*“A Woman’s Republic: Sun Yat-sen, Tang Qunying and the Question of Women’s Rights in 1912”*[[1]](#footnote-1)

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According to Li Xisuo and Xu Ning in their study of the “political participation craze” (*canzheng* re) that erupted during and after the 1911 Revolution suffragist and women's organizations were prominent and numerous, rivaled only by Manchus and Bannermen in their zest for getting organized and expressing their political views. Perhaps this was because women felt they had the most to gain and Bannermen the most to lose under the Republic. As a contemporary account of women’s participation in politics explained:

Women are carried away by revolutionary currents and the more open general mood. They participate in all manner of military, philanthropic, fund-raising and other concrete revolutionary work and increase their understanding of what the status and responsibilities of a citizen are.

Women who joined suffrage groups were described as acting "as if awakened from their illusions.” Embracing the fluid moment, they took to republican revolution "like fish to water."

These political women looked to republican principles for inspiration and remedies but they also prized spontaneous public performances and what F.G. Bailey has described as the more premeditated and “tactical uses of passion.” They took ideas from classical Chinese elite culture as well as global revolution -- the dashing regicide Sofia Perovskaya as role model but also the mother of Mencius as paragon of quiet virtue. They drew on rarified elite upbringings in “book-fragrant” households as “willow-catkin” girl prodigies to embellish and elevate their revolutionary journalism and to find the social confidence to stand up to men as equals. On revolutionary battlefields they relived childhood memories of the Mulan tale of a girl disguised as a boy-soldier to protect her aged father from conscription into the imperial army. Except that now they made no effort to disguise their sex or their contempt for the “poison” of neo-Confucian strictures that insisted on women returning to or remaining in the inner quarters and out-of-sight. In 1911, more than a few of these revolutionary fighters took the nom de guerre “Mulan.”

One of the most remarkable and influential members of this band of political women was the Hunanese republican revolutionary Tang Qunying. Tang Qunying was born in 1871 inXinqiao, Hengshan County, a picturesque village forty kilometers west of the county seat set amidst the rolling hills, forested mountains and neatly laid-out fields of southern Hunan.It is possible to provide the details of Tang Qunying’s remarkable life thanks in good part to writings of her grandson Tang Cunzheng that draw on family records and oral histories. Tang Qunying grew up in the Confucian heartland that supported the last-ditch and successful literati defense of the Qing dynasty against Taiping rebels.Her father General Tang Xingzhao joined Zeng Guofan's anti-Taiping Hunan Army and rose in the ranks to provincial commander.

Tang Xingzhao's relationship with his third daughter Qunying was especially close, conforming to the catkin ideal of the young female aesthete and her doting father. Girls like Qunying, as Susan Mann has noted, "were renowned for upstaging their male friends and relatives in verbal combat and poetry contests."Following the custom in many elite households, Qunying and her sisters were educated along with their brothers. Qunying was an excellent student and at a young age read the standard classics and became an accomplished poet. She learned to write the standard “eight-legged” essay even though as a female she could never take the imperial examination that required it. The father once praised one of Qunying’s poems in a conventional, but heartfelt way in an exchange that prefigured her career as an advocate for women's rights.

You write good poems. Your talent really is catkin-like. If you were a boy, you would honor your household as a successful examination candidate.

The family legend of her brilliance has Qunying boldly replying, “If one is a girl, why cannot the household also be so honored?" She also periodically unwrapped her own bound feet after objecting that her brothers were spared the crippling torment. As a result her feet, though

bound, were not tiny but “medium-large” as bound feet went.

Qunying was also something of a tomboy who, citing the Mulan story to her father, persuaded him to teach her swordsmanship and permit her to ride the family's horses despite inevitable tumbles. All of this earned her the father's jesting though prescient compliment that she was a "female knight-errant" (*nü xiake*) and her mother's complaint that she was wild and monkey-like.Such seemingly unconventional behavior had a place in elite and popular culture. As Wang Zheng notes, a boy or girl could be either martial (*wu*) or literary (*wen*) in inclination without the boy being "feminized" by literary pursuits or a girl "masculinized" by emulating Mulan. Qunying's interests in martial arts and the classics permitted her general-father to see his gifted daughter – and Qunying to see herself -- as both warrior and poet without Amazonian baggage.

Despite her sex, and because of her status as girl-prodigy, Tang Qunying had much in common with other revolutionary firebrands-in-the-making like her later friend and nemesis on the question of women’s rights Song Jiaoren.Song reveled in the role of rascal and gadfly to the point that, at seventeen, he shocked guests at his wedding banquet by calling for the overthrow of the emperor. Rectitude and propriety became foils for brash young men and women with the requisite literary skills and self-confidence to challenge them. The refined insolence that resulted might delight or horrify depending on the audience. Confucian patriarchy gave educated young women and men something to fight against. The same culture gave them many weapons – literary, martial and social -- to fight with.

In the spring of 1890 Tang Qunying’s father died. In the autumn of 1891, at the age of 19, and in accord with her mother's wishes, Qunying was married to a younger cousin of Zeng Guofan.Her husband's family lived in the nearby village of Heye ("Lotus Leaf"), northwest of Xinqiao and ancestral home of the Zeng clan. The move was eased by the fact that one of her sisters had also married a Zeng and preceded Qunying to Heye. Qunying got along well with her mother-in-law in a household that was moderately prosperous and presided over by her husband's father, a rather strict patriarch. Finally, the relationship between Qunying and her husband developed into one of genuine affection.

The Tang sisters made the acquaintance in Heye of another educated young woman, Ge Jianhao, who had married into a local family of scholar officials at age sixteen. Ge later won renown as a modern-minded mother who pawned her jewels to enable her son to pursue revolutionary politics and supported her daughter's refusal to accept an arranged marriage.The three young women, all in their twenties, often got together to drink wine, compose poetry, play chess, “play the lute to the moon,” and confide in each other.

Fortuitously for the women, the future revolutionary Qiu Jin also had a family connection to Heye since her husband was related to the Zeng clan. Although she lived with her husband in Xiangtan, near Changsha, Qiu Jin began visiting Heye in the mid-1890s. Qiu Jin was already well-known as a progressively minded woman, who was also skilled in scholarship, horseback riding, and the sword dance.Through Ge Jianhao and Qiu Jin, Tang Qiuying was exposed to new political thinking and the burning issues of the day.

Rather than severing ties to her natal home, Qunying's marriage was an expression of her family's wider connections to elite circles, and a welcome opportunity to establish friendships with other women of her generation and interests. Marriage did represent potentially severe restrictions. In the conventional text on women's obligations, “Admonitions for Women,” one of the seven reasons listed justifying a divorce was a woman "talking too much," a fault Tang had long since made into a virtue. Instead of marriage ending her intellectual pursuits, Tang's life of books and passionate, refined conversation traveled with her. Elite mobility, through visits of the kind Qunying was accustomed to at home, and marriages arranged among allied, literary families made a village like Heye a locus if not a hub of broader social and cultural interactions. The Xiang River, running north to Changsha past Hengshan, lay a journey of a day, or two, east from Heye. The bustling city of Hengyang to the south was only twenty km. farther. Xinqiao and Heye were deep in the countryside but not cut off from the movement of people, ideas and goods through Hunan and points south and north.

Two personal tragedies transformed circumstances which might have kept Tang Qunying in Heye indefinitely. In 1896 Qunying’s only child, a daughter, died suddenly.The following year her husband died.Tang Qunying might have remained in Heye as a twenty-six year-old widow. The Zeng clan was famous for the conservative application of such strictures. However, Tang Qunying had allies in her friends Qiu Jin and Ge Jianhao and they and her family supported her decision to return home. The kind of elite "sociability" among scholars praised and promoted at the time by Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei also enabled women like Tang Qunying to act independently and with a sense of shared purpose. In a letter Qiu Jin later wrote from Japan to a new women's college in Hunan, she insisted that "if we wish to escape the dominion of men, we must establish our own independence, educate ourselves, and [foster] sociability (*hequn*)." Qiu Jin, the Tang sisters and Ge Jianhao applied these principles in Xinqiao, Heye and places beyond.

Back home in Xinqiao, Tang continued to correspond with Qiu Jin and Ge Jianhao and worked in the family study cataloguing her father's library and writing poetry. She read widely in the reform literature of Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao, becoming conversant in issues like evolution and other Western ideas flooding into China. She was particularly attracted to writings that advocated the emancipation of women including those contained in Kang Youwei's *Book of the Great Unity* (*Datong shu*). In a poem entitled "My Thoughts on Reading *Datong shu*" Tang Qunying answered Kang in confident fashion.

In a small room I warm the wine.

Who will shape the heavens and change the world?

From the depths of oceanic darkness

I vow to be the one who treads the waves.

Tang's life had not been as grim or constricted as that of the female victims in Kang's litany patriarchal abuses. Still, her ability to converse, study, write, travel, and debate the issues of the day made her keenly aware of the many things that were still beyond her reach. Like Lu Xun, she transformed what irritated and angered her about the world into new ideas and commitments as part of the sea change in thinking taking place more generally in China.

At the urging of Qiu Jin, now in Japan, Tang Qunying traveled to Tokyo to study. While there she joined Sun Yat-sen’s Revolutionary Alliance and after the execution of Qiu Jin in China in 1907, Tang herself took part in a secret mission to Hunan to spy and organize on behalf of the Revolution. Sun Yat-sen, who was in northern Vietnam directing revolutionary uprisings on the border with China, was inspired to write a poem about and for Tang.

Waves billow to the heavens.

It's good to know you are on a boat.

When you return to the deep-running Xiang River

Greet Crazy Chen for me.

"Crazy Chen" (Chen Dian) was the alias of Chen Jing, a Hunan native of Xiangxiang. Tang Qunying and her friend and fellow Hunanese Zhang Hanying sought out Crazy Chen in Changsha as part of their revolutionary mission. From 1908 until June 1910 and when she returned to Japan, Tang, Zhang and their confederates pursued a series of propaganda and conspiratorial actions in Hunan and neighboring Jiangxi.In tune with the prevailing Revolutionary Alliance strategy, they sought alliances with local secret society branches. In one instance, using a contact in the local Qing garrison, Zhang, dressed as a peasant woman, managed to persuade a local commander that she knew where a group of bandits or rebels was hiding out. The ruse succeeded in drawing a government unit into an ambush, a stratagem aided by Tang in tea picker disguise misdirecting the troops.

While in exile, and like many other political women with literary backgrounds, Tang practiced political journalism. She kept a close eye on events in China and also on the international women’s movement as suffragettes in England and suffragists in America pressed their own cases for women’s rights. In a typical passage, Tang declared.

Permit us to soar throughout East Asia with women’s journals everywhere, catching every ear in the name of progress, raising a great cry with the mountains echoing in support… Female citizens! Bravely and honestly stride forward, countenances shining, heir to Mulan and the mother of Mencius.

She also, with an acute awareness of building pressures for women’s suffrage in the West, noted in 1911 on the eve of the 1911 Revolution:

Last year in England at a meeting of women, women from all over the country demanded the right to vote in both houses of parliament. This grand and imposing regard for human rights can also be seen in books and newspapers. The land of China is not second to England or America in importance. Nor are our women inferior to the women of England and America.

Although limited suffrage for women in Britain waited until 1918 and full suffrage only came in 1928, 1910 did witness intense and widely reported struggles for the vote in and out of parliament by British women and their allies. Expecting suffrage for English women to be granted soon, Tang Qunying argued that if Chinese men wanted to demonstrate their equality with foreigners, they should accept full citizenship rights for Chinese women. Meanwhile, Tang was no doubt aware of Qing constitutional reform programs, including in her home province of Hunan, that granted limited voting rights to men, and explicitly not to women, on the grounds that:

The intelligence and talents of women do not reach the level of men. Furthermore Chinese women typically cannot read or even recognize characters. They do not know about what is going on in the wider world. How then can the fill the role of electors who must be able to manage public affairs?

To be judged to have little understanding of the world while studying abroad and denied the vote on the grounds of illiteracy after having mastered both classical Chinese and a foreign language was impossible to accept without protest.

When Tang Qunying and other female revolutionary returned from exile to fight in 1911 they did so with a clear agenda for political change. And fight they did, including on the battlefields of the revolution. Tang on horseback with the skills her father taught her led a contingent of women in the bloody struggle for Nanjing. Afterwards, her comrade Zhang Ji described her valor in a poem.

Beacon fires flare on all sides.

Sleeves flicked back,

You lead troops forward.

The military role of women in the 1911 Revolution underscores the importance of a martial identity as part of the package of ideas that helped radicalize Tang Qunying and other women like her. Unlike liberal ideas about women as free individuals, the woman warrior role was indigenous as well as liberating. Tang on the battlefields of Central China was not only a modern, undisguised Mulan and knight-errant, but also a citizen-soldier. News and photographs of these Chinese citizen-soldiers had an electrifying effect on the international women’s movement. A few months later, as suffragists in New York City prepared for a massive women’s rights march up Fifth Avenue, with some of the women also on horseback, and a number in Chinese costume in honor of sisters in China, a spokeswoman for the Suffrage Alliance declared:

The Chinese have…answered practically one question which has not troubled the suffragists, but upon which the anti-suffragists have laid great stress – that of woman’s inability to protect her country and therefore her inability to help govern it. The Chinese have formed a regiment of young women and the pictures show them to be bright and intelligent…modest and self-respecting although they have laid aside their loose garments for trim military uniforms.

Military campaigns in China, as they churned across the landscape, also afforded excellent opportunities for forging connections with other women's organizations and leaders. After the war-phase of the revolution subsided in December, revolutionary authorities in Nanjing quickly disbanded the women’s brigades. Female combatants went their various ways. Some returned to their studies or married, including to officials in the new Republican government. Others, like Tang Qunying, who remained as a widow emphatically unmarried, continued their involvement in revolutionary and women's politics.Many joined the nation-wide movement for women’s suffrage.One of the long-run consequences of the 1911 Revolution was that a nation-wide scale of political operations took on new weight and meaning, a fact women like Tang were quick to exploit.

Tang Qunying, typical of the radical wing of the women’s movement (and there was a moderate wing as well of women less interested in gaining immediate political rights), demanded full political rights even before the provisional Republican government formed at the end of 1911. She later petitioned both the new government in Nanjing and Sun Yat-sen to that effect.

Happily, China has been revived in glory with dictatorship now transformed into a republic. With political revolution comes social revolution. If we wish to end the social tragedy, we must seek social equality. If we wish social equality we must first have equal rights for men and women. We must first have the right to vote and be elected.

Many calls for social reform were pinned to the standard of Republican revolution including the popular literacy movement, the anti-opium campaign, and Sun Yat-sen’s still vaguely defined notion of “people’s livelihood” with its hint of social leveling. There was nothing vague about the plans militant women had for achieving political rights and progressing rapidly on toward social and cultural transformation.

Much of Tang Qunying’s political energy in early 1912 was directed at influencing Sun Yat-sen, both before and after his resignation as provisional president. Sun clearly appreciated Tang’s contributions to the revolution. She met with Sun on February 2, 1912 to be recognized as a “Hero of Womankind” (*Jin’guo yingxong*), a traditional title for “women who fulfilled their obligations to the ruler or their kin with remarkable deeds in warfare.” Sun also presented Tang with the Presidential “Second Class Commendation Medal.”

From a suffragist standpoint, Sun’s views on women’s rights were appealing. His initial impulse in 1912 to support full suffrage demonstrated the extent of his commitments. When the Revolutionary Alliance issued its “Nine Point” party platform on March 3, male-female equality was featured as a basic principle. Moreover, Sun had long been open to the recruitment of women as revolutionary fighters. Sun Yat-sen also led a complicated personal life. His marriage to Lu Muzhen that resulted in the three children Sun acknowledged was of the traditional, arranged kind. On his travels he had many affairs including one in Japan that produced a daughter. Sun’s wandering eye for women exposed him to politically-motivated charges of consorting with prostitutes and keeping a concubine. In 1915, in the throes of his struggle with “the mid-life demon,” Sun wed 23 year-old Song Qingling without formally divorcing his first wife, creating a scandal among Sun’s missionary and Christian supporters.

Sun Yat-sen presented himself as an emancipator of the Chinese people from enslavement. Political women often used the republican trope of freedom from slavery to underline their goal female emancipation. In his brief presidency Sun issued more than thirty administrative edicts designed to end injustices. Sun ordered the abolition of corporal punishment including beatings with a bamboo stick and wearing the cangue around one’s neck.He decreed that hereditarily "debased" people be given rights as citizens. He ordered the same improvement of condition for occupational groups suffering discrimination, including barbers, actors, prostitutes, and servants. Sun seemed poised to act decisively on behalf of women as well.He reiterated the recent Qing edict banning footbinding.

However, when push came to shove, Sun tended to temporize on women’s rights. Early in 1912 when a female reporter, Lin Zongsu, published an interview with Sun that had him declaring unqualified support for women’s rights, Sun found himself attacked in print by Zhang Binglin and Zhang Jian for rejecting “sound social customs.” Sun immediately backed down. When women objected to a refusal by the provisional Senate in Nanjing to make women’s rights explicit in the Republic’s constitution (drafted by Song Jiaoren) and engaged in a raucous series of protests outside and inside the Senate chambers, Sun intervened to gain women access to Senate galleries to observe men debating and making law but also admonished them “not to by rioting unintentionally make yourselves out to be the enemy." During these disturbances, women took to the Senate floor uninvited and denounced their male comrades in no uncertain terms. In response to a male senator who declared that “Women have no national consciousness and no political ability,” Tang’s fellow suffrage leader Shen Peizhen replied with a defiant speech that “caused the hall to erupt.”

On the front line of battle, the ones in the vanguard were we women. In the rear areas making propaganda and carrying out relief were we women. Where were women not in the thick of things? As for you senators and “great men,” some of you spend the night playing mahjong and the day going to meetings and taking naps. You speak in bureaucratic jargon. How many of you have any idea of how to save the country? How dare you make such comments about us women?!

After giving up the Presidency to Yuan Shikai, Sun later in the summer of 1912 traveled to Beijing to meet with Yuan and preside over the re-founding of the Revolutionary Alliance as the Nationalist Party. When he arrived in Beijing on August 24 and announced his "aims and opinions," male-female equality was at the top of his list, followed by his cherished railway projects, respect for legislative institutions, unifying north and south China, responsible journalism (he was annoyed by critical press coverage), and his own decision to remain a "free citizen" rather than join the political class. The next day at a convention held in Beijing at the Huguang Guild Sun endorsed Song Jiaoren’s plans for turning the Nationalist Party into a parliamentary party geared to winning elections and, more immediately, Song’s expanding the appeal of the new Nationalist Party among more conservative political groups by jettisoning the Revolutionary Alliance’s earlier commitment to women’s rights.

After Sun Yat-sen gave a dedicatory speech on party unity to great applause from the several thousand people present, and Song and his colleague Zhang Ji had completed their speeches, three female Revolutionary Alliance members and radical suffragists – Tang Qunying, Shen Peizhen and Wang Changguo – stormed the stage and slapped Song with their fans. Wang grabbed Song by the throat and threatened to shoot him. The women then gave speeches from the stage, condemning the betrayal of women to an audience that was mostly male and now “tongue-tied and staring in anger.” In the afternoon, there followed more speeches, heckling, an attempt to attack Song again with fans.

In the wake of hours of rancor at the Huguang Lodge among convention delegates, Sun got up and gave his second speech of the day. His remarks lasted a marathon two hours and squarely addressed the question of women’s rights. In order to achieve party unification, if not unity, Sun made an abrupt switch from his pro-equality statement of the day before to open support for leaving out the women’s rights clause. This was the kind of 180° turn that gave him a reputation for both flexibility and opportunism. Sun at his core was a politician willing to balance ultimate values like patriotism or rights with attention to his political responsibilities, including care for his own career. That he presented himself as an idealist, and certainly was a man of principle in his own mind and in the hearts of many followers, exposed him to the charge of being not only Sun Dapao – Sun the “cannon” or blowhard-- but also a hypocrite. Under pressure Sun now declared that while equal rights was “still something very much to be hoped for, not even foreign countries had been able to reach this goal.” Since three countries – New Zealand, Australia and Finland -- had already granted the vote to women, Sun was wrong on this count. That none of these was a great power was probably more to the point. Alluding to "what foreigners thought" was a common rhetorical device for Sun and other public figures. Sun might have taken the lead from Chinese suffragists who reasoned that the vote for women would strike a blow for national pride by making China a leader in something other than poverty and weakness. However, on this occasion Sun drew a different lesson convenient to the balance of power in the audience he faced. Sun used the fact of global resistance to women's suffrage as a reason to delay action. He did promise that “one day” these rights would be secured. After all, how could men demand freedom for themselves and not accept equality with women? Sun's mastery of the future as a rhetorical device permitted him to use it either to inspire measures in the here and now or defer action by putting current demands off to some later date. If women’s rights were to be part of the revolution, the struggle would need to be long indeed. Sun’s faith in the future had a perverse implication for at least some of his supporters. Without a date certain for the revolution’s end, goals like women’s rights could be indefinitely postponed.

A reassuring rejoinder to principled opposition can be infuriating. An unconvinced Tang Qunying, with a parting verbal shot, walked out in protest. The next day Shen Peizhen and Tang Qunying went to see Sun at his residence. According to a newspaper account, Tang wept so loudly that the sound “shook the room.” The women “stuck fiercely to their position” and cited the many women who had risked or lost their lives for the revolution. Sun attempted to console them and was said to be “much moved,” but Shen and Tang left the meeting unsatisfied and furious.Sun later published a letter to a group of suffragists in Nanjing in which he declared his personal support for women's equality and blamed the removal of the original rights plank on "the opinions of a majority of men" at the convention. He noted in his own defense that he had made a special point of including women as guests at the various public events he had been attending in the capital. He advised women to organize themselves more effectively so that "when you begin to scramble for power with men you will be able to achieve victory." He also wrote Tang Qunying a personal letter of explanation with many of the same sentiments, a missive she reportedly treasured to the end of her life. Sun’s letter to Tang concluded with advice that contained a hint of self-criticism: “Never depend on men to act on your own behalf and never let yourself be used by men.”

Through the fall in Beijing suffragists continued to place pressure on the Nationalist Party to return to its former position on male-female equality. At a election committee meeting at Nationalist Party headquarters on September 8, described in the press as a “real-life drama” (*da huoxi*), Shen Peizhen and Wang Changguo demanded to be heard but were initially denied on the grounds they were not listed as speakers. Female party members present cursed this rebuff. As one might expect, Shen got up on stage anyway and her remarks in the end produced “thunderous applause” from the hundred people present. At a suffrage meeting in October in Beijing Shen Peizhen and Wang Changguo promised to “try and try again” to win the vote for women, reasoning: “Surely the word “Republic” cannot mean cutting out women and leaving only men.”

Several male politicians in the Beijing, including some of the same men who had been terrorized by suffragists in the Nanjing Senate in March, agreed to continue to place the demand for women’s suffrage as a motion before the Senate.After several petitions from women’s organizations a debate on the question was finally held in the Senate in Beijing on November 6, 1912. Most of the senators who spoke for the extension of voting rights to women were from Tang Qunying's home province of Hunan.They argued that nothing in the constitution prohibited extending voting rights to women. Opponents responded that the matter had been settled in Nanjing the previous spring with a deferral of the question until the convening of a full national assembly after the coming elections. They also complained about the “insulting language” used by women to refer to the Senate in the petitions placed before them. Petitions, manifestos, speeches depicting senators as mah-jongg playing, dissolute and cowardly opportunists appear to have taken a toll. The debate was characteristically heated and twice dissolved into mayhem (and twice returned to parliamentary order). In the final vote, only six senators voted for women's rights, a decisive defeat for the suffrage movement after a year of setbacks. In a stinging response Tang Qunying declared that “Since Yuan Shikai does not recognize that women have the right to vote, we need not recognize Yuan Shikai as president.”Shortly before she left Beijing to return to Hunan, Tang visited the Senate gallery on December 9, waited until members who had voted against suffrage rights entered. and then roundly cursed them for betraying women who had fought in the revolution.

Despite setbacks and frustrations on the national level and the return of many women to their provincial homes, suffragists maintained a presence in the capital thanks to Shen Peizhen and others. Whenever the Senate met, ten or so women were dispatched to the public galleries to observe the proceedings. When they were dissatisfied with what they heard, they would sometimes throw empty metal cigarette canisters at the senators.Such objects were big enough to do damage if they hit their target.

A famous photograph of Tang Qunying’s friend Qiu Jin shows her dressed as a man. But a female citizen dressed like a woman could be just as provocative, even without the aggressive tactics sometimes pursued by Tang Qunying or distinctive marks like bobbed hair, flamboyant hat or a lighted cigarette. A woman speaking in public was a violation of Confucian strictures that "women's speech not be heard outside of women's quarters."At the same time, as Susan Mann has pointed out, even these conservative ideas about a strictly limited role for women in public assumed that a woman's voice at home or "behind the screen” was "public" in that it articulated a moral view of general significance. Although feminists like Tang openly defied traditional norms, to the extent that for Confucianists "the authentic woman's voice was a moral voice" the righteous anger of women on the suffrage issue had deep roots, in the "mother of Mencius and Mulan" among other home-grown exemplars. Since what a woman had to say now in public likely took the form of a moral message about nation or self, the message and the public spectacle that surrounded it was hard to dismiss out of hand simply because a woman said it.

Winning battles in backrooms and in male-dominated institutions like the Senate or the Nationalist Party proved a tougher slog. Tang Qunying and her sisters-in-arms failed to win full constitutional rights in the early Republic. They did succeed in feminizing a portion of public life by speaking and organizing as well or better than men, to both the chagrin of cultural conservatives and male comrades and the sometimes grim, sometimes delighted satisfaction of the women themselves. The activism of women proved that republicanism could appeal not only to those who stood to inherit power from the remains of the Qing dynasty and Qing era revolutionary and reform organizations but also to those, like women, who required the creation of new institutions like suffrage societies, new practices like voting, and new forms of leadership in order to be empowered as citizens. The response of women like Tang Qunying and Shen Peizhen to the gaze of men – whether of a sympathetic Sun Yat-sen or a belligerent fellow politician -- was to look back as citizens.

1. Documentation for this essay can be found in Strand, *An Unfinished Republic: Leading by Word and Deed in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). References available on request. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)