

**A Historical Institutional Reexamination of the Natural Foot and
Natural Breast Movements**

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Abstract

This study analyzes the “Natural Foot” and “Natural Breast” movements that occurred successively in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China by adopting the paradigm of historical institutionalism. It adopts the ideal type of “gendered social institutions (GSI)” and conceptualizes two GSI that existed successively in Chinese society before and after the Natural Foot Movement which functioned as a critical juncture: The old GSI motivated women to engage in foot-binding through offering positive feedback within marriage and family, while the new GSI used eliminating women’s harmful body practices as a justification for male actors’ actions to create new forms of governmentality and enhance the infrastructural power of the state. The new GSI failed to provide women with a clear path to earn positive feedback. Therefore, it was resisted by some women who had been strongly affected by path dependence on the old GSI through the regressive practice of breast-binding, which resulted in an interim variant of the old GSI. This study ascribes the phenomenon that Chinese women in the age of revolution reject social movements purportedly advocating for their interests to the fact that the new GSI was established only to serve male actors’ goals of nation-building. Lacking an understanding of women’s lives and the female world, the new GSI simply failed to address women’s detailed and subtle needs which are highly different from men’s, and might therefore seem oppressive rather than emancipatory to women.

Keywords: Historical Institutionalism; The Natural Foot Movement; The Natural Breast Movement; Gendered Social Institution

Introduction

In the midst of turbulence from the late Qing dynasty to the early period of the Republic of China, two feminist movements emerged successively, namely the Natural Foot Movement and the Natural Breast Movement.

The Natural Foot Movement began around the 1880s with the aim of eradicating the practice of foot-binding among Chinese women. First initiated by British Christian missionaries and some Chinese male nationalist intellectuals, this movement later gained widespread support from nationalist intellectuals and reformers. Instead of playing the role of ideological leaders in such a progressive feminist campaign, female advocates were more engaged in the concrete implementation of policies promulgated to unbind women's feet because it was less awkward for strangers with the same sex to interact with each other privately. The anti-foot-binding efforts represented by the Natural Foot Movement continued until the late 1930s and could be called a success in the end.

In contrast to the Natural Foot Movement that started earlier, the Natural Breast Movement only prevailed around 1927, seeking to abolish the fashion of breast-binding among young female students. Before 1927, some feminist reformers had criticized breast-binding practices without much response until male reformers again took leadership of the movement. Breast-binding, like foot-binding, has long been a form of female attire in Neo-Confucian China. However, the social requirement regarding breast-binding were far less stringent compared with that on foot-binding. The flatness of a girl's chest was not a universal standard for assessing her social status, sexual allure or moral standing. The direct physical pain caused by breast-binding was also far less serious than that of foot-binding. It wasn't until the early Republic era when foot-binding declined that breast-binding experienced a renaissance. Women's quest for no curve in their body shapes was unprecedentedly fervent - female students and urban women made great efforts to flatten their chests, disregarding difficulties in breathing and even risking respiratory illnesses.

The Natural Foot and Natural Breast movements share some similarities. Firstly, their societal influence was largely propelled by Chinese male nationalist

intellectuals and reformers. The voice of female reformers were far less heard than their male counterparts', while many ordinary women and men alike resisted these seemingly women's rights-oriented movements. Secondly, both social movements were enforced through practical policies involving preaching to individuals, public lecturing, regular physical examinations, and fines, which enhanced the infrastructural power and legitimacy of local governments and the central regime then. Therefore, the two movements served not only as the prologue of Chinese feminist movements, but also a form of nation-building which was central to the political agenda during that era.

Based on primary and secondary sources, this study employs the paradigm of historical institutionalism (HI) and analytical narrative to reconstruct two competing "gendered social institutions" in the society at that time. Next, I'll infer motivations behind specific behaviors of male and female institutional actors by looking at how institutional change occurred and affected actors.

The research significance of this article lies in the following aspects:

In terms of methodology, this study employs historical institutionalism as an analytical paradigm, using social movements as the entry point to analyze an informal institution, namely "gendered social institution". As an original creation inspired by the concept of "ideal type" of Max Weber, this term fills the gap in historical institutionalists' study of informal institutions and gender equality. Previous research using historical institutionalism to study gender issues has mainly focused on formal political institutions, including legal systems, electoral systems and so on. Although these political institutions are also gendered, given that gender relations operate more covertly and persistently in broader social realms than in the political sphere, these explicitly defined formal institutions may diverge significantly from real-world conditions. Additionally, due to temporal and geographical differences, directly analyzing the actual social gender situation using formally prescribed gender-related political institutions in a specific country/society may be overly arbitrary. Therefore, this study contributes a new ideal type to conceptualize the abstract, covert, informal but existent social gender institutions.

In terms of the research object, unlike other studies on the Natural Foot and

Natural Breast movements, this article analyzes these seemingly separate social movements as a continuum of events, uncovering the institutional factors hidden behind them. For feminist studies, this analytical perspective is conducive to seeing through phenomena to essence, not only applicable to addressing the research questions posed in this article but also inspiring for the contemporary feminist movement process. In today's postmodern societies, unequal institutional structures are hidden behind seemingly equal entries, and the deception and numbness of institutions towards women are masked by discourses such as women's self-subjugation and female competition. A growing segment of the feminist community has taken a historical detour: they believe that much of the blame for the stagnation of today's feminist movement lies with women themselves. The two social movements studied in this article and the developmental context of the institutions behind them can inspire these individuals to correct these misconceptions and reexamine the perplexing or regressive actions, especially those taken by women, in the course of feminist movements.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

1.1 Existing research on foot-binding, breast-binding, and movements against them

The literature on foot-binding is vast, but this paper will not delve into specific issues such as the historical origins of foot-binding, operational variations across different temporal and spatial contexts, or literary works on it. Instead, it'll focus solely on addressing one research question: why do actors choose to engage in foot-binding? Assuming the existence of a gendered social institution, the paper thus considers factors at the institutional level. More specifically, this inquiry can be broken down into two key questions: first, how do actors with more power rely on foot-binding to sustain the continuity of the institution; and second, what practical feedback does the institution provide to the oppressed female actors after practicing foot-binding to ensure that overt contestation does not arise.

Regarding footbinding, most historical records consider the “Natural Foot Movement” as the endpoint (although it was not a point in time, it was a time period) of footbinding history. Among them, comprehensive and widely cited Chinese historical works include Gao Hongxing's *History of Footbinding*¹, which objectively documents many historical details, ranging from the origins of foot-binding to the Natural Foot Movement, even supplementing a wealth of curious anecdotes about foot-binding in the appendix. Regarding the Natural Foot Movement, Gao Hongxing adheres to the traditional “May-Fourth conception of women's history”, viewing the Natural Foot Movement as progressive. Among English scholarships, a highly cited book is Fan Hong's *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom*². This book offers more interpretations and analyses of historical materials, although it mentions some problems brought about by ideological shifts in the history of Chinese women's liberation, it does not overshadow its overall progressive tone.

¹ 高洪兴/著, 《缠足史》(上海: 上海文艺出版社, 1995)。

² Fan Hong, *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom: The Liberation of Women's Bodies* (London: Frank Cass & CO. LTD., 1997).

In opposition to the “May-Fourth conception of women’s history” stands the revisionist conception of women’s history, best represented by Dorothy Ko’s *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*³. This work reveals the essence of the seemingly progressive Natural Foot Movement, showing that male elite intellectuals were only eager to abolish the custom for the purpose of national construction, even disregarding the physical torment that many women would endure when they unbound their feet after years of foot-binding. In the chapters discussing foot-binding and foot-unbinding, Ko respectively captures the subjectivity or agency of women. She believes that women, in pursuit of their own psychological satisfaction, can overcome physical pain with willpower to engage in foot-binding or foot-unbinding. However, the psychological satisfaction sought by women cannot be disconnected from the external world - what satisfies them is not solely an individual behavior but an action that holds symbolic significance in society and can potentially elicits external feedback. Therefore, this article takes one step further to interpret what external factors construct women’s psychological expectations and satisfaction based on Ko’s work, enabling them to demonstrate their agency.

Among Chinese academic scholarships, Wang Yajuan’s *Body Discipline and Social Change under Power Discourse: A Historical Examination Centered on Modern Clothing, Hairstyles, and Footbinding*⁴ employs theories of power, discipline, and body politics to analyze the different policies on foot-binding enacted during the periods of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the Hundred-Day political reform, the late Qing Dynasty, and the Revolution of 1911. Taking a revisionist stance, the work points out that the sires of reforms and movements still fundamentally objectified women.

Several scholarly articles are worth noting. Firstly, Yang Xingmei’s “Concepts and Society: The Beauty and Ugliness of Women’s Bound Feet and Two Worlds in Modern China” highlights the existence of contradictory values and survival competition in society during the Natural Foot Movement. While upper-class women didn’t need to worry about failing to get married if they had unbound feet, which

³ Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

⁴ 王雅娟/著,《权力话语下的身体规训与社会变革:以近代服饰、辫发和缠足为中心的历史考察》(北京:中国社会科学出版社,2017)。

allowed them to pursue “new thoughts” and new aesthetic standards, other women dared not abandon foot-binding as they were still evaluated and selected in the lower-class marriage market based on old standards⁵. This study incorporates Yang Xingmei’s concepts of “value”, “survival competition”, and “old/new worlds” into the ideal type of “institution”, aiming to present this transformation period more clearly.

Another noteworthy piece is C. Fred Blake’s “Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor”. He adopts Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s three-dimensional model of the “mindful body” to connect his entire study, elucidating how foot-binding reinforces the patriarchal system in Neo-Confucian China through differentiating the fields controlled by the sexes, various “self-cultivation” methods, and forms of labor in production and reproduction⁶. While the conclusions of this article are highly insightful, some of the inferences lack support from historical evidence.

Regarding breast-binding and the Natural Breast Movement, there is not a comprehensive body of historical records. This is primarily because breast-binding in the imperial era did not have unified, strict, or mandatory operational standards like foot-binding, nor did it become a prerequisite for marriage. The Natural Breast Movement, on the other hand, appears as a relatively inconspicuous chapter in various historical texts and lengthy essays within the context of Chinese women’s enlightenment and emancipation history. Compared to the Natural Foot Movement, it had a brief existence and was not as widespread in terms of geographical presence. Liu Zhenggang is the most cited Chinese scholar for his research on the Natural Breast Movement which has outlined the detailed process of the “Natural Breast Movement”.⁷ He mainly adopts the “May-Fourth conception of women’s history”, portraying women who persisted in breast-binding or resorted to reserve measures to enhance their breasts as victims of their own actions, while portraying reformers,

⁵ 杨兴梅/文, “观念与社会: 女子小脚的美丑与近代中国的两个世界”, 《近代史研究》第4期, 2000: 53-86+2。

⁶ C. Fred Blake, “Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor,” *Signs* 19, no. 3 (Spring, 1994): 676-712.

⁷ 刘正刚、曾繁花/文, “解放乳房的艰难: 民国时期‘天乳运动’探析”, 《妇女研究论丛》第101期, 2010/9: 66-72。

mostly consist of males, as the agents of justice, without delving further into the underlying reasons for this dynamic.

Unfortunately, few scholars explain why the fashion of breast-binding occurred. This may be due to the limitations of historical sources - the trend of binding breasts strictly was much shorter-lived than foot-binding. By the time it was brought onto the reform agenda, it was already a target for criticism. We can only glean information about the drawbacks of breast-binding from newspaper articles of the time - it physically harmed women just like foot-binding and was a mental vestige of feudal ideology, constituting an unjust act against the nation, ethnicity, and society, leading to the destruction of the country and its future generations. From these critical voices, it is challenging to understand why these women chose to bind their breasts. The remaining records only include opponents' speculations about the motives behind women's breast-binding, leaving future scholars to continue speculating based on these subjective accounts.

The only study that connects the appearance of the Natural Foot Movement and the Natural Breast Movement for analysis rather than separating them is Zhang Aihua's "Women's Breasts and Beyond - A Gendered Analysis of the Appeals for Breast-Unbinding: 1910s-1920s". While this article focuses on the Natural Breast Movement, it touches upon the same issues that this paper also addresses: female students in women's schools receiving modern education aimed at liberating women, including unbinding their feet and promoting gender equality, yet they initiated the trend of breast-binding. Zhang infers two possible reasons. First, there was a brief trend of breast-binding in the United States at the time, so female students in Chinese modern schools imitated American women to emphasize their identity as modern women; Second, China has a historical tradition of women cross-dressing to achieve goals that break gender boundaries, such as studying, joining the military, seeking revenge, etc. Therefore, the female students in the Republic era of China bound their breasts to diminish their feminine characteristics in order to engage in activities traditionally associated with men but not women, such as studying and participating in politics⁸. However, while Zhang's two speculations are plausible to some extent,

⁸ Zhang Aihua, "Women's Breasts and Beyond - A Gendered Analysis of the Appeals for Breast-Unbinding: 1910s-1920s," *Postscript: A Journal of Graduate Criticism and Theory* 8, no. 1 (2011): 15-19.

they may not fully reflect the widespread psychological motivations behind women's breast-binding at the time. Firstly, the rise of American flappers was a rebellion against the traditional Victorian feminine image of a curved figure⁹, whereas Neo-Confucianist China has always emphasized a beauty of delicacy and slimness rather than curves. Therefore, the female students in China did not rebel against past aesthetics through breast-binding; instead, they reinforced existing standards of beauty. Secondly, from the criticisms of breast-binding, opponents believed that female students bound their breasts, like foot-binding and makeup, to please men in appearance, without suggesting that these female students aimed to "become" men to perform traditionally male activities¹⁰. Hence, Zhang Aihua's two speculations may not be entirely accurate, as he, like other Western feminist scholars, overestimates the impact of female enlightenment and emancipation, and overly optimistically rationalizes women's "lagging behind" behavior in the feminist movement. In reality, only by addressing why women lag behind can we uncover why Chinese women lack agency in the feminist movement or, more radically speaking, what the essence of this seemingly progressive feminist movement truly is.

Overall, existing research leaves two questions unanswered. First, why did young female students who were receiving modern education and whose mind should've been liberated choose the self-harming practice of breast-binding? Second, why did women generally resist social movements claiming to give them rights? Biased primary historical sources make it challenging to deduce definitive answers to these questions so this study will try to speculate probable answers from the institutional level - as institutional actors, women react in a different way from men to the institutional dynamics.

1.2 Feminist research adopting historical institutionalism as an analytical paradigm

Finally, a brief overview of feminist research adopting historical institutionalism is needed. When feminist institutionalists apply historical

⁹ Ibid, 18.

¹⁰ Ibid, 19.

institutionalism in their research, they often focus on objects of study in modern politics. For instance, Marie Gottschalk's research suggests that American women's groups and feminists, by primarily addressing violent behaviors such as rape and domestic violence that threaten social order, have feminized the issue of crime in the United States, contributing to more conservative tendencies in penal policies compared with European legal systems¹¹. Esping-Andersen argues that although countries face similar trends, different gender relations and family divisions of labor lead to the development of three distinct welfare regimes¹². Most studies in the English scholarships also explore gender factors behind modern political institutions, which is the same among their Chinese counterparts¹³¹⁴。

Obviously, historical institutionalism is not widely used in gender studies, but it is highly applicable. Waylen Georgina points out that historical institutionalism helps us “more easily combine a consideration of actors - particularly key actors in insider and outsider alliances - with their institutional context in ways that are mindful of institutional legacies as well as institutional change and the importance of ideas and framing.”¹⁵ For this study, I cannot simply emulate previous research methods on formal institutions such as laws and welfare in modern politics. Instead, I must conceptualize an informal, covert gendered social institution first. This set of institution determines aspects of gender relations, gender division of labor, and other foundational aspects of society.

¹¹ Marie Gottschalk, “Inequality and the Carceral State,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism*, eds. Orfeo Fioretos, Tulia G. Falletti and Adam Sheingate, 375 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² James Conran and Kathleen Thelen, “Institutional Change,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism*, 62.

¹³ 刘秀红/文, “制度、利益与观念:男女同龄退休政策改革研究——基于历史制度主义视角”, 《理论导刊》第12期, 2010: 17-20。

¹⁴ 刘秀红/文, “城镇企业职工基本养老保险制度模式与性别公平——基于历史制度主义分析范式”, 《理论月刊》第8期, 2011: 90-93。

¹⁵ Waylen Georgina, “What Can Historical Institutionalism Offer Feminist Institutionalists?”, *Politics and Gender* 5, no. 2 (2009): 1-15.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

This paper will adopt the analytical paradigm of historical institutionalism (HI) and the methodology of analytic narrative to first conceptualize two sets of “gendered social institutions (GSI)” existing before and after the Natural Foot Movement. It will then elaborate on the institutional changes and the contestation between the old and new GSI during the period from the Natural Foot Movement to the Natural Breast Movement, while inferring their causes.

2.1 The Ideal Type for Analysis: Gendered Social Institution (GSI)

As mentioned above, to conceptualize abstract and informal social institutions, this article follows the general approach of social science research, employing an original Weberian “ideal type” to concretize the institutional object of study. An ideal type is “formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct.”¹⁶ Given that this study considers political-level institutions to be a subset of social-level institutions, it will not directly adopt an existing ideal type called “gendered political institution” proposed by Kenney¹⁷.

The term “gendered social institution” is specially synthesized from the respective implications of “gendered”, “social” and “institution”, three terms which have all been recognized by the current scholarship, to serve the purpose of this study.

First of all, “institutions” not only consist of formal organizational forms and laws - though these are the primary focus of most historical institutionalists - but also

¹⁶ Edward Shils and Henry Finch, ed., *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1949), 90.

¹⁷ Sally Kenney, “New research on gendered political institutions,” *Political Research Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1996): 445-466.

encompass informal and latent rules and norms that also structure conduct.¹⁸ Though Paul Pierson's widely accepted definition of institution grants "social norm" the same significance as formal rules and policy structures, there is currently a lack of systematic research on implicit norms in contemporary scholarship, which are precisely underscored in this paper¹⁹. Another feature of institutions is their "distributional effect". As Paul Pierson argues, institutions are "not neutral coordinating mechanisms but in fact reflect, and also reproduce and magnify, particular patterns of power distribution in politics."²⁰ An established institution provides positive feedback to actors with unequal power, while also reinforcing power asymmetry in its operation, creating an inertial equilibrium that is resistant to changes.²¹

The second word "social" indicates the unit of analysis. John Ikenberry points out that institutions "range from specific characteristics of government institutions, to the more overarching structures of state, to the nation's normative social order"²² which exactly stands for the administrative level, the state level and the social level. According to Thelen and Streeck, certain institutions may well remain unaffected even during periods of massive social and political upheaval²³. During the period analyzed in this paper, there were drastic changes in the national political and administrative structures. However, social institutions which had had a profound influence among all classes continued to exist as a resilient continuum, proved to be the most challenging to change. That's why social institution will be the unit of analysis of this study.

¹⁸ Kathleen Thelen and Sven Steinmo, "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics," in *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis*, eds. Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen and Frank Longstrech, 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Paul Pierson, "The Path to European Integration: A Historical Institutional Perspective," as a working paper of the program for the study of Germany and Europe, no. 5.2 (25 October 1994): 4.

²⁰ Kathleen Thelen, "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 394.

²¹ Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (June 2000): 259.

²² John Ikenberry, "Conclusion: An Institutional Approach to American Foreign Economic Policy," in *The State and American Foreign Economic Policy* eds. John Ikenberry, David Lake, and Michael Mastanduno, 226 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988).

²³ Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen, "Introduction: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies," in *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*, eds. Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen, 8-9 (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005).

The term “gendered” sets the feminist tone of this paper, as conventional social scientists rarely consider gender as a decisive factor influencing political processes. Feminist scholarship, on the other hand, boldly exposes the significance of gender as a crucial social differentiator - the relationship between men and women plays an equally vital role in political events as that between, for example, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, or rulers and the ruled. Kenney argues that within a gendered institution the constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the daily life or logic of political institutions rather than “existing out in society or fixed within individuals which they then bring whole to the institution.”²⁴ Gender relations are both “institutional” and “institutionalized”, embedded in particular political institutions, constraining and shaping social interaction²⁵. The social institutions in China, whether during the Neo-Confucian imperial era or afterwards, has always been highly gendered. Individuals find themselves in entirely different fields within society solely because of their gender, living up to distinct societal expectations. Even individuals of the same class background experience significantly divergent life trajectories simply due to their gender.

To sum up, GSI is a kind of informal and tacit social norm, which does not undergo significant changes in sync with rapid transformations in macro political or organizational institutions. GSI not only determines power distribution between genders, gender division of labor, and forms of marital coalition between men and women, but also constrains them to act according to distinctive social mobility goals. Actors in this system, despite being in unequal positions, can each receive positive feedback from the institution, which is why they are willing to continuously uphold it.

2.2 Theories on the dynamics of institutions

After defining the type of institution that this paper needs to focus on, I need to briefly introduce some theories advocated by historical institutionalists in studying the establishment, maintenance, and evolution of institutions to guide the specific

²⁴ Sally Kenney, “New research on gendered political institutions,” 456.

²⁵ Fiona Mackay, Meryl Kenny and Louise Chappell, “New Institutionalism Through a Gender Lens: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism,” *International Political Science Review* 31, no. 5 (2010): 580.

analysis that follows.

2.2.1 Critical juncture: the formation and evolution of institutions

The formation and evolution of institutions are related to critical junctures. Critical junctures can be defined from several dimensions. In terms of the temporal dimension, a critical juncture occurs before the institutional outcomes it leads to and lasts far shorter time than the duration of the resulting institution²⁶. From the causal dimension, a critical juncture can be either a sufficient or necessary condition for the institutional outcomes it produces²⁷. Regarding the origin, a critical juncture may either be endogenous²⁸ or exogenous²⁹, for which this paper tends to blur the boundaries of this dichotomy, suggesting that both external and internal pressures transmit to institutional actors, prompting corresponding reactions, all constituting the generation of a critical juncture. Lastly, in terms of the content covered, this paper adopts an ideational approach to critical junctures, which “underscores the role of ideational change in producing institutional outcomes.”³⁰ During such critical junctures, political actors strive to establish and propagate legitimacy for new institutional arrangements³¹. According to the criteria mentioned above, this paper considers that the critical juncture leading to the alternation between old and new GSI is the launching of the Natural Foot Movement. It prompted actors to begin working on designing a new GSI (whether intentionally or unintentionally), while the old GSI also derived in competition. By the time of the Natural Breast Movement, the new GSI had essentially replaced the old one, achieving victory in institutional competition.

²⁶ Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Keleman, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism,” *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 341 – 369.

²⁷ James Mahoney, Khairunnisa Mohamedali and Christoph Nguyen, “Causality and Time in Historical Institutionalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism*, 77-79.

²⁸ Avner Greif and David Laitin, “An Endogenous Theory of Institutional Change,” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (2004): 633 – 652.

²⁹ Peter Hall, “Politics as a Process Structured in Space and Time,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism*, 38.

³⁰ Giovanni Capoccia, “Critical Junctures,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism*, 96.

³¹ John Hogan and David Doyle, “The Importance of Ideas: An A Priori Critical Junctures Framework,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 4 (2007): 884.

2.2.2 Path dependence: the maintenance of institutions

The maintenance of institutions is mostly related to path dependence. Path dependence can explain why a certain institution persists, even if it is not the most efficient, making it difficult to change³². Scholars represented by Mahoney argue that path dependence arises from a series of reaction and counter-reaction dynamics triggered by a contingent moment³³, while scholars represented by Pierson suggest that the formation of path dependence is due to institutions being a self-reinforcing process that can bring increasing positive feedback to actors³⁴. This paper mainly adopts the latter view, suggesting that the reason why GSI can exist stably and persistently is because it provides increasing positive feedback to actors, leading to path dependence of actors on the GSI.

2.3 Methodology: Analytic Narratives

Same as the current HI scholarship, this study adopts the methodology of analytic narratives to investigate into cases. According to Levi, analytic narratives helps construct explanations of empirical events respecting their temporal and spacial constraints, while disciplining and appropriating details for purposes that go beyond just plainly depicting what has happened³⁵. Thelen also points out that analyses adopting such narratives offer “incorporate elements of deduction and induction in ways that overcome traditional distinctions between historical institutionalism’s characteristic focus on specific contextual conditions and rational choice’s characteristic search for generalizable features of political behavior rooted in the incentive structures that individuals face.”³⁶

³² Orfeo Fioretos, Tulia Falletti and Adam Sheingate, “Historical Institutionalism in Political Science,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism*, 11.

³³ James Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 4 (2000): 507-548.

³⁴ Pierson, “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence,” 252-253.

³⁵ Margaret Levi, “Producing an Analytic Narrative,” in *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture*, eds. John Bowen and Roger Petersen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³⁶ Thelen, “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics,” 370.

Chapter 3 Case Study of the Natural Foot and Natural Breast Movements

3.1 The GSI before the Natural Foot movement

Some historians in China, Japan, and the West consider the Song Dynasty as a significant turning point in Chinese ancient history³⁷. After its revival, Confucianism evolved into Neo-Confucianism during the Song Dynasty, becoming the dominant social ideology and permeating every pore of Chinese patrilineal society through the imperial examination system, which only allowed male participation³⁸. Land ownership, tax systems, urbanization, and commercialization also influenced the division of labor between the two social genders and family structures. In this context, a set of GSI emerged, standing tenacious from the Song Dynasty until the fall of the Qing Empire, and reaching its peak during the Ming and Qing periods. The GSI shaped the conceptual structure of institutional actors, instilling a belief in adhering to a certain set of criteria and providing positive feedback to reward specific behaviors, leading to a strong path-dependence effect.

3.1.1 The social expectations the old GSI imposed on men and women

Firstly, the GSI imposed distinct social expectations on both genders, with social expectations being one facet of the conceptual structure. Since the Song Dynasty, Neo-Confucianism had become the dominant ideology³⁹, with its moral standards prominently reflected in the social expectations across the imperial China. However, when examining males and females separately, it becomes apparent that Confucian moral standards were just one component of social expectations and cannot be directly equated with them. Social expectations were not necessarily

³⁷ Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993): 1-2.

³⁸ Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examination in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000): 13.

³⁹ Fan Hong, Footbinding, *Feminism and Freedom*, 17-18.

practiced by individuals. They might gain widespread acknowledgement precisely because there was a lack of individuals meeting these expectations in society.

For males, achieving success in the imperial examination and entering the class of scholar-bureaucrats was the most ideal scenario. Society expected, and only expected, males to meet Confucian standards of a “junzi (君子, a gentleman)” in terms of their conduct, knowledge, and morality. Society did not impose additional requirements beyond the already stringent Confucian criteria.

Here, it is necessary to take some time to analyze the connotations of junzi to help us understand why only males are expected to become junzi. The most important quality of a junzi is “ren (仁)”, which can be translated as “benevolent”. Mencius, building upon Confucius, stated that “the benevolent person loves others,”⁴⁰ with Blake interpreting ren in English as the “innate capacity to be mindful of others.”⁴¹ Confucius divided ren into five dimensions: one should be “respectful, large-minded, trustworthy, quick in response and generous”. He further pointed out that “If you are respectful, you will not be met with insult. If you are large-minded, you will win the hearts of the people. If you are trustworthy, people will have confidence in you. If you are quick in response, you will get things done. If you are generous to others, this will be enough [storing up of kindly feelings] to ask them to do things for you.”⁴² Only by fulfilling these five aspects can one be considered ren. It is evident that to practice the standard of kindness, one must undergo socialization and stand as a part of a social network.

In the context of Neo-Confucianism, the meaning of “kindness” as a public moral virtue becomes more pronounced. Cheng Yi stated, “The heavenly heart is the most benevolent for it is public-minded. Only when a person is as public-minded as possible can he be benevolent.”⁴³ Zhu Xi mentioned, “To care only about the public

⁴⁰ 原文为“仁者爱人。”出自《孟子·离娄下》。参见《孟子》（北京：中华书局，2010）。

⁴¹ Blake, “Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China,” 679.

⁴² 原文为“恭、宽、信、敏、惠。恭则不侮，宽则得众，信则人任焉，敏则有功，惠则足以使人。”出自《论语·阳货》。参见《论语》（北京：中华书局，2010）。

⁴³ 原文为“天心所以至仁者，惟公尔，人能至公，便是仁。”出自《河南程氏外书》卷第十二。参见《二程全集·上》（武汉：崇文书局，2022）。

without any personal desires is benevolence”⁴⁴ Therefore, it is only by caring for others beyond one’s self-centered small-scale social circle that one can meet the standard of ren. All of this points towards a utilitarian interpretation of ren, where the benevolent individuals must immerse themselves in society, engage in politics, assist the ruler in serving the people, and serve as an example to educate the populace.

Social expectations for men did not make a preconceived ontological judgment based on men as a specific group. In other words, all men are born as blank sheets by nature, and some men can gradually become junzi by nurture. In stark contrast, social expectations for women were based on the premise of viewing women as inherently possessing negative qualities. Prior to presenting expectations, there had been a series of clearly derogatory ontological definitions for the group of women: they are lubricious, boisterous, noisy, gossipy and prodigal. The social expectations for women lay in that women would correct their inherent flaws and become obedient, quiet, chaste individuals who could educate their offspring and comply with their husbands and in-laws. The virtues that belonged to women were primarily practiced within the private sphere and the family. Women were not allowed to expose themselves in society like men, nor did they have so many opportunities as men did to practice morality in public, so they didn’t have the admission to cultivating ren at all and therefore couldn’t become junzi. That is why it can be inferred that Confucian expectations of ren did not actually include women from the very beginning. The social expectations for women mainly stem from patriarchy and some modified Confucian thoughts.

Chaste women represented the most extreme ideal figure of women in the old GSI. It is important to note that whether the virtue of “chaste woman” or “faithful maiden” was in conformity with Confucian morality was a subject of controversy even among Confucian scholars in imperial China, but during the Ming and Qing dynasties, chaste women and faithful maidens were explicitly awarded by emperors, so the social expectations for women were not entirely equivalent to the Confucian expectations for individuals (criteria that appear to be gender-neutral). Ebrey finds out that a prominent theme in biographies of chaste women is that they possessed

⁴⁴ 原文为“公而无私便是仁。”出自《朱子语类》卷第六。参见《朱子语类》（武汉：崇文书局，2018），第一册。

qualities such as tranquility, seriousness, a lack of fondness for ornate clothing, and seldom engaging in playful activities with peers from a young age. She cited a biography of a chaste woman, Chen Juniang, from Guangdong:

She was sober when still young, and not casual in laughter or speech. She regarded diligent work at spinning and weaving as her task. In the countryside, customs were simple and entertainments few. Only at the winter and spring festivals did troupes come to perform songs and dances. Women went in groups to watch and have a good time. She sat all day quietly in her room and did not step out. People repeatedly tried to make her go, but she would not. Everyone said that the Chen daughter did not enjoy outings.⁴⁵

This whole series of descriptions of the chaste woman's childhood qualities are all framed using negatory leading terms such as “not(不、弗)” and “lacking(无)”, suggesting that avoiding the following behaviors and not engaging in these bad actions is what makes a woman praiseworthy. In other words, women who are not praiseworthy would typically engage in these actions.

If chaste women are just a highly idealized female image, symbolizing the highest standard in social expectation for women, then the standards more applicable to all women came from the “Commandments for Women” written by the female historian in Ban Zhao (around 49 AD - 120 AD) in the Eastern Han Dynasty. The textbooks commonly used in women's education during the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties were almost all based on the “Commandments for Women”.⁴⁶ Ban Zhao wrote this article against the backdrop that the emperors' mothers or wives, together with their relatives, held the power - in Chinese, these people are called “the relatives on the outside (外戚)”, indicating their identity as outsiders to the orthodox male rulers. The phenomenon that these outsiders grabbed power posed a significant threat to patrilineal authority and the patriarchal society structure. Here, women entering the public sphere and wielding power would not be glorified as the practice of ren. When women were in power, people often did not care about their specific political measures, but rather on the ugly power struggles among them, while the

⁴⁵ Lu Weijing, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 183. The Chinese original text is “幼端重，不妄笑语，孜孜以纺绩为事。乡间俗朴，无纷华，惟春社腊臘，梨园歌舞，妇女群趋，视为游乐。女终日静坐不出房闼，固强之，亦弗赴，众谓陈氏女不好游云。”

⁴⁶ 参见班昭/文，“女诫”。

same struggles among male rulers were selectively ignored. The demands Ban Zhao puts forth in the “Commandments for Women” regarding female behavior and conduct were all aimed at eliminating the implicit threat women posed to the patrilineal authority and the patriarchal family.

Although Ban Zhao wrote “Commandments for Women” from a Confucian perspective, her personal motivation for writing this book (to provide proper education to unmarried women at home according to Confucian standards, so as not to embarrass the husband’s family or their own family after marriage), as well as the actual ideas contained in the text, originated more from patriarchal thinking rather than Confucian thoughts. Like the authors of various biographies of chaste women, Ban Zhao also used many commandments that start with “don’t”: “Don’t joke and play”, “Don’t argue with husband”, “Don’t speak vulgar words”, “Don’t be frivolous and seductive.” In other words, if a woman had not received education, then she would naturally do these wrong things. Ban Zhao sees these wrong conduct as normal for women, which were in an urgent need to be corrected.

Another moral expectation of Confucian thought for junzi is “yi (义, righteousness)”, which seems to be universally applicable to both men and women. In fact, it is still divided into two different sets of standards to demand and evaluate men and women. The connotation of yi can be deduced from Confucius saying that “Faced with what is right yet doing nothing about it shows a lack of courage.”⁴⁷ Yi stands for the right things that one should do. According to Lu’s research, the concept of yi during the Ming and Qing dynasties fundamentally refers to the responsibility one person owes to another person or a certain identity, without emphasizing social status distinctions among individuals⁴⁸. However, since yi is practiced by continuously reinforcing one’s identity through actual behaviors, if the distinctions between the superior and the inferior, the outside and the inside, and the principal and the subordinate are preinstalled in one’s identity, then the moral expectations guided by yi would naturally reflect such differences. Although both loyal widowers and chaste widows exist, men’s yi was mostly practiced in their

⁴⁷ 原文为“见义不为，无勇也。”出自《论语·为政》。参见《论语》（北京：中华书局，2010）。

⁴⁸ Lu, *True to Her Word*, 146.

relations with upper-class males or peers, while women's yi was manifested within marriage and family, rather than within social networks. Interactions between women and female non-family members might well be disrupted or even stigmatized, because they were not included in a woman's prescribed identity (daughter, wife, mother).

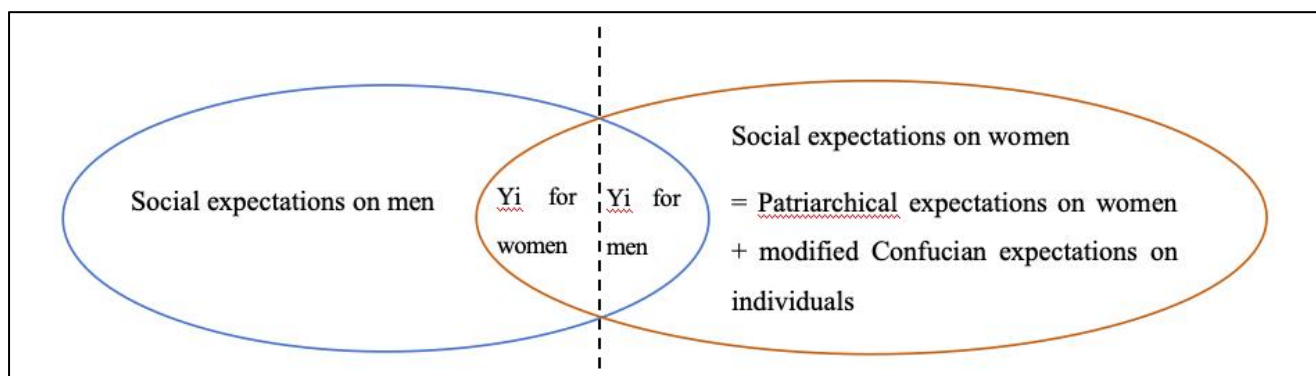


Figure 1 *The Social Expectations on Men and Women in the Old GSI*

According to this social expectation differentiation, it is evident that, in order to gain social recognition, males needed to be actively engaged in the public sphere, striving to create some form of social value, while females were ideally confined to the domestic sphere, steadfastly resisting their inherent moral shortcomings and repaying the value deficit they inherently possessed. This not only determines that males and females respectively belonged to the “outer” and “inner” quarters, but also implies that the starting points for males and females were “zero” and “negative numbers”. To achieve this distinction, a physical means is needed to restrict females to the inner space and constantly correct and discipline their unruly bodies in a tangible way. Blake argued that “Neo-confucian thought was long on its demand that females become virtuous and industrious while bending to the will of male authority, but it was short on how this process of ‘becoming her body’ should be accomplished. The process was left to the people, and by default to women, to figure out and act upon.”⁴⁹ The practice of foot-binding undoubtedly accomplished both tasks perfectly. Although the origin of foot-binding remains a subject of debate, its widespread adoption from the Song dynasty and almost becoming a necessity for the majority of women during the Ming and Qing dynasties is certainly due to its exceptional integration into GSI, providing women with a tangible way to fulfill abstract social

⁴⁹ Blake, “Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China,” 680.

expectations.

3.1.2 The positive feedback the old GSI offered to men and women

In addition to social expectations at the conceptual level, GSI also provides different paths for males and females to receive positive feedback, which is closely related to the previous societal expectations but more so through different feedback mechanisms guiding actors towards different paths. In other words, males and females only receive positive feedback for certain actions but not others.

As mentioned above, only if a male succeeds in the imperial examination and engages in public politics could he practice *ren* and *yi* required to become a *junzi*. In reality, what truly drew males to the arduous path of imperial examinations was the improvement in their quality of life and a certain level of social prestige that a scholarly honor of official rank promised. Firstly, even if the imperial examination degree holders did not secure official positions, they still enjoyed preferential treatments in terms of taxation and corvee labor, as well as legal privileges that also belonged to officialdom such as the exemption from corporal punishment⁵⁰. In the Ming Dynasty, even the lowest-ranking *xiuca*i (those who pass the county examinations) enjoyed the privilege of exemption from corvee labor, same as various officials holding current positions, on leave, or in retirement. By the late 16th century during the end of the Ming Dynasty, men who held degrees in the imperial examination system had established their dominant positions in local areas, forming the stratum known as “rural gentry (乡绅)”⁵¹. This is what imperial examinations offer men at the level of social production. At the level of reproduction, ever since the Song Dynasty, families with daughters would compete to attract young men who had achieved success in the imperial examinations and showed potential in official careers by offering extremely high dowries. This practice was known as “seize a son-in-law from under the examination lists (于榜下捉婿)”⁵². Therefore, the imperial examination system, which was open only to males, provided practical

⁵⁰ Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examination*, 241.

⁵¹ 郝秉键/文, “日本史学界的明清‘绅士论’”, 《清史研究》第4期, 2004/11: 95.

⁵² Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters*, 72.

benefits for men in both production and reproduction aspects of life.

In fact, the majority of men were not able to afford the time off work to study full-time for the imperial examinations, and even fewer were able to successfully pass the exams and enter official careers. By the late Ming Dynasty, with the increasing competition in the imperial examinations, only those who passed the palace examination were likely to be appointed as high-ranking local officials like magistrates of a county or a prefecture⁵³. Therefore, men who did not have the means to dedicate themselves to prolonged examination preparation would ultimately sought ordinary occupations such as farming, craftsmanship, manual labor, serving as laborers, working as servants, practicing medicine, selling food or handicrafts at markets, and so on. This article does not intend to delve into the social mobility of men in different dynasties, but simply to highlight a clear point: men who could not afford to stay at home to prepare for the imperial examinations had to engage in independent labor in society in order to support themselves, marry, and have children.

In contrast to men, women in imperial China acquired positive feedback not through independent labor in society, but rather through their production and reproduction labor within the family. Chinese families are completely patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal. Women were acutely aware of this model and their marginalized position within it. Moreover, most women found that accepting the incentives and rewards provided by the family system and operating within it was more beneficial to themselves⁵⁴. A successful life for a woman in imperial China might have been something like this: She had been taught textile skills and literature as a child, had her feet strictly bound, and was betrothed to a man of equal family background. Afterwards, she left her parental home carrying a sizable dowry earned and prepared by her parents and herself, over which she had control even after marriage. She joined the groom's family, becoming the legitimate wife and essentially the head of the household (though not officially granted the title). She would give birth to several sons, educate them according to Confucian moral standards, and encourage them to participate in the imperial examinations once they

⁵³ Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examination*, 298.

⁵⁴ Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters*, 8.

reached a certain age. If she also gave birth to daughters, she had the responsibility to find suitable husbands for them. She needed to be skilled in weaving and capable of crafting handmade goods at home, which her husband could sell at the market to supplement the household income. She had control over the family's finances, handling all aspects of ritual and hospitality matters such as sacrifices and banquets, and might also have to manage personal affairs of relatives and dependents. Her efforts were dedicated to being a virtuous helpmate to her husband, supporting him as he focused on preparing for the imperial examinations or advanced his bureaucratic career. Once her sons were married, she became a respected mother-in-law, with the authority to directly educate and command her daughters-in-law. Ultimately, if her husband passed away before her, her implicit role as the head of the family might even receive legal recognition and protection. She would continue to manage the family's various assets and her children's education, maintain good relations with her husband's relatives, and remain faithful to his memory until her death. After her passing, her name would be inscribed into her husband's ancestral records, and she might also be posthumously honored by the court as a chaste woman.

Although women spent their entire lives confined within the walls of their families' homes, they did not necessarily consider their existence meaningless. On the contrary, each time they successfully managed a household chore, they would receive corresponding positive feedback - perhaps in the form of verbal recognition and material rewards from their husbands, submissive obedience from family members, praise from neighbors and fellow villagers, or even direct commendation from the imperial court. Therefore, if a woman did not lead such a successful life, she would first impute her failure to receive her due rewards to intrinsic reasons such as not having bound her feet enough, not bearing a son, or having become a concubine. She would not think that the field she belonged to was too restrictive from the very beginning, leaving no opportunity for her to bring her talents into full play.

Among all these performance indicators, foot-binding was the earliest to occur and the most decisive for the successful completion of all subsequent tasks. Girls would begin the process of foot-binding when they were as young as five or six years

old, as their feet were more pliable at this age, resulting in smaller foot size in the end. Foot-binding played a crucial role in a woman's success in marriage and in her life as a whole. Initially, only daughters from wealthy families who did not need to work in the fields underwent foot-binding, but later on, even daughters from ordinary and poor families eagerly followed suit. Many parents and a significant number of daughters believed that a pair of beautifully bound feet would attract a desirable husband and lead to a relatively happy married life⁵⁵. Foot-binding for women not only visually enhanced their sexual attractiveness and distinguished their class from one another but also implied their fertility, closely linked to their future task of bearing sons. "It was considered that foot binding increased fertility by redirecting qi and Blood from the lower extremities into the loins."⁵⁶ Such gynecological knowledge further convinced parents of daughters and families seeking wives of the necessity of foot-binding, directly relating to whether men could fulfill the task of reproducing and inheriting family businesses.

The fierce competition among men in the imperial examinations was vividly apparent, while it's often neglected that women customarily engaged in social competition over foot-binding. Throughout various regions of the country, a "Foot-Racing Festival" was held annually, where girls would unwrap their bindings and expose their normally hidden tiny feet, vying with each other over the size and shape of their feet and providing a visual feast for passing men. Beyond these dedicated foot-showcasing events, regular temple fairs also served as venues for subtle rivalry among women. Visiting temples to offer incense was a rare and legally sanctioned opportunity for women to go out, for which they would dress up elaborately, frantically gather the necessary garments, shoes, and cloths for foot-binding, and on the day of the outing, constantly monitor their walking posture to avoid ridicule. The victories achieved in this everyday competition represented a form of positive feedback from the GSI, which was similar to the success in the imperial examinations for it also required women to endure long-term physical pain and invest time, effort, and money continuously. If a woman let her feet grow freely, she risked being ridiculed, failing to marry, and being despised by her own parents.

⁵⁵ Fan Hong, *Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom*, 47-48.

⁵⁶ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 366.

The punitive side of this institution ensured that all women who could bind their feet dared not refrain from doing so.

To sum up, foot-binding provided women with a clear path to upward mobility: by strictly binding their feet, they could access a happy married life and gain respect from both family and society. Foot-binding allowed women to perceive the strength of their own will through the physical practice embodied, and by exercising this agency, they could receive the institutional feedback. Even though the institution confined them to a narrow competitive field, they believed in this clearly visible ladder of success, which is why they relied on and upheld this oppressive GSI.

3.2 A new GSI in the making

3.2.1 The context where the need to establish a new GSI arose

In the late Qing Dynasty, China faced a series of internal and external crises, including the invasion of foreign powers and the obsolescence of bureaucratic institutions, leading to social turmoil and successive waves of reform. To adapt to these changes, the existing beneficiaries of the GSI - male elite intellectuals - began to spontaneously plan and design a new GSI. This effort was dispersed rather than systematic, but ultimately, they all pointed toward the same new objective: the new GSI must align with the needs of nation-building.

Nation-building encompasses the general process of state rationalization and the construction of a “imagined community”. State rationalization can be achieved through changing the distribution of the power of the state. Michael Mann divided the power of the state into two dimensions, namely despotic power and infrastructural power. Despotic power enables the elite to undertake a certain range of actions without routine, institutionalized negotiation with civil society groups, while infrastructural power refers to “the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm.” Based on these two powers, he proposed four ideal types of states⁵⁷. Clearly, what

⁵⁷ Michael Mann, “Infrastructural Power Revisited,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43, (2008): 355-356.

China needed to do in the late Qing and early Republic period was to transform from an imperial state that has high despotic power but low infrastructural power into a bureaucratic state that has low despotic power and high infrastructural power. Enhancing the state's infrastructural power can be accomplished through what Victoria Hui described as self-strengthening reform, including establishing a standing army by national conscription, imposing direct and indirect taxes, promoting economic productivity, and replacing aristocracy by meritocracy⁵⁸. Imposing taxes and improving economic efficiency not only require an increase in labor force but also necessitate the enhancement of state administrative efficiency. Therefore, Chinese male reformers turned their attention to nearly half of the population confined to the inner quarters - the foot-bound women who were not involved in social labor. To incorporate women's labor into social labor and bring women into macro-political considerations, male reformers gradually overthrew the existing GSI after the critical juncture of the Natural Foot Movement, and explored a new GSI.

The building of nation as an “imagined community” is closely related to language. In the late Qing Dynasty, faced with the challenge of nationalist reformers, rulers had to establish what Benedict Anderson calls “official nationalism” to avoid being excluded from a rising national community and to maintain their ruling position⁵⁹. To this end, rulers needed to selectively adopt the issues raised by reformers and control the discourse. The issue concerning women attracted the attention of reformers and did not harm the core interests of rulers, so the rulers adopted the reformers' “formulation” on the issue of women. The so-called “formulation” is a fixed description of a certain issue. Hershatter astutely noted that late Qing reformers adopted many formulations when discussing women's issues. Some reformers directly discussed national power, pointing out that China mistreats “its women” (this is a formulation that equates China with men). In return, China is treated as a woman by stronger nations in the world: China was submitted to powers and humiliated, with parts of its territory forcibly occupied and its usage rights being

⁵⁸ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, “Toward a Dynamic Theory of International Politics: Insights from Comparing Ancient China and Early Modern Europe,” *International Organization* 58, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 183.

⁵⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 101.

arbitrarily bought and sold. These critics placed themselves in opposition to Chinese culture and politics, occasionally proposing radical political reform plans and at times borrowing some discourses from the social purification movements in the UK and the US. Other critics' writings centered around their desire for a post-capitalist society, wherein Chinese women would no longer need to rely on men to survive; by then, gender equality would be a marker of China's entry into a developed society (although the gender division of labor would still exist). In the reformers' texts, gender, modernity and the state were intertwined⁶⁰. For the late Qing rulers, resolving gender issues and adopting the formalization proposed by the reformers would not shake their ruling foundation. In the following text, I will discuss how the Natural Foot Movement, as a critical juncture, has contributed significantly to the process of nation-building with respect to both state rationalization and the construction of an imagined community.

3.2.2 A critical juncture: the Natural Foot Movement

The reason why the Natural Foot Movement is considered an accidental critical juncture is that it formed a filter, through which specific factors in subsequent events were filtered, ultimately leading to the establishment of a new institution.⁶¹

Firstly, the emergence of "natural feet" as a linguistic category did not originate from Chinese male intellectuals. The invention of the term "natural feet" or "heavenly feet" to contrast with "bound feet" marked a turning point, signaling the cultural and social decline of foot-binding. The earliest recorded public use of this English term dates back to one morning in 1875, when Rev. John MacGowan, a British missionary stationed at the Xiamen, a treaty port in South China, organized a congregation meeting during which they founded The Heavenly Foot Society. Rev. MacGowan was a member of The London Missionary Society and arrived in Xiamen in 1860 after the Second Opium War⁶². By the time Mrs. Archibald Little initiated the Natural Feet Society in Shanghai in 1895, the translation of "natural feet" had been formally introduced into the Chinese lexicon. The criticism of foot-binding by

⁶⁰ Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 328.

⁶¹ Mahoney et al., "Causality and Time in Historical Institutionalism," 79.

⁶² Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, 14.

Christian missionaries and pastors mainly included the following: MacGowan deduced from Christian doctrine that foot-binding destroyed the complete and natural body that God had given to women; Chinese Pastor Ye further accused mothers of abusing their young daughters during foot-binding, violating the maternal love they ought to have, and also described these women with bound feet as “enchantresses” that attract attention, considering foot-binding as an act that incites lust. Obviously, Christians defined foot-binding as a practice solely between mothers and daughters, with men completely absent from the narrative, without mentioning men’s culpability as perpetrators. This narrative of “foot-binding as a misery entirely of women’s own making” was further promoted by male reformers later on.

Secondly, through extensive experiments conducted in different eras and regions, the Natural Foot Movement established a new form of governmentality: making public, criminalizing, sloganizing the phenomena appearing on women’s bodies, and using this to achieve the effect of disciplining and managing all members of society. The reason why women’s bodies were more suitable as targets than men’s bodies is that the patriarchal system, which has lasted for thousands of years, has already viewed women’s bodies as the possessions of a society centered around men. Correcting the phenomena occurring on women’s bodies was not for the liberation of women themselves, but to address a malady present in men. Furthermore, the inherent emptiness of women’s bodies determines their fate of being objectified and problematized in the political agenda. Ko points out that in the visually oriented society of imperial China, “a woman’s fashion or ‘social skin’ defined her social status and persona: without fashion she was nothing.”⁶³ When discussing women’s bodies during the Natural Foot Movement, she further notes that a woman’s “body-as-machine makes for a convenient signpost whose use is advertised on its surface. A signpost has no use for interiority.”⁶⁴

3.2.3 The altered social expectations on women and the blocked path for women to get positive feedback in the new GSI

Facing the significant differences between domestic society and the external

⁶³ Ibid, 185.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 30.

world, as well as being compelled to adhere to a more universal set of political principles, male intellectuals and reformers experienced severe anxiety similar to a son facing his Father setting laws for him from a psychoanalytic perspective⁶⁵. They continuously projected this anxiety onto the socially meaningless bodies of women, hoping to resolve their own issues by imposing new disciplines on women. Therefore, the Natural Foot Movement initiated by Western missionaries received strong support from Chinese male reformers, as they attempted to transition women from the old GSI to a new one, disciplining and exploiting women's value in new ways.

Reformers and intellectuals generally attacked foot-binding from two perspectives: nationalism and populism. Liang Qichao believed that women, who did not participate in social labor and lacked education, were entirely dependent on men for survival. He also pointed out that men, at the very least, were ashamed of their incompetence, and could still provide for their families, while women did not even feel ashamed of becoming a burden of the whole society⁶⁶. Although Liang Qichao strongly opposed foot-binding and advocated for women to receive modern education, he emphasized the “perpetrator” role of women more intensively than Christian missionaries and some female reformers did. In 1898, Kang Youwei petitioned Emperor Guangxu to issue an edict banning foot-binding, stating that foot-binding had made China lack competitiveness on the international stage.⁶⁷ Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei were both representatives of nationalists. On the other hand, Xu Ke represented the populist anti-foot-binding activists. Since the foot-binding custom originated from the literati class and was most welcomed by the “conservative literati”, Xu Ke believed that “natural feet” represented a commoner culture that should be praised but is despised, while foot-binding symbolized the corruption and despotism of the ruling class. To achieve universal equality among all social classes domestically and between China and other countries, natural feet should be promoted⁶⁸. It is evident that these reformers, in order to address issues within a male-dominated political agenda, resorted to desperate measures, using foot-binding, a surface-level issue, to conceal the problems at a deeper level of social

⁶⁵ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 61.

⁶⁶ Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, 21.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 38.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 19.

and political systems.

A set of new GSI primarily targeting women gradually took shape in the ideals of reformers during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China through the implementation of the Natural Foot Movement. In this new GSI, there were expanded social expectations placed on women. Though women no longer needed to bind their feet, they were expected to find a new way to step out of the confines of the home, engage in society, participate in broader political activities, and support men in the grand task of improving the nation. However, the new GSI did not offer women a clear path to receive positive feedback. It only outlined what actions by women would be punished, without providing them with a social promotion path that aligned with the new conditions.

In the Republic of China, the government legally stipulated equal pay for men and women for equal work (although in practice women didn't get equally paid) and granted women the right to work. In the private sector, positions such as weavers, teahouse hostesses, teachers, doctors, nurses, and so on, were all open to women, and even preferred to employ women. However, women from affluent families who had received modern education, and women from poor families who were old-fashioned in their thinking, were both faced with a dilemma at the crossroads of the old and new societies: on the one hand, the new society and new mentality required women to work in society, realize economic independence, and not depend on men for survival; on the other hand, the new society inherited the social expectations of the old society for women, which continued to require women to be good wives, good mothers and good managers of the family for their husbands. If a woman chose to build a family, there was a high probability that she would not be able to uphold her career in society; if a woman wanted to maintain her career, she could only choose not to get married or to get married late.

Renowned Chinese male writer Xiao Qian recalled, "As early as the 1930s when I was studying at Yenching University, I noticed that most of the female professors there were single (Bing Xin being a rare exception). It turned out that once women got married, they immediately lost their qualifications to teach. At that time, there was an extremely unreasonable rule in the nursing school of Peking Union Medical College, which prohibited students from getting married not only during

their study period but also for several years after graduation. Otherwise, their nursing qualifications would be immediately revoked.”⁶⁹ A female intellectual who had served as the head of a student organization once described her life after marriage in this way: “The ambition I once held to serve society was gradually eroded day by day. With children coming one after another, crying and shouting, changing diapers and feeding milk, it leaves you dizzy and overwhelmed; dealing with household chores and connecting with relatives and friends keep you busy all the time. In such a situation, even if you once had sky-high aspirations, they would fade into nothing. It really breaks my heart!”⁷⁰

The dilemma faced by women in balancing family and career reflects the contradictory aspirations of reformers. On one hand, they aim to mobilize women as social laborers, yet on the other hand, they impose stricter standards for women’s intergenerational reproductive labor within the family. Besides continuing to bear the burden of domestic chores traditionally assigned to women, their reproductive tasks were no longer solely domestic affairs but were imbued with political significance closely linked to the nation’s well-being. During the late Qing Dynasty, in the Natural Foot Movement, Jin Yi, a bourgeois democratic revolutionary, once wrote: “Throughout history, the extinction of a nation is caused by self-inflicted wounds, not by external forces. Today, in China, men and women indulge themselves in smoking and foot-binding respectively, which is a descent into depravity that would hastening the loss of lives and descendants.”⁷¹ In the Natural Breast Movement later, the impact of breast-binding on breastfeeding and thus harming the health of future generations of the nation also became a point of concern for male reformers, which will be further discussed in the following.

Compared with the old GSI, the new GSI completely repaid female actors with only negative feedback: even if a woman successfully balanced family and career, she would still live in a completely “disempowered” state in society and at home. In society, gender pay equality was far from being achieved, and most professions were still dominated by men; at home, husbands did not appreciate the sacrifices their

⁶⁹ 余华林/文, “民国时期妇女对职业与家事的两难抉择”, 《中州学刊》第 216 期, 2014/12: 145.

⁷⁰ 张琴碧如/文, “怎样劝导家庭妇女”, 《上海妇女》第 7 期, 1938: 27.

⁷¹ 高洪兴/著, 《缠足史》, 164。原文为“从古灭种亡国, 皆由于自造, 而非人所能为。今我中国吸烟缠足, 男女分途, 皆日趋于禽门鬼道, 自速其丧魄亡魂而斩绝宗嗣也。”

wives had made for the family, taking it for granted, and wives no longer had the privileges of controlling family property or managing servants as in the old society. The transition from foot-binding to foot unbinding was not about empowering women; rather, it blocked the easiest path for them to receive positive feedback, which had been to demonstrate the value of being a woman through self-harm, thereby gaining some real power within the realm of her husband's family. The Natural Foot Movement corrected the "errors" and "guilt" of women, and then placed them, disempowered, in competition with men in the arena of social labor, while also weakening their power within the family.

3.2.4 New path for men to get positive feedback in the new GSI

The critical juncture of the Natural Foot Movement, in addition to changing the social expectations towards women, also added channels for the most powerful actors within the old GSI to receive positive feedback. Although in the late Qing and early Republic period, China's political power changed hands several times, the vast administrative system did not break apart. New regimes often improved upon the administrative institutions of the old regime rather than completely establish a new administrative team. On prohibiting foot-binding, the late Qing government, the Hubei military government, the Nanjing Provisional Government, the Beiyang warlord government and the national Government successively implemented the anti-foot-binding policy from dissuading to banning and punishment.⁷²

In 1902, Empress Dowager Cixi issued an imperial decree urging the cessation of foot-binding⁷³. Subsequently, local officials such as the Governor of Sichuan, Cen Chunxuan, promptly responded to the call⁷⁴. Zhang Zhidong, who had always been advocating natural feet and had once written a prologue for the launching of the Natural Feet Society in Shanghai in 1887, was more enthusiastic in dissuading and banning women from foot-binding at this time⁷⁵. In 1912, after the establishment of the Hubei military government, Li Yuanhong also officially announced that women

⁷² 杨兴梅/文, "从劝导到禁罚: 清季四川反缠足努力述略", 《历史研究》第6期, 2000: 80-81; 王雅娟/著, 《权力话语下的身体规训与社会变革》, 125-150+204-215。

⁷³ 王雅娟/著, 《权力话语下的身体规训与社会变革》, 126。

⁷⁴ Ibid, 126-127.

⁷⁵ 高洪兴/著, 《缠足史》, 163。

should unbind their feet⁷⁶. In the same year, Sun Yet-sen, the Provisional President of the Nanjing Provisional Government, declared “Order from the Provisional President to the Ministry of Internal Affairs on Prohibiting Foot-Binding”⁷⁷. The Ministry of Internal Affairs later announced “Massage from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to Provincial Governors on Prohibiting Foot-Binding”⁷⁸, which was implemented in some provinces and cities including Jinhua, Zhejiang Province⁷⁹. During the period of Beiyang government, despite changes in political situation, the efforts to prohibit foot-binding did not cease⁸⁰. After the Kuomintang took power, the policy against foot-binding became even stricter. The practice of foot-binding was most popular in Shanxi Province. During the Republic era, Shanxi was governed by Yan Xishan, a warlord. The means of governance on foot-binding he took included the following:

(1) A regular examination adopting the model of inclusion of plague victims. According to Michel Foucault, in a plague town, a certain number of individuals whose health conditions remain unknown will be grouped into a unit of management (a quarter). In every quarter there is one inspector, who keeps a list of people he is responsible for. Everyday he would knock on the doors of the houses in his quarter, and those who are healthy should respond by showing up at the window, while those who fail to appear would be considered to have contracted the plague. The infected people will be quarantined in his house rather than being expelled from the quarter. They will receive medical intervention and will be marked on the list as patients⁸¹.

In Shanxi, Yan Xishan carried out such examination on women. Firstly, he set up a new position of “the heads of district” in addition to the county authorities. They both had authorities were to “scrutinize and look (察见)” and tabulate the number and percentage of footbound females in each locale. To facilitate the open examination of women’s feet, Yan ordered every county to hire female inspectors who would be accompanied and protected by male policemen in case of violent clashes with civilians. “The village wardens had to notify the women by calling their

⁷⁶ 王雅娟/著, 《权力话语下的身体规训与社会变革》, 204.

⁷⁷ Ibid. The Chinese original text is “临时大总统关于劝禁缠足致内务部令”.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 205. The Chinese original text is “内务部咨各省都督禁止缠足文”.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 205-206.

⁸⁰ 高洪兴/著, 《缠足史》, 166.

⁸¹ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France, 1974-1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003), 45.

names from the outside and asking them to step into the courtyard or go out to the front gate.”⁸² Although such measures prevented officials from abusing their power or over-staying their time at women’s homes, they ironically led to the result that women must expose their feet for examination in public, which was a great humiliation.

(2) Setting up new fines as a source of fiscal revenue. This practice was explored in detail by Ko as follows:

Although we do not have the account books for each county, circumstantial evidence suggests that many patriarchs simply paid the fines to get the state their back. After all, this was merely one of the many levies they had already swallowed, as Yan himself so succinctly described: “The three duties of the people are: serving as a soldier, paying taxes, and getting an education. Don’t forget!”⁸³ By July 1918, the fines were pouring in. In theory, the Tianzu hui in each county was entitled to 30 percent of the income, whereas the remainder would finance the county girls’ school (or, if there was none, the boys’ school). Yan complained that although the amount of deposits was logged, the cash was often unaccounted for. He ordered all counties to designate a separate set of books for the fines, listing activities in four columns: opening balance, deposit, withdrawal (with receipts), and ending balance. New books were to be submitted every two months. The political business of fangzu thus created, at least on paper, a self-sufficient economy administered by the county authorities.⁸⁴

Both forms of governmentality meet the criteria set out at the beginning of this chapter for the state’s self-strengthening reforms. Different from standing armies, the permanent administrative organizations could better extend their tendrils of public power into the capillaries of private rights, enhancing penetration into society and preventing behaviors that threaten governance goals, producing even more outstanding fruits of controlling risks than the military. Furthermore, although foot-binding was fined instead of being taxed, the practice also served to directly increase financial revenue under pretenses, rather than through intermediaries. In practice, the feet examination and fines did indeed lead to a battle between public authority and private power of local patriarchs over women. During the inspection process, women experienced not so much a “liberation for their own good,” but

⁸² Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters*, 55-56. The Chinese original text is “通知本人, 或在院内, 或唤至门口, 按名查看。”

⁸³ Ibid, 57. The Chinese original text is “当兵、纳税、受教育, 为人民之三大义务, 不可不知!”

⁸⁴ Ibid, 58. The Chinese original text of the order from Yan Xishan here is “应自惩罚缠足之日起至七月底止, 分别旧管、新收、开除、实在四项汇造清册, 并将开除项下, 领款者之收据附粘册尾送署备核, 嗣后每两个月造送四柱清册一本, 以昭核实而便存查。”

rather open humiliation and an excuse to impose additional fines.

In the next chapter, I will argue how, during the flourishing process of the Natural Foot Movement, women briefly created a variant of the old GSI in order to adapt to the new environment while also maintaining the path dependence on the old GSI.

3.3 The counterattack and variation of the old GSI:

Breast-binding

Historical institutionalists have two views on institutional changes. One believes that institutions experience abrupt changes under external shocks, while the other believes that gradual changes occur within the old institutions. This article's analysis combines the two views, suggesting that while two sets of institutions compete, gradual institutional changes also occur within the old institutions, giving rise to a variant of the old GSI, albeit this variant eventually tends to disappear.

As mentioned above, since the new GSI did not provide women with a clear path for positive feedback, their path dependence on the old GSI was stronger than males'. However, in order to adapt to environmental changes and avoid the surveillance and punishment of public authority, they needed to find a bodily practice that is not as obvious as foot-binding but can still showcase feminine traits and distinguishing themselves from other women, ensuring their personal success in marriage. Breast-binding fulfilled both of these requirements quite well.

First of all, whether one's feet are large or small, foot-binding is a very painful and agonizing form of harsh physical transformation, while the pain caused by breast-binding may not necessarily be as severe. Breast-binding first became popular among young female students, who at this stage might have smaller breast sizes due to incomplete development, resulting in much lower pain compared with foot-binding for young girls. Moreover, we can speculate that even young women whose development were complete might become emaciated due to malnutrition and excessive labor during turbulent times, leading to flat chests that may not suffer from excessive pain when bound. In fact, breast-binding during the imperial China was not

as pervasive as foot-binding, as the ancient women's undergarments did not have a function to flatten the chest; stories of women binding their chests were only found in personal anecdotes from ancient times. It was not until the Republic of China period when tightly binding the chest suddenly became a trend.

Although breast-binding may not necessarily cause acute pain, it is indeed a self-inflicting bodily practice. Some opponents, based on personal experience rather than objective medical studies, pointed out that breast-binding would cause women to have difficulty in breathing, contract lung diseases, impede development, affect milk secretion, and subsequently impact future breastfeeding. Lin Shuhua (an instructor at a girls' school, the first person to leave a written record against breast-binding) argued that "Breast-binding damages the lungs and hinders natural breathing, which weakens women's bodies and triggers frequent outbreaks of diseases and ailments. As a result, women's longevity cannot be ensured."⁸⁵ (Lin 1915, 4). Zhang Jingsheng, the first sexologist in China, believed that a woman's breasts and buttocks keep her body in balance, and if the size of breasts was reduced but that of buttocks remained the same, it would lead to ugly gait and it was not hygienic⁸⁶. There were also medical arguments persuading women to give up breast-binding, for example, in 1920, the Shanghai "Republic Daily" published an article analyzing the harm of breast-binding from a physiological perspective, "If the breasts are compressed, you cannot breathe freely with your lungs; if the carbon dioxide in the lungs cannot be fully excreted, fresh air naturally cannot enter. So, after the blood circulates through the whole body, waste will accumulate in the lungs or remain in the bloodstream, circulating back to various parts of the body. ... How can you not develop lung diseases?"⁸⁷

However, before causing overt symptoms such as coughing, fainting, or hunching, breast-binding does not radically change a woman's body posture in the same way as foot-binding. In other words, women who bind their chests may appear no different from others outwardly, as it is a more discreet form of self-infliction. According to a study of 93 female skeletal specimens unearthed from the Qing

⁸⁵ 林树华/文, "对于女界身体残毁之改革论", 《妇女杂志》第12期, 1915: 4. (4-5)

⁸⁶ 张竞生/著, 《美的人生观》(北京: 新潮社, 1925), 27.

⁸⁷ 力子/文, "为什么要缚乳", 《上海民国日报》, 1920/04/15.

Dynasty tombs in Xifengbao, Hongdong, Shanxi in 2022, foot-binding causes an increase in the tension of the plantar fascia and Achilles tendon when local women stand and walk, resulting in increased pressure on the forefoot and hindfoot, with a concentration of force on the heel bone and the base of the first metatarsal bone. Changes in foot structure lead to alterations in the gait of women with bound feet, causing them to use the knee and hip joints as buffers when stepping to compensate for the loss of arch cushioning.⁸⁸ The impact of foot-binding on women is so significant that even without seeing their bound feet, observing their posture from a distance reveals that they have bound feet. Throughout history, many men fascinated by foot-binding were exactly drawn to the unique gait of such women.

Breast-binding is more discreet than foot-binding, allowing women to temporarily evade scrutiny of their bodies. Breast-binding also retains the function of highlighting feminine traits and enhancing competitiveness in the marriage market, as with foot-binding. Unlike the within the old GSI, the expected feminine traits here have undergone some changes. Social expectations of women no longer solely required them to focus on being good wives and mothers within their husbands' households but also entailed receiving education, entering the workforce, and becoming self-reliant rather than being dependent on their natal or marital families. Therefore, breast-binding not only visually showcased the slender and delicate qualities of women favored in the old society but also enabled women to embody the traits required in the new society, such as independence, civility, modernity, and assertiveness similar to men, thereby manifesting modernity.

Breast-binding also served as a tool to distinguish female social classes. Bound breasts became a symbol of urban women's identity, while natural breasts were mocked as "vulgar rural women (村下婆)". According to media reports, in Dashatou, Guangzhou, a woman who did not bind her breasts walk on the streets together with her husband. She was depreciatingly called a "vulgar rural woman" by three fashionably dressed gentlemen. She hated this epithet, so she imitated urban women to bind her breast with a borrowed "xiaoshan (小衫)". At the time, the majority of

⁸⁸ 孙晓璠等/文, "山西洪洞西冯堡清代墓地缠足女性的骨骼损伤和关节疾病", 《人类学学报》第 42 卷第 2 期, 2023: 201-221.

women seen in the city bound their breasts⁸⁹. For elite women, they bound their breasts in order to gain and maintain their class distinction; for commoners, the practice can be interpreted as an attempt to transcend the class boundary with the aim of upward social mobility just as they bound their feet. That's why the trend of breast-binding first started in women's schools and was later followed by urban women.

Women substituted foot-binding with breast-binding, attempting to continue operating in the manner of the old GSI, creating a transient variant of the old GSI. As male actors held more power in both the new and old GSIs, they dominated the establishment of the new GSI. Soon, they recognized the existence of this variant and employed the tactics they practiced in the new GSI to eliminate this variant.

3.4 The triumph of the new GSI marked by the Natural Breast Movement

The triumph of the new GSI lay in its elimination of the old GSI and its variants. In the Natural Breast Movement, we can see the new GSI formally establishing its social expectations for actors and giving positive feedback to male actors, thus institutionalizing a new set of GSIs. The implementation of this GSI framework also allowed proactive actors in the old GSI to achieve their nation-building goals through institution reform.

First, in the two social movements targeting women, the "Natural Breast Movement" and the "Natural Foot Movement", were clearly terms that were phrased based on the same logic. As signifiers, they not only highlighted the presence of the advocated "the signified", but also implied the presence of the opposing and intended-to-be-eliminated "the signified". In other words, they delineated a corresponding set of meaning categories on women: artificial (unhealthy, detrimental to nation) - natural (healthy, beneficial to the nation). In the new GSI, when women actively intervene and discipline their natural bodies to meet societal expectations, they did not receive corresponding positive feedback. Instead, they posed a threat to

⁸⁹ 刘正刚、曾繁花/文, "解放乳房的艰难", 67.

society, the nation and the country, as male reformers hoped to see women completely relinquish the power to transform and discipline their bodies to society and the state.

Furthermore, in the Natural Breast Movement, the strict requirements for reproduction were more compellingly preserved, with women being required to have a healthy body not just for themselves, but to reproduce healthy offspring. Various slogans calling for the abolition of breast-binding best reflected such requirements. It was believed by some that binding the breasts causes women to be “naturally deficient” in bearing children, which leads to weakness of the nation. Some argued that if women bind their breasts for generations, “our race will weaken! At that time, our nation will perish on its own first before being invaded and oppressed by imperialist powers.” An article in the inaugural issue of *Shanghai Women's Magazine* in 1915 even argued that the harm caused by breast-binding is greater than that of foot-binding, as breast-binding causes chest disease, which can affect the lactation for future children, resulting in weak offspring. It may even cause children to have lung diseases and contaminate bone marrow, leading to the “destruction of the nation”. The article advocated for women to protect their own natural development in order to contribute to a strong nation and strong offspring. Even though at that time, due to underdeveloped medical technology, people could not discover the severe damage foot-binding causes to the entire body's bones and muscles like modern people, just thinking about the level of physical pain caused by breast-binding and foot-binding, one should not conclude that foot-binding has less harmful effects than breast-binding. Obviously, the harms mentioned in this article were mainly related to the detriment to the nation, society and people, rather than the harm to women's own bodies.

The third point indicates evidence of the new GSI taking root during the Natural Breast Movement period was the continuation of the governmentality oriented towards the expansion of state power. As discussed earlier, breast-binding was originally a more covert and private practice than foot-binding. By the period of the Natural Breast Movement, however, reformers could not be satisfied by taking off women's shoes and socks - they wanted to take off women's outerwear and see if they wore xiaoshan underneath to bind their breasts. Guangdong was the first place

where breast-binding was widely practiced, and it was also the first to propose a strict ban on breast-binding. Zhu Jiaye, the head of the Civil Affairs Department of Guangdong, proposed, “From the date of this announcement, within three months, all women in the province are prohibited from binding their breasts, and various women’s organizations in the province and county leaders are encouraged to promote this measure, aiming to abolish this practice within the given time frame. If anyone is found to have bound their breasts after the deadline, once confirmed, they shall be fined no less than fifty yuan. For those under the age of twenty, their guardians shall be held responsible for the violation, in order to mutually alert and collaborate to eliminate this harmful habit, ensuring that this practice has no place to exist in the future.” In April 1929, Guangxi Province also sent the same official message: “Given that most women in this city are still reluctant to abandon the longstanding habit of breast-binding, which greatly contradicts the purpose of health protection, we have decided in our meeting to formally request your department to instruct all female students in schools in this city to promptly cease the practice of breast-binding as a means of promoting health awareness. We kindly ask you to follow the example set by other provinces and issue instructions to all school principals to implement a regular schedule for all female students to unbind their breasts. If this measure is not implemented by the deadline, the principals shall be responsible for conducting inspections to ensure compliance, in order to effectively promote and safeguard health.” Some folk stories also show that the governmentality including hiring female inspectors, organizing regular inspections and imposing fines were consistent in the Natural Breast Movement. For example, Ms. Wei Qingfen bravely threw away the cloths for breast-binding, but immediately faced opposition from her family, so she had to bind them again. As a result, when she went out on the street, she was fined 50 silver yuan by a female police officer. Her family then prohibited her from going out, but one day, a women’s organization conducted a surprise inspection and found Mrs. Wei still binding her breasts, resulting in another fine of 50 silver yuan.

Although a new GSI has been established by this time, this set of GSI still only provided a pathway for most men to receive positive feedback. Male reformers have indeed achieved some of their nation-building goals by constructing and disciplining women’s bodies. In addition to these men who held the most power, other male actors could continue to follow familiar patterns, advancing through social labor and

then appropriating the reproductive labor of their wives through marriage. However, the world that women were faced with then can be described in a metaphor: A sharp knife (foot-binding) had been pulled out of their veins, but they continued to bleed (losing the only path to get positive feedback). They tried to cover the wound with something else (breast-binding) but were again stopped, and they might face a more dangerous situation than if the knife had not been pulled out (struggling within a GSI that does not give them positive feedback).

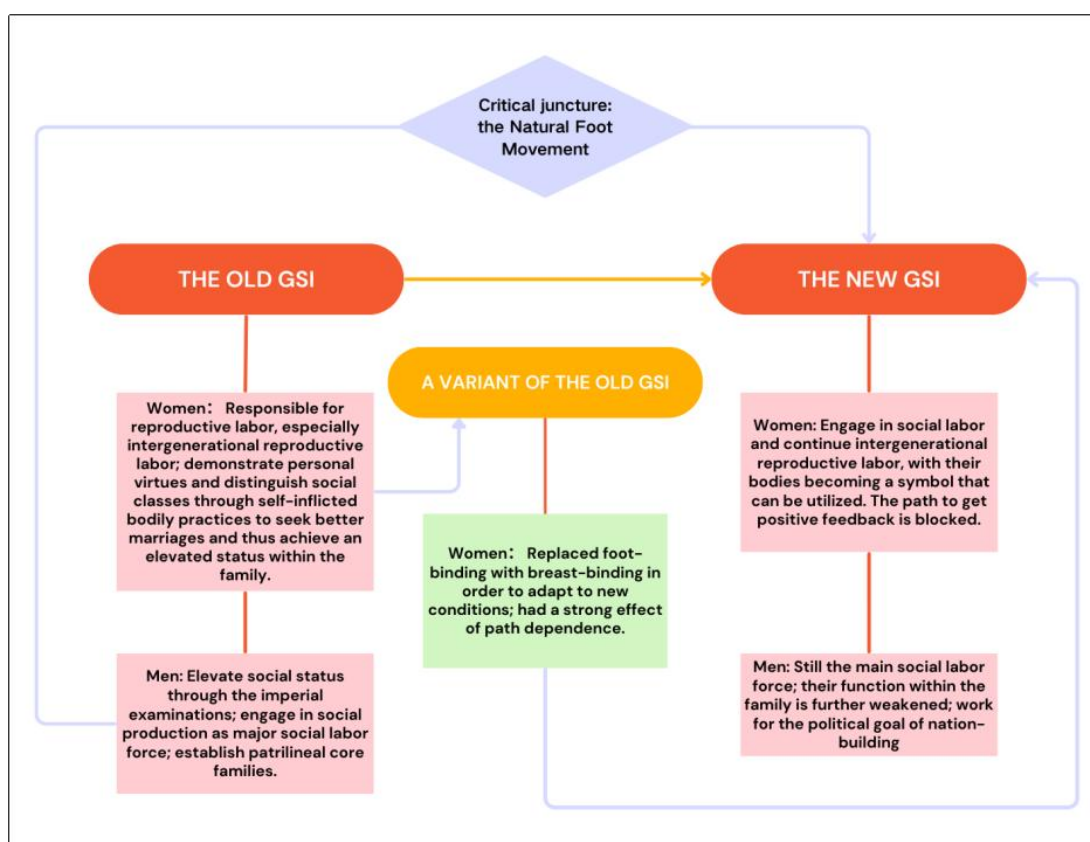


Figure 2 *The Respective Nature and the Evolution of the Two GSI*

Conclusion

This study, based on the paradigm of historical institutionalism and employing analytical narrative, accomplishes two tasks.

Firstly, this paper conceptualizes two gendered social institutions (GSI) that existed successively in Chinese society before and after the Natural Foot Movement. Subsequently, this paper expounds the process of competition and succession between two sets of GSI, analyzing why such institutional changes occurred and the diverse impacts of these changes on different actors. This is undertaken to elucidate a historical question that existing research fails to address: Why did women reject social movements purportedly advocating for their interests?

GSI is an integral part of the societal structure that delineates a comprehensive distinction between men and women across all other categorizations such as class, different interest communities, etc. Men and women are universally segregated into two distinct fields for different capital accumulation and power struggle to achieve specific trajectories.

Before the Natural Foot Movement, men were primarily responsible for social productive labor. Some of them accumulated cultural capital through imperial examinations, expecting to transform their cultural capital into power capital. They were not the main workforce for intergenerational reproduction but relied on the fruits of females' intergenerational labor to pass on and expand their accumulated capital. Women's field revolved around patrilineal families and marriage; they constituted the primary labor force for intergenerational reproduction, bearing and educating offspring within households. Unable to engage in societal labor independently, they could not survive autonomously and thus sought attachment to men from superior classes through marriage as the best path upward. Consequently, they engaged in intense involution, showcasing their sexual allure, moral cultivation, and superiority compared to women from other classes through the self-inflicting practice of foot-binding as an entry ticket for future marriages. This competitive route to marital success led them to remain unaware of the oppressive nature of the institution. The old GSI provided women with a clear pathway for social

advancement.

The vested interests in the old GSI were led by male intellectual elites. Confronted with challenges from the Western world, the old GSI could no longer serve their interests adequately, prompting them to initiate spontaneous reforms. Their new interest demands included the necessity to construct a national community and enhance infrastructural power of the state for rationalization. Therefore, they need to establish a new GSI to cater to emerging interests. Consequently, foot-binding transitioned from being lauded to being condemned. Reformers argued that it harmed women physically and induced mental lethargy so that it hindered women from participating societal labor. Foot-binding was perceived as a shameful social spectacle when contrasted with Western society. To abolish foot-binding, male reformers employed methods of surveillance, regular inspections, fines, which bolstered administrative capacities at local levels and enhanced the legitimacy of governing authorities.

Other actors within the old GSI resisted institutional change due to path dependency. Common men and literati benefited from the old GSI; they continued to romanticize foot-binding in public discourse and persisted in marrying women with bound feet in practice. These conservative male actors' interest demands differed from those of male intellectual elites so they were reluctant to adapt to a new set of institutions.

Although female actors were oppressed within the old GSI, they had adapted to the social mobility pathways provided and were unwilling to embrace risks associated with institutional changes. Foot-binding practices placed women in contentious territories within the marriage market; however, accustomed to achieving social advancement through self-inflicted pain, they opted for a revival of a more discreet and less painful form of self-torment: breast-binding.

Male reformers swiftly identified breast-binding as a lingering vestige akin to foot-binding from the old GSI. They initiated the Natural Breast Movement, denouncing breast-binding's impact on women's reproductive capabilities and its hindrance on national progress while employing similar governance tactics (surveillance, fines) to eradicate breast-binding. Many female reformers and

modern-minded women actively responded.

The Natural Breast Movement signifies the consolidation of the new GSI and the complete decline of the old GSI since it absorbed more actors from the previous institution into the new one; henceforth, there existed no pathway for women to elevate their social status through brutal self-infliction. However, founders of the new GSI had not started out for women's interest; thus far, this newly-built institution failed to provide women with a clear path towards realizing new societal values - men evidently achieve social worth through labor participation and political engagement aligned with contemporary trends, while women didn't manage to accrue greater societal value through these actions; their social value remains confined primarily within the realm of family. Society imposes even more stringent requirements on women for intergenerational reproduction without offering equal returns for their social labor contributions.

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