

Chinese Media Representations of Chinese Women during COVID-19: Implications, Impacts, and Future

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ABSTRACT: As COVID-19 threw the world into uncertainty, countries' public health responses, as well as how the media presented them, drew widespread public attention. By analyzing a specific incident in which female nurses in Gansu, China were filmed having their heads shaved before going into the Wuhan frontline, this paper examines Chinese media's nationalist rhetoric, and questions the techniques used in this kind of propaganda, which focuses excessively on individual sacrifices. My research demonstrates a close relationship between media representations of symbolized women's bodies and social responses. This connection at least affects people psychologically, while it can also lead to abusive behavior. News sources and social media are taken into account to analyze the implications and impact of the Gansu incident. In conclusion, this paper demonstrates the incident's dehumanizing nature for the women involved, but also interprets it as a social ritual that raised awareness on the status of gender equality in China among the public.

KEYWORDS: Public health; Media representation; Gender equality; Coronavirus; China.

■ Introduction

Pandemics are feared because of their devastating power to cause death and fear. For example, the 1918 flu killed almost 5 percent of the global population--an estimated 100 million people --and lowered the overall life expectancy by over 10 years during the course of a single year.¹ Pandemics are also "hailed" because of their stimulating effect on disease control and medical development. For instance, in 2005, a collaborative group of scientists from several universities and research centers recreated the 1918 virus and produced a specific vaccine that would protect populations in the event that a similar strain develops naturally or is somehow created as a bioterrorism agent.² COVID-19 is commonly feared because of both its physical damage (painful breathing, and potential for heart attack, kidney failure, and coagula dysfunction, etc.) and its economic devastation which can cause lingering pain and perhaps even deeper scars -- far larger than the other post-war pandemics.³ However, inevitably, marginalized groups, such as women and children, are often more affected because they endure both the physical and social discrimination of disease due to unequal access to power

This is especially true in the case of Covid-19 where Chinese women have experienced the virus along with sexism. Being a socially-conservative communist country, China restricts its media in a self-laudatory way in order to achieve national stability. This produces a generally under-informed population and can even be viewed as the main cause of the outbreak of COVID-19 in China. For example, initially the Wuhan government concealed the fact that hospitals had taken in several patients who had the same undiagnosed symptoms. Moreover, provincial TV stations even reported on doctors who tried to spread the news as scaremongers and admonished them. Still worse, this inaccurate and regulated reporting can lead to misinterpretations of issues such as the

true contribution women made during the pandemic. China's tightly controlled media, in conjunction with ingrained patriarchal ideas including "proper" gender roles and sexuality, have ultimately made the road to gender equality extremely difficult. In the following paper, I will examine how media representations of women during the most recent pandemic--COVID-19--affects the progression of gender equality in China. Specifically, I will review images, videos, and texts from various Chinese newspapers' websites and social media. Building on existing research and available media records from publisher, this article reviews how media represent women, what responses they arouse, and to what extent they catalyze or hamper equality. Sources such as Wuhan Evening News are employed because they reflect authentic official Chinese media milieu.

Historical Context and Background:

As early as the 19th century, there was evidence that gender was a site where people who suffered from epidemics tried to rationalize or explain diseases. For example, The Contagious Disease Acts passed in 1864 by the British Parliament assumed carriers of syphilis were female.⁴ Stigmatizing them as "fallen women" that threatened civil and family life, both local and central government enacted legislation that regulated prostitution, locking prostitutes in quarantine hospitals.⁵

Women's bodies were also seen as symbols of socio-cultural status.⁶ Different representations of how women themselves or others "used" their bodies, linked with perceptions from various standpoints towards these visual embodiments, had both negative and positive impact on the perpetual pursuit for most of the women--equality. One of the standpoints in fact equated the nation itself to a woman, by referring to it as "mother country" or using the pronoun "her". Maternalizing the country can be seen as early as 16th century France when politicians who advocated national community used the

the metaphor, “France is a mother whose body is split by her children’s religious conflict.”⁷ This visualization signifies the relationship between the nation and its people as mutually protective and intimate. The very first shift in image of Chinese women occurred 100 years ago, when the Republic of China was established in 1911. Grand President Zhongshan Sun repealed the infamous rule of “bound feet” under the new ideal of modernity of the new nation. This custom once embodied patriarchal ideals about sexuality in a way that physically confined women, preventing their escapades, so that women were better used as domicile breeders/householders, even as objects.

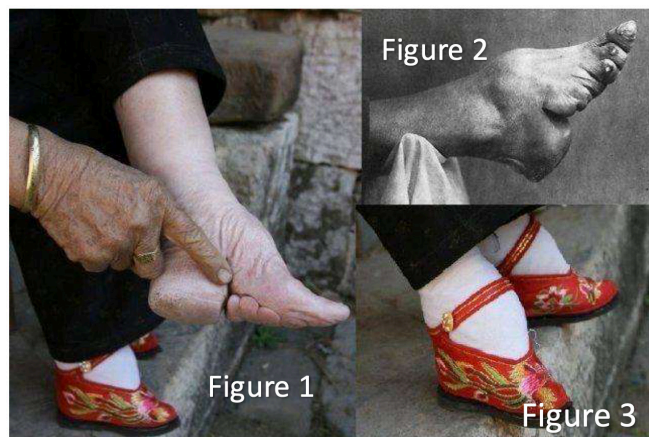


Figure 1 & 2: The distorted feet after binding for years.

Figure 3: Specially designed shoes (approximately 10 cm in length), hand made by women themselves. Source: <http://www.ladywu.net/qiwenjiemi/2018/112227581>

In the 1920-30s, after foot binding’s repeal, reformist intellectuals such as Qichao Liang went further and urged magazines to focus on women’s themes, and print advertisements with female models “boldly” displaying their beauty in order to consolidate the idea of “modern women”, who were patriotic, politically aware, and educated.⁸



This idea of “modern women” was advocated simultaneously as the newly created Republic of China tried to show its people and the world that it was independent, glamorous, and confident. Women in Wuhan also facilitated the process by holding a naked pageant in 1927 to “break shame and get freedom”. As a positive result, numerous local and national Women’s Associations were established afterwards.⁹ However, as these positive representations were either commercial in

nature, or politically motivated – spearheaded by elites and members of the middle class under male dominance in order to intervene and assert a political agenda, or arouse patriotism, they can hardly be considered as having solid utility for advancing gender equality/encouraging feminist movements.

Although a leap from 100 years ago, women’s status in China nowadays is still incomparable to that of men. This is shown by a 1-1.18 female to male ratio discrepancy¹⁰, which exceeds the standard ratio of 1.03-1.08 set by the United Nations. This lower status is also shown by lower mean salaries: 75.4% of men’s.¹¹ Luckily, the equality awareness of both genders in China is progressing, which can be seen by the fact that more pro-women proposals were brought up during the National People’s Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference. In the case of the pandemic, the manifestation of Chinese women’s bodies in media brings its significance to the fore of gender equality in China.

Gender and Media:

According to an online survey conducted 16-20 March 2020 by Amy Watson, 40% of the 1003 Chinese respondents said that they spend more time-consuming news coverage than they did before the pandemic, while 22% of the respondents specifically consume news on social media.¹² Knowing this, insidious Chinese media overemphasized individual sacrifices of people—particularly female nurses—in order to arouse patriotism and a sense of solidarity. One example was propaganda of nurses from Gansu getting their heads shaved by a team of male barbers before they were dispatched to Wuhan, 15th February. Videos recorded them crying while barbers “triumphantly” showed the nurses their shaved hair. Media users—regardless of gender—were angered by this portrayal of women.



The public was angered because hair has significant historical meaning for Chinese people. Confucian culture took hair seriously as exemplified by the saying, “Body hair skin, received by the parents, dare not to damage” that links hair to filial and ethical values. In the 1910-30s, hair was symbolized as a holdover from feudalism by innovators from Republic of China. However, none of hair’s multiple implications were related to patriotism or solidarity. Although large groups of women cutting their hair short were not uncommon in Chinese history, this 2020 occasion was particularly infuriating because it seemed to annihilate women’s autonomy and agency. “Women are essential, as part of the nation, are owned by the country, but not by family or men, have their independent identity.”¹⁴ Opinions like this prevailed at that time, leading many female students to voluntarily advocate for hair cutting as an “independent choice”. In that historical context, this body transformation was endowed with utmost feminist symbolism—as well as

nation-building expectations.¹⁵ Nowadays, cutting women's hair is again being used as a vehicle to convey assigned meanings, as well as to grab public attention. Ironically, from the videos of the nurses' hair cutting, there are no signs of independent determination from the nurses' expressions, only sadness and unwillingness, which sharply contrasts with the mood of those early female students. Although later clarified by the hospital that the nurses did this voluntarily, the fact that male barbers are doing the job for them still communicates a sense of deprivation and oppression.¹⁶ This largely departs from the origins of female hair cutting—beneficial for self-identification. The public responded indignantly towards these videos and photos, condemning both the Gansu government and the media publishers for excessive formalism and the overwhelming patriarchal messages it carried.

To see this hair cutting in a positive light, the event drew a significant amount of social attention toward issue of gender. Countless queries it drew such as “Why not shave male nurses' hair as well?” and “why overly report on female's bodies instead of reporting on female expertise?” were raised and posted online. Well-written arguments by both feminists and politically neutral people aroused over 10,000 retweets and spurred numerous critiques discussing Chinese gender issues as well. Moreover, reputed celebrities such as Yuchun Lee, a female singer, and Hesu Yang, a male rapper, wrote songs called *To girls* and *Harley Quinn* (an unconventionally fierce female comic character) respectfully in order to show support. Over 25,000 active users on NetEase Cloud Music, the most popular China-based music platform among Chinese users, commented on, or “liked” each of the song. It is therefore evident that beginning with discussions about media representations of female bodies, the sense of gender equality is awakening in China.

However, to see the hair cutting in a more pessimistic way, the event actually lowered women's status. To begin, even though the nurses' body images were exploited in propaganda to arouse sympathy and supposedly patriotism, we still don't even know the fifteen nurses' names. This neglect of individuality yet overemphasis on “being a part of something greater” again reduced women's values—their sacrifices as “attractive women” had overshadowed their contributions as medical professionals. This again fits the long-existing patriarchal ideals that perceive women mainly by appearance and exaggerate their roles as “mothers” and “wives” instead of their other roles like “protectors” or “fighters”. Moreover, this representation also contrasted sharply with the diminishment of nurses' material needs in Wuhan. When asked about how many menstrual pads were needed to support nurses on their periods, for example, a male authority from Jinyintan Hospital refused this help by indicating, “This is not a necessity. We need more masks and protection suits.”¹⁷ Propaganda about artificial female heroism and their muffled requests go hand in hand, materializing women's bodies into dehumanized tools that arouse patriotism.

Finally, there might be an association between burgeoning domestic abuse rates and this head shaving event. Recordings of women crying after having their heads shaved delivered the implicit message that women were fragile and were not

in control of their own bodies. “Reports of domestic violence in February were two to three times higher than the same month last year.” Wan, leader of an anti-domestic violence organization WanHuWuBao, said. From January 23 to March 6, the public security bureau in Jianli and Qianjiang (both are cities in Hubei Province) received more than 300 reports of domestic violence. Wan offers one explanation, “Many cases occurred between ex-couples, who initially only temporarily reunited for their children during the Chinese New Year, were now forced to stay under one roof because of the pandemic. Their past and present resentment towards each other accumulated and triggered violence.”¹⁸ Could it be then that the recordings of women crying after having their heads shaved provided additional legitimacy to overarching patriarchal ideas that men - rather than women - control women's bodies?

■ Conclusion

The representation of nurses' bodies by Chinese media during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated many historical and cultural implications. While it revealed the cruel reality of the status quo of gender inequality in China, it also drew much social attention toward this issue, and promoted calls for improvement in future media representations.

Looking Ahead:

Overall, this exposure of nurses getting their hair shaved should be cherished, not because the behavior itself is valuable, but for the extent of reflection it called upon people, and its awakening effect on the issue of gender equality in China. Unprecedentedly, educated and thoughtful responses about gender-discriminating were evoked from the masses, which encouraged more feminists to continue their activism, and spurred more people to devote interest in feminism. As discussed, historical media such as literature and commercials had characterized China as a mother. People accordingly adopted their “mother's” idiosyncrasies from “weak”, “deprived”, and “desolated” to “strong”, “independent” and “protective” as she walked from foreign invasions to gaining a place in the world (1920-30s).¹⁹

As China develops faster materially, its future media certainly has a role in representing its moral development, which includes the pursuit of gender equality. Future media should direct people in the same way it did 100 years ago, depicting stronger women instead of posting their seemingly oppressed images online. In order to optimize the media's positive effects, publications and propaganda should no longer focus on women's bodies, or their individual sacrifices. Therefore, everyday woman who haven't made such sacrifices such as “going onto the frontline 10 days after miscarriage” could be treated as nobly as those who had. Otherwise, completely ordinary women would be seen as “not deserving of a place in media reports” even though they contribute no less. I look forward to a good media environment in China that reports on subjects as inclusively as possible. In conclusion, the best result is that we can learn lessons from media representations of women during the COVID-119 crisis, so that we can find a way to navigate future media

wisely in order to improve the general gender environment in China.

■ Acknowledgements

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