead, all that we see is their quibbles and quarrels, which surely make them less virtuous than women from the official-scholar families. What do you say to this? Common people’s quibbles and quarrels inevitably come from the narrow scope of their minds. In their daily lives, they are trapped within this extremely small and limited world. If they are made to know the ten thousand years of history, the five continents of the world, the way people get along with each other, and

the way countries become prosperous or weak, their minds will be busy attending to the needs of all the people under heaven and will have no time for quibbling over family chores or affairs of women and children. Today most women are disadvantaged because they know nothing about the world and therefore devote all their energy to fighting daily over trivial matters. As a result, women all cultivate the same ugly habits without even having to learn them or having to consult one another. Because of this, among hundreds of millions of people and tens of millions of families throughout the land, there is not one family that is at peace inside and out, and where the conduct and speech of its members reflect harmony. And all these family conflicts begin with women—the mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, and sisters-in-law. Some cynics have even gone as far as to suggest that all women should be killed.

Are women evil by nature? If you throw together a bunch of untamed, uncivilized hollow bodies and lock them up in one room, do you expect them to get along with each other? Unable to provide for themselves, these women become men’s burden by wearing men down bodily and physically. Even worse, if the family is in chaos all day, causing a man to become agitated and upset as soon as he enters the room, the degree to which this undermines and exhausts his spirit and aspirations cannot be underestimated. Hence, even for an outstanding and charismatic hero, the mundane trivialities of domestic life can scarcely fail in a short time to confuse and to undermine his ambition and talent. If so, women really are poison and men should not be united with them. Instead of ingesting and enjoying this poison, perhaps men should pay some attention to finding the antidote.

The third proof [for my claim that women’s education is necessary for national survival] is that for Westerners, out of a hundred tasks involved in educating young children, over seventy are borne by the mother. A small infant is naturally closer to the mother than to the father, [and] therefore only the mother can take advantage of this propensity to guide him. Consequently, if the mother is a good teacher, it is for the child to grow upright; if the mother is a bad teacher, then the child is not likely to turn out well. According to The Family Instructions of Master Yan (Yanshi jiaxun),

"[C]hildren’s education should begin at infancy. Before [the children begin] going to school and studying under a mentor, the children’s character and

\[^6\]Refers to a sixth-century text compiled by Yan Zhiti (531–591). It became an influential and commonly referenced source of Confucian perspectives on the family and education.
ambition have generally been established. The future development of the children's character will follow the one that is formed at a very young age. This is indeed the foundation of pedagogy. If the mother understands the fundamentals of education and is skilled in applying them, then even before ten years of age, her children will be able to comprehend the rudimentary principles of scholarship, and they will already have established their ambitions and aspirations.

Today, children's primary education is not established in China. When a child studies under a tutor outside the family, the teachers are shallow, ignorant, and careless, having nothing valuable to teach the pupil. Such tutelage is different from the experiences of early childhood; the child is used to feeling satisfied at home in the care of the wet nurse, immersed daily in nothing but the most tedious and scandalous domestic trifles. Even a better teacher merely educates the child to admire success in the imperial examination and the accumulation of wealth, while admonishing the child to safeguard family property and to produce more progeny. This is the best education these teachers can muster. Therefore, in the child's mind as he grows up, there is nothing in the world more important than these achievements. In thousands of homes in all places, people commiserate in their ignorance, which results in the shallow, shameless, ignorant, and savage world in which people vie to pursue their private interests. Although people complain about the barbaric and degenerate ways of the world, they have no idea how it came to be this way; and even worse, people seem content with this state of affairs just as it is. If we were to have a small schoolboy from the West walk side by side with our majestic and aged official-scholars, the boy's varied knowledge and ambitions would certainly exhibit features with which our scholars could not compete. Is this because the Westerners belong to a special species or race (zhong ?), different from us entirely? No, the difference is that when young, our people grow accustomed to our erroneous methods of education.

In short, it has been said that there are two fundamental principles of governance: the first is to instill an upright heart, and the second is to recruit talented people from far and wide. Children's education establishes the foundation of both principles. Children's education begins with the mother's teaching, which is itself rooted in women's education. Therefore women's education fundamentally determines whether a nation will survive or be destroyed and whether it will prosper or languish in weakness.

The fourth reason is that prenatal education, discussed thoroughly in [the ancient texts] Rites of Da Dui (Da Dai Li) and Discursive Weighing (Lun Heng), has long been forgotten by later generations. Nowadays, Westerners certainly pay a lot attention to the issue. In their investigation of the principle of the transformation and evolution of animals and human species, Western philosophers think that inside any living organism (human beings, birds, insects, fishes, and grasses and trees are living organisms; metal, stone, water, and soil are inorganic substances), some parts are dead, whereas others are not dead. For example, the root, trunk, fruit, flower, and leaf are all dying parts of a plant. Those parts that do not die leave the mother and cling to the seed, thereby continuing the life of the species to the next generation. This is called propagation. The same process is true for human beings. Even so, there are gradual changes that occur between the two kinds of changes that can cause the species to develop from monkeys to human beings, from a savage and backward species to a civilized and noble one. The changes are slight and imperceptible in the beginning, but they will be enormous by the end of the process. It is for this reason that Western scholars who study the science of race have taken prenatal education as a top priority. They have given much thought to the various ways of improving their own species. Countries intending to strengthen their military power also order their women to practice physical exercises. They recognize that only in this way will their children have plump skin and strong, powerful tendons and muscles. This is also a fundamental concern in girls' schools.

Nowadays, for people who have foresight and who are concerned about the world, there are three important matters: to protect the nation, to protect the species, and to protect education. How are we to protect the nation? Only by strengthening it can it be protected. How are we to protect the species? Only by improving it can it be protected. To advance from deceit to loyalty, from selfishness to public spirit, from division to unity, from ignorance to intelligence, from savagery to civilization, this is the way [to improve the species]. Men's education constitutes half [of the nation] and women's education the other, but the education of men necessarily begins with that of women. As such, the protection of the species necessarily begins with and pivots on the education of women.

Da Dai Li refers to a set of descriptions of Zhou dynasty rituals.
Lun Heng is a Han dynasty text (ca. 80 C.E.) comprising a set of philosophical essays by Wang Chong.
Nowadays, when I discuss the necessity of women's education with people, they hardly take it as a practical and appropriate step to save the species. They think it is like saving people from starvation by teaching them how to plow or rescuing people from thirst by teaching them how to dig a well. They do not realize that the necessity of women's education has been carefully discussed, thoroughly interrogated, and avidly pursued by both our own ancient sages and the learned scholars of the West.

(According to The Treatise on Fetal Education [Taijiao Xuan], "[i]t is said in the Book of Changes that 'when one grasps the fundamentals, the myriad things would naturally fall into place. Even a minor lapse can lead to a major mistake. A learned man is therefore conscientious of the repercussions of his actions.' When he selects for his children the spouse who will carry his descendants, he will choose a family known for its benevolence and uprightness for generations. In this way, their offspring will be benevolent and filial, and they will not fall into debauchery and violence. Everyone they associate with will be benevolent, and the members of their three clans [the clans of the father, mother, and wife] will assist them. Therefore people say that the offspring of the phoenix are born with kindness, whereas those of the tiger and the wolf are born to be greedy and ruthless. The difference between the two stems from the characters of their mothers. There is in this statement a profound and obvious truth." It is also said that "the ways of prenatal education should be carved on the jade board, hidden in the golden casket, and placed in the ancestral temple as admonition for later generations. The seriousness with which the ancients treat this issue is not without reason." Mr. Yan Youling [Yan Fu] translated Evolution and Ethics [Tian Yan Lun], in which it is said that "inorganic substances cannot die because it never had life to begin with. The living organism, however, has some dead parts and also some live parts in its body. The live parts are not the so-called spirit or soul, and the parts that will die and those that will not die are two absolutely different things. The root or the trunk of the plants is the part that will die. The part that remains alive leaves the mother and clings to the filial generation. It may undergo slight modification, but it will not die; or part of it may die, but it will not die entirely. Animals and plants all follow this principle." Thus, one person will carry with him the immortal aspect that is transferred to him from his grandfather. When one is endowed with life and form, the immortal part of his forebears is passed on in evolved form to today; this is the reason for the need for prenatal education. In his correspondence with me, Mr. Yan has said that "the principles of biology [shengxue] hold that when a person is born, his mind, talent, physical figure, disposition, and character are inherited within the body. He is born with the mind and life experiences that were accumulated and stored by the grandparents from tens of hundreds of generations ago, and these experiences will change according to his own exposures, the influence from his teachers and friends, and his life experiences in the future." This insight is very profound. If one is concerned about the protection of the human species, one has to pay attention to the two above factors. The first factor explains the root of the advantage of prenatal education, whereas the second factor elucidates the even deeper basis for that truth. This theory will certainly be understood by everyone within a few decades, but now hardly anyone believes it to be practical or useful.)

A Western scientist (gezhi jia) has said that "women are generally not as good as men in comprehending abstract knowledge such as arithmetic and science. But when these theories are rendered into such practical specializations as medicine and manufacture, men are generally not as good as women." In terms of learning and education, men and women each have their strengths, but neither is inherently superior or inferior. People may claim that for thousands of years, men have brought forth significant scholarship and accomplished great tasks, so much so that our ancient annals are full of records of them, but none whatsoever about women. This may lead them to conclude that even if women were educated, their achievements would amount to very little.

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9This text from the Tang dynasty (7th century C.E.) laid out the argument that women's behavior while pregnant would affect their child, so that quarreling, food and drink, and so on, were all to be monitored strictly. For more on this issue, see the introduction to Tina Phillips Johnson, Childbirth in Republican China: Delivering Modernity (New York: Lexington Books, 2011).

10Yan Fu (1854-1921), was a reformer and translator during the late-Qing and republican periods. In particular, he was known for his translations of Adam Smith's The Wealth of Nations and Herbert Spencer's social evolutionary text Evolution and Ethics. For Yan Fu's importance at the time, see Benjamin Schwartz, In Search of Wealth and Power: Yan Fu and the West (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

11Shengxue is generally termed shengwu xue today.

12Gezhi can be rendered as "natural studies"; it was accepted at the time as equivalent to "science." Today, kexue is the accepted term for "science." For a recent study of the shifting meanings of gezhi and the introduction of modern Western science to China, see Benjamin Elman, A Cultural History of Modern Science in China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
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Let us consider these arguments in light of the principles of biology. In the hierarchy of living things, plants which grow upward from the earth are utterly lacking in intelligence. Animals that crawl about the surface of the earth are more intelligent than plants. But if these creatures could walk upright and perceive the world through our eyes, there would be no major differences among the various intelligences. Whatever difference in intelligence there might be is determined solely by the degree of enlightenment in living creatures. Let us consider two illustrations of this principle. During the reigns of Qianlong and Jiaqing emperors (1735–1820), Han Learning scholars of the Jiangze [Jiangsu-Zhejiang] region were both accomplished and numerous, whereas in my Yue [Guangdong] region there was not even one. Since the reigns of Xianfeng and Tongzhi emperors (1850–1875), however, the Yue region witnessed a sudden proliferation of scholars who could not stop discussing Ma Rong and Zheng Xuan or clinging to their copies of Analysis and Explication of Written Characters (Shuowen Jiezi), and they were as numerous as carp in the river. The reason for this change is not that people in the Yue region were dumb in the eighteenth century but became intelligent in the nineteenth century. Similarly, before the Meiji period (1868–1911) in Japan, people were unenlightened and the quality of their manufacture was poor. Since the vast and rapid change brought about by the Meiji Restoration, the achievements of the Japanese have been astonishing. This is not because they were stupid in the past and smart at present. When the mind is stiff and unexercised, the intelligence is blocked. But if properly instructed and guided, the mind is activated just like flipping a switch, when all the strings will start to move. Through thousands of years, women did not acquire fame in learning because they were never guided to that path. If women were to begin learning, they would have two advantages over men: they have fewer social entanglements and obligations; second, they are spared the difficulty of the official examination. Women live quiet lives and have meticulous minds. Therefore, women can often perceive principles that men cannot, and they can invent new methods that could elude men.

According to an account in Western historiography, Mohammed's mother, who was the daughter of Mutallib and the aunt of Zaynab bint Jahsh, attained scholarly achievement that held its own in comparison to that of the men of her time. There are also young Chinese women, such as Kang Aide or Shi Meiyu, who went abroad to study and then returned to China after they completed their studies. Such women are praised even by prestigious scholars in the West. In light of all this, how can we possibly say that women are born without the ability to learn? These are two hundred million human beings who walk upright and perceive the world with their

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13 Liang is sketching out a history of the geographical shifts in Confucian schools of learning here. Jiangze (encompassing present-day Shanghai and parts south of the Yangtze) was a traditional stronghold of Song Learning prior to the eighteenth century, when Han Learning was rediscovered and elevated to a form of critique of the Qing imperial state. The differences between the schools are technical, but also political. What Liang is pointing to here, in the first place, is the spread of Han Learning (also known as New Text Confucianism) to Guangdong in the south from its birthplace in Suzhou. Second, he is pointing to the political import of Han Learning as a critique of the imperial state and the state's alleged addiction to abstractions rather than concrete, "stakecraft" learning. For more on these issues, see Benjamin Elman, Classicalism, Politics and Kinship: The Chiang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

30 Han Learning relied upon a philological authentication of which Confucian texts were the actual ancient texts. Thus, the philological dictionary was of primary importance to this school of thought.

Ma Rong (179–166) was a classicalist and writer of the Eastern (Later) Han dynasty. He was born in Fufeng Maoling (now Guangping in Shaanxi Province, Scholars in the Ming dynasty (14th–17th century C.E.) edited The Anthology of Ma Jichang, thus contributing to the revival of his form of learning. Zheng Xuan (172–200), a classicist of the Eastern (Later) Han dynasty, was born in Beihaigaomi (now it is Gaomi in Shandong Province).

Shuowen Jiezi was written by Xu Shen in the Eastern (Later) Han dynasty. It sums up six categories of Chinese character construction and is the most famous work of philology in China. It is the basis of the Han Text (Han Learning) school of Confucianism.

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13 The Meiji Restoration refers to the period around 1868, when Tokugawa rule was deposed and a new emperor and reign, named Meiji, was established. Under the Meiji regime and the compulsion of threatened Euro-American invasion, Japan quickly modernized and within several decades became an Asian imperial power, defeating China in the 1894–1895 Sino-Japanese War, through which Japan acquired Taiwan, and defeating Russia in the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War, thus proceeding toward the annexation of Korea. Such Chinese intellectuals as Liang were both admiring of and threatened by Japan's rise.

11 The official examination refers to the civil service exams, established in the tenth century and abolished in 1905, which were restricted to men only and served to recruit educated people for the dynastic bureaucracy. These were highly competitive, and men whose families could spare their labor prepared for decades to take them, with little hope of success.

13 Kang Aide (aka Ida Kang, 1873–1931) and Shi Meiyu (aka Mary Stone, 1873–1954) were among the first four Chinese female students to study abroad. Shi received an MD at the University of Michigan in 1896, and Kang received her MD there in the same year. For more on Liang's version of Kang and Shi, see Hsi Ying, "Naming the First 'New Woman,'" in Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China, ed. Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, 180–211 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, East Asian Monographs, 2002).
eyes, yet they are treated as though they were barbarians and discarded as though they were plants and beasts. There is no denying that such treatment is cruel and contrary to benevolence.  

It is certainly a good thing that all schools of thought have come to be concerned about the problem of equality! (Mr. Nanhai [Kang Youwei], in fact, claims that Confucian doctrine already contains the basic principle of equality.  

Where does inequality come from? It stems from the worship of power. Where does equality come from? It comes from the love for benevolence. Although all belong to the same species of human beings, those who are named “the people” [min] are made to obey the ruler like servants and concubines; those who are named women [nü] are made to obey men like slaves. They are not just called servants, concubines, and slaves, but their ears and eyes are sealed, their hands and feet are bound, their minds are frozen, their path toward learning is blocked, their livelihood is cut off, and so they have no choice but to be totally subservient to those with power. As millennia passed, they grew accustomed to being servants, concubines, and slaves, taking their status as natural without any self-awareness. If anyone expressed the slightest doubt and questioned his or her unfair treatment as servant, concubine, or slave, others would rise up and ridicule him or her. For several thousands of years, therefore, no man has articulated the necessity of women’s education for the proper governance of the empire. Nor has there been any woman who has endeavored to rally her own kind to fight for the cause. It is not because women are inherently lacking in talent but because they are faced with formidable forces of oppression.

Today if you tell people that “education is necessary to strengthen the nation,” most are convinced. Yet, if you tell them that “women’s education is necessary to strengthen the nation,” most will be skeptical. [Besides what I have already argued,] there is another reason for this deluded view. In China today, people wave their arms and waggle their tongues with talk of “strengthening the nation”; they are stunned by Westerners and desire to emulate their successes—the grandness of their ships, the sharpness of their weapons, the speed of their railways, and the spectacular growth of their mining industries. Of these pursuits, there is not one in which women are of any consequence. Hence, those who are concerned with the nation claim that “to educate women is not urgent.” They are not aware that though the strengths of Westerners are manifested in the manners listed above, the root of Western strengths resides somewhere else altogether. Men can succeed in agriculture, handicrafts, medicine, business, science, law, and academia, but so can women. Men and women are the same in that education can make them useful to the nation. Today, education is considered the foundation of successful governance. Is it not because the nation rests on the foundations of its talented people? Is it not because the talents with which the people of China are already endowed can be developed only through education? Why, then, should we assume that at most only two hundred million people have talent and dismiss the other two hundred million as being without talent?

Of all the nations of the West, America is by far the most prosperous. Of all the ascendant nations in the East, Japan is the strongest. The idea of equality between men and women was first advocated in America and was gradually practiced in Japan. Women’s education in Japan generally consists of thirteen subjects: first, moral cultivation; second, education (i.e., how to teach and raise children); third, national language (i.e., Japanese); fourth, Kanbun [classical Chinese writing]; fifth, history (including foreign history); sixth, geography; seventh, mathematics; eighth, science; ninth, household management; tenth, calligraphy; eleventh, painting; twelfth, music; and thirteenth, physical education. Only a few of these subjects differ at all from the curricula used in men’s education. They diverge only when it comes to military affairs and politics, which remain central concerns for men in a world obsessed with power.

Even as Westerners have set about building their nations, they have yet to make the world peaceful. In a peaceful world, no matter whether big or small, far or near, all places under heaven would be the same. There would exist no borders between nations or races; nor would there be any wars, weapons, or military conscription. For the true progress of nations to occur, only such occupations as agriculture, commercial business, medicine, law, science, and manufacture are to be encouraged. No matter whether one is a man or a woman, all people in the nation should engage in their own line of work and be able to support themselves, eliminating the division between

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9Liang is shaming his fellow men by drawing upon one of the cardinal principles of Confucian social behavior: benevolence.
9Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Liang’s teacher, a Confucian scholar and the leader of the reformers, led the petition movement and the Hundred Days’ Reform (1898). His works include Xin xue wei jing kao [A study of the “New Text” forgeries], Kongzi qiu shi kao [A study of the reforms of Confucius], and Datong shu [The book of great unity]. See “The Historical Context,” in this volume, for more on the 1898 reforms.
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those who can provide for themselves and those who cannot. Toward this end, men and women must receive comparable education. Today, America is closest to this ideal. We may therefore conclude that a country with the best women's education is also the strongest. Such a nation can "win a war without a fight," such as America has done. Next in strength are those countries where women's education is less developed [than that of America], such as England, France, Germany, and Japan. Finally, in those countries where women's education has declined and where even the education of mothers has been lost, the unemployed are numerous and intelligent people are rare, having survived only by luck. Among such unfortunate nations are India, Persia, and Turkey.

It is for all the above reasons that I claim that women's education is truly an urgent matter in China today.

Although "women's education" has not yet come into existence in China, [what we mean by] education cannot be attained by hunching over one's desk and studying from dawn to dusk; nor does it come from mumbling a text aloud to oneself. One's intelligence should be inspired by studying with teachers and friends; one's talent should be increased through travel in China and abroad. Only through these complementary experiences can one's education be said to be complete. In China today, women live secluded in their inner chambers, never going out; for their entire lives they never encounter one single wise person nor visit one metropolitan city. They study alone without any friends, ignorant of any news of the world beyond their chambers. This manner of study cannot even allow them to learn how to write the frivolous poetry that entertained women of previous generations much less master the practical studies that are useful to the nation. I recognize that that this is really a tall order even for the most extraordinarily talented few.

Beyond this, I am aware of another form of hardship to which woman is subjected—a hardship by which her limbs are broken and her flesh made to fester. By this means of torture her body is crippled merely for the pleasure of another. As long as footbinding remains in practice, women's education can never flourish. When the rule of the Qing began, the emperor ordered all men to shave their foreheads and grow the Manchu queue. As soon as order was restored in the nation toward the end of the reign of the Shunzhi emperor (1644–1661), footbinding was publicly banned; but alas, the ban has not been enforced for a long enough time, so the old habit remains unchanged. The power of one ruler cannot change the hearts of the ignorant masses, and the heads of our strongest men are no match for the feet of our most vulnerable women. And so this terrible practice persisted and spread for hundreds of years, becoming more entrenched by the day, such that it now endures even under the oppression of the emperor and the scorn of foreign nations. Women suffer in plain sight from the bitterness of this terrible poison, but in truth it is our entire race that is left with the greatest injury.

Is it as punishment that Heaven has left our four hundred million people saddled with this terrible sin, or does it persist because our rulers have for so long averted their eyes to it?


30One way the Manchu Qing dynasty enforced visible fealty to their rule was through the sartorial requirement of a male queue. By 1911, with the revolution against the dynasty, many elite men began to cut their queues; during the high Qing, the absence of a queue was taken as seditious and punishable by death. For the Shunzhi edicts on footbinding, see Dorothy Ko, "The Body as Attire: The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth-Century China," Journal of Women's History 8, 4 (Winter 1997): 8–27.

31These are stereotypes of women that became popularized at the time. For a more historically complete view of nineteenth-century women's lives, see Susan Mann, Talented Women of the Zhang Family (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).