

Connotation, Evolution, and Practice: An Inquiry into Xiang Jingyu's Feminist Liberation Thought

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Abstract: As an outstanding leader in the modern women's liberation movement, Xiang Jingyu's feminist liberation thought was not static but evolved, deepened and refined in response to actual situation. This systematic and profound body of thought not only laid the theoretical foundation for the in women's work, but continues to offer significant insights for contemporary feminist theory and practice.

Keywords: Xiang Jingyu; Feminist Liberation Thought; Women's Liberation Movement

1. Introduction

Xiang Jingyu (1895-1928), originally named Xiang Junxian, was a Tujia ethnic minority from Xupu County, Hunan Province. She was one of the early important, its sole female founder, the first female member of the Central Committee, and the first minister of Women's Affairs. She is hailed as "the pioneer and leader of "China's women liberation movement" and "the grandmother of the Chinese revolution". Though Xiang Jingyu's life spanned only 33 years, she developed a coherent set of feminist liberation ideas with distinct Chinese characteristics. This paper will use Xiang's life as a framework, employing both historical and theoretical perspectives and dividing her feminist thought into three stages: initial exploration (1911-1920), gradual development (1920-1921), and final formation (1922-1925). It will elaborate on the main content and characteristics of her feminist liberation thought in each stage. Finally, it will also explore the contemporary value of Xiang's feminist liberation thought.

2. Evolution Process and Key Content at Each Stage

2.1 Initial Development (1911-1920)

Xiang Jingyu's ideas on women's liberation

during this period can be summarized as "education for national salvation". This approach advocated as raising women's ideological awareness through education, equipping them with specialized skills to achieve economic independence, and ultimately realizing women's liberation. The emergence of this idea resulted from the combined influence of three factors: the historical context, personal growth environment, and educational experiences.

Xiang Jingyu was born in 1895, a year that profoundly impacted China's historical trajectory. That year witnessed the Qing Dynasty's crushing defeat in the *First Sino-Japanese War*. The Qing government signed the *Treaty of Shimonoseki* with Japan, deepening China's status as a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society. However, this defeat also marked a pivotal turning point in China's modern history. It sparked a collective awakening among the Chinese people, as Liang Qichao wrote in *Account of the Wuxu Coup*: "After the burning of the *Summer Palace* in 1860 and the *Battle of Fuzhou* in 1884, the people across the eighteen provinces still remained oblivious to the pain, showing no sign of abandoning their stubborn arrogance. It was until Taiwan China was ceded and the indemnity of 200 million taels was paid that gradually woke up from their slumber"[1]. The patriotic and salvation consciousness of people from Hunan has always been strong. Though not an economically prosperous region in modern times, Hunan possessed an exceptionally enlightened and vibrant cultural environment during the *Hundred Days' Reform*. At that time, under the vigorous promotion of enlightened officials such as Chen Baozhen, Jiang Biao, alongside reformers and gentry like Tan Sitong, Xiong Xiling, and Ouyang Zhonghu, Hunan witnessed a sweeping wave of enthusiasm for establishing girls' schools.

In 1916, Xiang Jingyu graduated from *Zhounan Women's Normal School* and returned to her hometown. With financial support of local

progressive figures and her father, she established *Xupu Women's School*, the county's first co-educational school, hoping to empower students through education to make them become people who could truly shine in the female world. To encourage more girls to enroll, Xiang even visited every major town in Xupu alone, going door-to-door to persuade them to study. Through her tireless efforts, the school grew from just over dozen students to more than three hundred.

In her educational philosophy, Xiang Jingyu first emphasized that women should acquire scientific and cultural knowledge. She believed they should not only study humanities and social sciences such as history, politics, and sociology to understand the basic laws of historical development and social realities, but also pursue natural sciences including physics, chemistry, astronomy, and geology. This comprehensive education would enhance their overall capabilities and lay a solid theoretical foundation for their personal growth.

Public spirit refers to an individual's awareness and emotional commitment to public welfare, active participation in public affairs, and concern for social issues. It represents an ideology that transcends personal interests and focuses on the entire social group[2]. Besides emphasizing the imparting of cultural knowledge to students, Xiang also prioritized cultivating their moral character and sense of social responsibility. A representative example of this was her leading students in various social practice activities. Xiang observed that the streets of Xupu were "littered with filth piled high, emitting foul odors that assaulted the nostrils"[3]. Consequently, she often led students to clean the streets on weekends.

Xiang was very fond of sports. In her opinion, "The people are weak and gaunt. Though blessed with a hundred years of life and a seven-foot frame, they are worn down and their vitality diminishes day by day. Often, before their endeavors are half completed, they succumb to illness and die. Their achievements remain unfinished, their learning hindered, their spirits incomplete, and their career short-lived"[3]. Therefore, during her time running the school, Xiang offered PE classes to the students, hired PE teachers, and regularly held sports meets. She even composed a "*Sports Song*" to inspire students to build up their bodies.

Xiang had a unique set of selection criteria for

teachers coming to teach in the women's school. First of all, she emphasized that teachers should lead by example and attach equal importance to both words and deeds, regarding this as "the fundamental principle of teaching"[3]. Secondly, she insightfully pointed out: "The pursuit of daily renewal is the fundamental principle of learning"[3]. She advocated that teachers should stay attuned to social trends and global developments, constantly studying and exploring to enrich their knowledge reserves. Finally, in Xiang's view, the prevailing social ills of the time manifested in three primary ways: first, some people were pessimistic, "nurturing a fatalistic outlook that extinguishes all ambition for progress"[3]; second, others held excessively extreme views; third, some pursued personal gain at the expense of the nation's welfare. Therefore, she argued that teachers should dare to fight against the prevailing adverse social conditions, "remaining unstained by the mud", and shoulder the heavy responsibility of eliminating vice and exalting virtue.

However, Xiang's thought during this period remained immature. Although she had the aspiration and enthusiasm of saving the country through education, she overlooked the fact that education requires a strong economic foundation and superstructure as support. Even as she traveled around to raise funds for the school, she often found herself "short of funds", and faced numerous criticisms and accusations from the diehard.

2.2 Gradual Development (1920-1922)

In 1919, Xiang joined the *Xinmin Society* founded by Mao Zedong, Cai Hesen, and Xiao Zisheng, becoming one of its earliest female members. At that time, the *May Fourth Movement* was sweeping across the nation. Additionally, France, having just endured World War I, urgently required substantial manpower and resources to restore production. Against this backdrop, a wave of enthusiasm for working and studying in France began to emerge domestically. Responding to the call, Xiang, along with Cai Chang, organized the *Hunan Association for work-study in France*, becoming the pioneer of the *Hunan women's work-study movement in France*. By the end of that year, Xiang Jingyu, Cai Hesen, Cai Chang, and others embarked on their journey to France, hoping to find a true solution to save the nation.

Along the way, Xiang often discussed issues

with Cai Hesen. During this process, her thinking underwent a significant transformation, “beginning to abandon the illusion of saving the nation through education and leaning towards communism”[4].

After arriving in France, Xiang diligently studied French while simultaneously conducting in-depth research on Marxist classics such as *The Manifesto*, and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Her theoretical level and ideological awareness were greatly enhanced. This can be seen from her article *Deliberation on women’s emancipation and reform*.

In May 1920, Xiang Jingyu wrote the famous article *Deliberation on women’s emancipation and reform*. In it, she incisively pointed out that private property ownership was the root cause of women’s oppression. She made a similar point in her article *The National Revolutionary Movement of Chinese Women in the Future*: “As animal husbandry and agriculture developed, men’s status and rose sharply because they excelled at warfare and trade. Once men established private property, women were gradually excluded from production and confined to a rigidly defined domestic role, becoming mechanical tools to satisfy men’s sexual desires and raise children for them”[3]. From these arguments, it is clear that Xiang believed the development of social division of labour and the emergence of private property excluded women from social production, causing them to lose their agency and remained subordinated to men as the “second sex”. Furthermore, she criticized the new family structure. She argued that even when women managed all household affairs, men retained ultimate control, leaving women marginalized within the family. Thus, she asserted: “The new family is still a tool for men to achieve their hedonism”[3]. Only by abolishing the traditional family model of “men outside and women inside” could women achieve liberation. To this end, Xiang emphasized that economic independence was the sole condition for women’s liberation. She argued that women’s economic liberation should focus on the entire female group rather than the economic independence of an individual. “If we merely advocate the economic independence of individuals under various slogans and fuel the flames of private property, this is not liberating women, but creating obstacles for them”[3].

The two years in France marked a pivotal turning point in Xiang’s development of feminist liberation thought. As she wrote in 1920: “Since leaving Xupu, I realize all my past views were mistaken and and sinful. Even if I pursued them in an airship now, I fear I could not catch up”[3]. By this time, Xiang had completely abandoned her earlier reformist path of achieving women’s liberation through education, transforming instead into a Marxist willing to dedicate her life to the cause of communism.

2.3 Final Formation (1922-1925)

In January 1922, Xiang Jingyu returned to Shanghai and soon joined in July, she was elected as the first Minister of Women’s Affairs of the Central Committee, thus becoming a leader of the Chinese proletarian women’s liberation movement. From her return to China in early 1922 until her departure for the *Far East University* in October 1925, Xiang combined the Marxist view of women with the specific realities of the Chinese Revolution, “drafted a series of document and resolutions on the women’s movement, wrote numerous articles on the women’s movement, and trained a large number of women cadres”[5], making an indelible contribution to the vigorous development of the women’s liberation movement in the early days .

Xiang placed great emphasis on the strength of working women during this period, viewing this group as the “pioneer of women’s liberation”[3] and the “forerunners of the national revolution”[3]. In her article *The Recent Women’s Movement in China*, she analyzed from a materialist historical perspective of why working women could become the main force of in women’s liberation movement. She argued that this stemmed from their original background: impoverished background forced them to engage in production and be exploited and oppressed by capitalists, thus fostering an urgent desire for liberation. Meanwhile, the development of modern industry created condition for their organized gathering. Under the joint effect of these two factors, “they are naturally easy to organize and struggle”[3]. Xiang emphasized that women’s liberation movement in China should prioritize the concerns of working women, as “their position is extremely painful”[3]. However, working women also have an undeniable disadvantage: though brimming with revolutionary fervour, their low level of

education meant they lacked sufficient understanding of revolution. In contrast, within the historical context of modern women's history, educated women were the pioneering group to awaken to enlightenment consciousness. They could awaken the collective struggle consciousness of the majority of women by undertaking the tasks of social propaganda and ideological education. In her view, if educated women could shed the hypocrisy and passivity imposed by traditional Confucian ethics and cultivate a spirit of struggle and revolutionary consciousness, this cohort would become a vital force in promoting the awakening and pursuit of women's political rights. Therefore, she explicitly proposed in the *Resolution on Women's Movement* at the establishment of a united front for the women's movement, uniting working women with educated women to effectively advance the women's liberation cause.

She also advocated establishing women's organizations to advance the women's liberation movement. She emphasized that for Chinese women to achieve genuine emancipation, they must unite and be led by a unified organization. Through her efforts, the *Shanghai Women's National Congress* was formed, marking "the beginning of the systematic and planned development of the Chinese women's movement under the same goal and strategy"[3]. Shortly thereafter, the Women's National Conferences sprang up in Guangzhou, Tianjin, Hangzhou and other places. After the *May 30th Movement* broke out in 1925, Xiang mobilized women to actively participate in this anti-imperialist patriotic movement and initiated the Women's Liberation Association, which grew to a membership of 300,000. These women made significant contributions to the movement's triumph.

Moreover, she asserted that women's liberation movement in China was closely linked to the National Revolution. "The women's rights movement is part of the civil rights movement. Without the civil rights movement, there can be no women's liberation movement; the women's liberation movement absolutely cannot exist independently of the civil rights movement"[3]. Under the semi-colonial and semi-feudal nature of modern China, two evil forces prevailed: imperialism and warlords. The Beiyang warlord government served as the "spokesman" for imperialist powers in China, colluding with them

to transform the nation into a "world of bandits and soldiers". Xiang thus pointed out that "the sole purpose of the civil rights movement is to resist imperialism and overthrow the warlords. Women's rights can only be secured within the broader civil rights movement"[3]. In the *Resolution on Women's Movement* adopted, she explicitly proposed that women's movement "should incorporate two slogans: "overthrow the warlords" and "overthrow foreign imperialism"[5], thus encouraging more women to join the National Revolution. She maintained that "the women's movement must ride the mighty wind of the national movement to achieve rapid progress"[3], and that women's liberation could only be realized when the Chinese nation attained complete independence and liberation.

Finally, Xiang also attached great importance to the propaganda role of newspapers and periodicals. She pointed out that the ignorance and lack of awareness among Chinese women were not inherent traits, but rather the inevitable products of traditional agricultural and patriarchal society. Therefore, during this period, in addition to leading workers' strikes and devoting herself to running worker's night schools and training women cadres, she also published numerous articles in periodicals such as *The Guide Weekly* and *The Ladies' Journal*, propagating the Marxist theories on women's liberation. Through this approach, she sought to "keep women constantly coming into contact with political and social news"[3], thereby cultivating "political literacy"[3] and "social awareness"[3].

4. Contemporary Value

At present, significant progress has been made in women's empowerment. A multitude of outstanding women have stepped onto the international stage, leading fulfilling lives and contributing their wisdom and strength...However, complex challenges persist in realizing women's comprehensive development, and the journey towards gender equality remains long and arduous. As a pioneer of the women's liberation movement in China, Xiang's feminist liberation thought combined Marxist views on women with the specific practice of the Chinese revolution, greatly promoting the awakening of self-awareness among women at the time and advancing the development of the modern women's liberation

movement in China. More importantly, this ideology not only holds indelible historical significance but also possesses profound contemporary value, offering historical insights for exploring gender issues in today's society.

Firstly, Xiang Jingyu advocated integrating women's liberation into the broader framework of national liberation and independence, opposing the treatment of women's liberation as a separate issue. This aligns closely with the current assertion that "promoting the comprehensive development of women as a national action"[6], providing ideological support for the formulation of policies to promote women's development in the new era. For instance, the *China Women's Development Outline (2021-2030)* states that "efforts must be intensified to cultivate female scientific and technological talent"[7], which encourages greater female participation in cutting-edge fields such as advanced manufacturing and artificial intelligence, thereby breaking the stereotype that science and technology are male-dominated domains.

Secondly, Xiang believed that women should be fully independent in terms of economy, ideology and personality, and such independence should go hand in hand with social liberation. The essence of this view is to transform women from dependents into the main force in social construction. Within the trajectory of Chinese modernization, the value of women as labour resources and drivers of innovation has become increasingly prominent. Her proposition can provide spiritual impetus and value guidance for stimulating women's potential and unleashing their strength.

Thirdly, Xiang placed great emphasis on the vital role of working women in the women's liberation movement. By establishing workers' night schools and female workers' clubs, she empowered working women to become the main force in the women's liberation movement. This approach of rooting in the grassroots and mobilizing the masses is conducive to enriching the practical paths of current grassroots women's work. For instance, today's grassroots women's federation can draw on her "female workers' mutual aid groups" model to establish community-based women's support

organizations, transforming women from "service recipients" to "participants in social governance". Data shows that by January 2025, "Fuding City in Fujian Province had established 758 various women's groups, enrolling 5,306 women to join and cumulatively mediating over 100 mixed family disputes"[8].

Although Xiang's life was short, she actively adapted to the trends of the times and constantly explored, eventually forming a rich and distinctive Chinese female liberation ideology, promoting the Sinicization of Marxist women's liberation theory and leaving a brilliant mark in the history of modern Chinese women.

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