

LI ZHISHAN'S FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN TIANJIN IN THE 1920s

YUXIN MA

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

Scholarship on May Fourth feminists in Tianjin often focuses on those who became communist party members later, such as Deng Yingchao, Zhang Ruoming, Liu Qingyang, and Guo Longzhen. But Li Zhishan (1896-c. 1937-45), the editor-in-chief of *Nüxing* (Women's Star) and *Funü ribao* (Women's Daily), and a well-known feminist activist then was largely neglected because she became a member of the Nationalist Party in late 1920s. This paper constructs Li Zhishan as a liberal feminist by investigating her feminist writings and her feminist practices in public spaces. Li Zhishan advocated women's education, independence, and career lives. Modern education made her a teacher, an editor, and a social activist. She married her choice, edited women's journals, and devoted her life to women's movements. As an editor, she responded to readers' requests at home and abroad by editing correspondence columns, and cultivated a network of women journalists across periodicals. She turned her journals into a public space for readers to offer advices and help to mistreated women. She used her social connections to help women leave oppressive families, and deployed the influence of print media to promote women's interests. Her journal condemned male ruffians who insulted women, and defended women's dignity and reputation. She challenged male ruffians at court and punished them through legal measures. This article argues women journalists participated in feminist movements by editing journals; women's journals constituted an important public space for women to champion feminism.

Introduction

In studying May Fourth feminism, Wang Zheng argues that the masculine liberal feminist discourse constructed by male New Culturalists enabled May Fourth new women to deny female inferiority and to claim a share in the power and privileges of men.¹ I share the wisdom that liberal feminist discourse empowered May Fourth new women, but I argue that such discourse was not constructed only by men. Many female writers also contributed to the liberal feminist discourse by editing and writing for women's journals, and they promoted women's education, careers, and independence both in their writings and social practices. As modern citizens with an education and a career, women journalists not only made decisions in their own lives, but also were concerned about other women's oppression. As liberal feminists, they took women's emancipation as an end itself, unlike male intellectuals who regarded women's emancipation as something serving larger purposes such as modernity, democracy and nationalism. That was why many May Fourth liberal feminists held onto their feminist ground later regardless of their political leanings, yet male discussion on women's emancipation changed with the intellectual and political currents.² Since liberal feminists took women's emancipation for an end, they could be less affected by left-wing ideologies in the early 1920s.

This article investigates the feminist writings and social practices of a woman activist Li Zhishan in the May Fourth Era (1915-1925) in Tianjin. She lived in an age when women's education had been promoted for more than two decades, foot-binding had been abandoned by educated women in urban centers, and women's issues were openly discussed by male intellectuals. As an educated urban woman who lived in a new age, Li Zhishan had experienced major institutional changes. Her natural feet gave her greater physical mobility, and enabled her to be more active in public spaces. Her educational experiences at a modern school in a major city with other girls created a social network of like-minded girls around her. Once out of family control, those strong-willed girls enjoyed their freedom in participating in public activities, and explored their opportunities to be independent by seeking occupations open to women, e.g., teaching. Living close to the center of May Fourth Movement, Li Zhishan and her friends were widely exposed to the New Culture and May Fourth nationalism. Armed with those progressive ideas, perceived themselves as modern citizens, they eagerly explored how to be modern women at personal level, and how to pursue women's emancipation at large.

The Story of a New Woman

Li Zhishan came to feminist ideas through her participation in May Fourth nationalist movements in Tianjin. Born in 1896 as Li Yitao, the only daughter of a poor urban family in Tianjin, she nonetheless attended the famous Zhili Nüshi (which later became Tianjin Women's Teacher College) from 1913-1919. Created during the New Policy reform in 1907, Zhili Nüshi adopted the Western educational system. Aimed at training "good wives and wise mothers," the college emphasized women students' teaching practices. All new graduates were required to practice teaching at the primary school affiliated with the college.³

Participating in the May Fourth nationalist movements transformed Li Yitao from a teacher to a social activist. Li Yitao was a teacher at the primary school when the May Fourth Movement started. She quickly joined younger female students at the college—Deng Yingchao, Zhang Ruoming, Guo Longzhen and others in making patriotic speeches. Her age and career experience was her assets—when Tianjin Women's Patriotic Association was founded on May 25, 1919, she was elected the Vice Chair, second to the chair Liu Qingyang.⁴ The Association boycotted Japanese goods, promoted national products, and called for women's patriotism.⁵ Its members made patriotic speeches, opened free schools, and published a weekly *Xingshi zhoukan* (Awakening the World Weekly) edited by Xu Guangping and Jiang Yun. Women's Patriotic Association worked closely with male students' Tianjin Student Union in orchestrating the release of Tianjin students arrested by the warlord government in Beijing. Such cooperation led to the publication of another periodical *Pingmin* (People).⁶

Li Yitao experienced gender equality when she worked closely with male students during May Fourth nationalist movements. Such experience gave her a new name which symbolized her equality with men. On September 16, 1919, leaders of Women's Patriotic Association and Tianjin Students Union decided to create a leadership core *Juewushe* (the Awakening Society) based on the principle of gender equality. The Society included ten men (Zhou Enlai, Ma Jun, Li Zhenying, Pan Shilun, and Xue Hanyue were from Nankai; Shen Zhiwu from Tianjin Polytech Institute, Guang Xibing was from Normal University, and Chen Xiaocen was from Beiyang University), and ten women (including Li Yitao, Guo Longzhen, Deng Wenshu who later

adopted the name Deng Yingchao, Zhang Ruoming, Zheng Yan, Zhang Cijing and others). Later the Society grew by strictly following the principle of equal number of male and female members. To protect members in public and patriotic activities, the Society decided that all members should use pseudo names. They drew numbers to decide their pseudo-names. Deng Wenshu became Yihao (number one), Zhou Enlai became (number five), and Li Yitao adopted the name Li Zhishan (number forty-three), a name she cherished and used as her public identity for the rest of her life.

New Culture hero Li Dazhao praised the Awakening Society for breaking the barrier between sexes, and encouraged them to read literature of Bolsheviks and Marxism. On January 20, 1920, The Awakening Society published a journal *Juewu* (Awakening), and the cover of the first issue had a red star, indicating their Marxist influence. The Awakening Society founded a new Tianjin student union which included both male and female students. Leadership of the new union also followed the principle—half seats for men and half women.⁷ After its creation, the Awakening Society did not have a clear mission, after a few meetings it dissolved in August 1920. Among female members, Guo Longzhen, Liu Qingyang, and Zhang Ruoming went to France to study, Deng Yingchao and Li Zhishan found jobs in Beijing, and other female members taught at different cities.⁸

Her experience at the Awakening Society made Li Zhishan hold fast onto the principle of gender equality all her life. Participation in the May Fourth Movement had dramatically transformed her view of being a modern woman. The Movement had awakened her gender consciousness, and changed her attitude towards men, marriage and family. In March 1923, she recalled her earlier experience in an article “The Change in My View on Marriage” in a progressive journal *Xinghuo*. She emphasized the disadvantage of being a girl and the importance of education in changing her life, and vividly described how she came to the ideas of women’s emancipation, autonomous love and consensual marriage:

“From I was thirteen to I was seventeen [1909-13], I believed in celibacy. I was the only child and my parents were already in their forties. My relatives often pat on me and showed pity to my Mom, ‘If this were a boy, you would soon be a mother in-law and have a daughter in-law serve you after so much hard toiling.’ My Mom sighed over her fate, realizing she eventually had to marry me out. But I thought ‘If I do not marry at all, I can be my Mom’s ‘son’ thus change her fate.’ As I grew up, I saw how daughter in-laws were mistreated. I was spoiled by my father. How could I bear such mistreatment? So I decided not to marry at all.”⁹

Before the New Cultural movement, teenager Li Zhishan tried to avoid marriage for two reasons. First, she thought a girl could do what a boy could—taking care of parents in their old age. She wanted to play a son’s roles. Second, she was afraid of being a mistreated daughter in-law. Celibacy was her radical and individual way to resist gender inequality.

“From I was seventeen to I was twenty-three [1913-1919], I was a student at Tianjin Women’s Teacher School. During those years, I firmly held onto celibacy. I had the skills to make a living by teaching, and enjoyed five years’ freedom of being a woman student. Though my family was poor, my parents invested all they had for my

education. ... I did not like the idea of an arranged marriage. Besides, I had not met a decent man in my life. I did not want to serve parents in-law.”¹⁰

Around the New Cultural Movement, education equipped women students with skills to make a living, and provided them the maximum freedom young girls could enjoy. Li Zhishan internalized the idea that women should have independent personhood. Her independence as a teacher prolonged her freedom of being single. She did not see why a woman who made her own living need serve someone else’s parents. Rejecting the idea of an arranged marriage, she justified her celibacy by saying that those men around her were not good enough. Then the great change took place.

“When I was twenty-three [1919], May Fourth Movement started. ...I was awakened to enlightenment ideas, and would like to be my natural self. I thought that habits, customs, systems, and even laws were all made by human beings; human beings should not be controlled by those things. Realizing that celibacy was unnatural, I decided to reform myself. Though arranged marriage was not what I wanted, I could still marry in the way I thought natural. If I got married, I need not restrict myself within the household and need not serve parents-in-laws. A woman should have the courage to be a celibate if she cannot find the right man; but she need not choose celibacy if she meets the right man. Those ‘who marry for marriages’ sake’ were often unhappy. But if there was a man whom I truly loved, it would be unnatural for me to remain a celibate.”¹¹

Li Zhishan came to a mental emancipation by participating in the May Fourth movement side by side with men. She came to the idea that an individual should have the courage break away from ill customs and bad systems. Instead of suppressing /denying her natural desire, she realized the option to satisfy such desire through a natural way. The idea of autonomous love and consensual marriage now crept into her mind. If the New Culture Movement provided educated women enlightened ideas and new ethics, then participating in the May Fourth Movement provided them an opportunity and a material base to practice such new ideas and ethics. In the past, the best thing educated women could do about their personal lives was to escape marriages. Now liberal feminist discourse constructed a new subjectivity of *xinnüxing* for women without subverting the basic institution of family. Women with modern education could marry out of love and establish their *xiaojiating* (nuclear family), meanwhile pursue a public career. Embracing liberal feminism made marriage no longer dreadful but desirable and fulfilling for her. But how could she find the right man? Her engagement in patriotic movements and her chance to work with men at student union provided the opportunities.

“I was twenty-five in 1920 when one of my friends Chen Xiaocen became close to me. We two had similar experiences and worldviews, and our personalities matched well. Our relationship developed from friendship to love. After we became intimate, we lived together formally in 1922. Like I expected, I was not restricted within a family after I got married. We spent a year on trains, ships, in Canton, Hong Kong, Tianjin and Shanghai doing social works. I did not serve his parents, and I was still my parents’ ‘son.’”¹²

Both Li Zhishan and Chen Xiaocen were members of the Awakening Society, and they knew each other in May Fourth nationalist movements. Li emphasized on their matching views

and personalities. It took them two more years for this relationship to bear fruit. In 1922, at the age of twenty-seven, Li Zhishan married in the way she wanted—no formal wedding, no regular home, and out of parents' control. In addition, her career as a social activist continued after she got married. She was not restricted by household chores. Instead, the couple spent a year traveling and doing social works at major urban centers. In pursuing education, career, nationalist and feminist goals, Li realized her dream of being a “son” to her parents, was not mistreated by parent-in-laws, and avoided the extreme of celibacy. As an emancipated new woman, she shared her story in 1923, hoping that “all those oppressed can rise against the unjust system and bad customs,” and celibates could “revolutionize their minds, and have new lives and ethics in their own ways.”¹³

Li Zhishan had serious concern about how to keep women's individual rights and independent personhood (*duli ren'ge*) within consensual marriages. At that time, married new women reasserted their individual identities by linking their husbands' family names with their own natal family names in a more equitable fashion, and double surnames suggested their marital status.¹⁴ But Li Zhishan was not comfortable in accepting the patriarchal family relations. She suggested that married women need not add their husbands' family names in front of their own because they should keep their own identities. Rejecting the in-law relations imposed by extended family, she proposed in February 1922 in *Funü pinglun* (Women's Comments) that married women should address husbands' family members by their names, and his parents “*bofu*, *bomu*” rather than “*gonggong*, *popo*.”¹⁵

After the New Culture Movement, ideas of *lian'ai ziyou* (freedom to love), *hunyin ziyou* (freedom to marry), and *lihun ziyou* (freedom to divorce) became popular among educated youth as they struggled against the emotional inhibitions imposed by the society on young people. As a supporter and benefactor of such ideas, Li Zhishan gave her advice to youth who wanted to enjoy perfect love relationship. First, a person should know how to please one's partner with his/her own behavior, speech, and smiles, and how to properly react to the romantic feeling one's partner brought. Second, one should learn how to forgive one's partner when the latter displeased him/her. Li Zhishan emphasized on the importance of mutual understanding and forgiveness in defending true love. Third, one should share the partner's worldview. Having a common goal in life is a solid foundation to build true love. Finally, a person should devote fully to his/her partner. A person can only give his/her true love to the special one who deserves it.¹⁶

In championing autonomous love and consensual marriage, Li Zhishan remained critical of those who justified extramarital affairs in the name of autonomous love. She disapproved the practice of sacrificing one's original spouse to pursue new love. On April 1, 1923, her friend Xu Yingxi married Yao Zuobin in Tianjin. As a new woman, Xu Yingxi had taught at several people's schools for women, and served as the Vice Chair of the Tianjin Women's Rights Alliance. Xu invited both Li Zhishan and Chen Xiaocen to her wedding. Chen Xiaocen served as *jiluyuan* (a wedding secretary), taking notes of the wedding speeches. Li Zhishan was invited to deliver a wedding speech. Xu's own speech to her guests emphasized on her courage to break an arranged marriage and marry her true love Yao Zuobin, and the good matching of their personalities and habits. Despite her polite congratulations to the new couple, Li Zhishan nonetheless mildly criticized the groom Yao who had divorced his original wife in order to marry Xu. Li Zhishan was aware that the couple did not know each other long enough, and

Yao's character was criticized by others. Li Zhishan was sympathetic to Yao's original wife and suggested the new couple to help her in some way. As a friend to the newlyweds, she reconciled that although Yao had defects, what mattered was that Xu loved Yao. "Love is omnipotent (*wanneng de*)." Later, Chen Xiaocen published his record of this wedding in *Xinghuo*, and Li Zhishan's speech was carried in *Women's Star*.¹⁷

As a female champion for women's interests, Li Zhishan realized that new morality in love and marriage had victimizing effects on wives who were in arranged marriages. She did not just speak for new women of her likeness, but also wanted to do something for those victimized wives who were innocent yet were imposed on a divorce. The consciousness to help those unfortunate women distinguished Li Zhishan from other individualistic new women.

The Feminist Editor

Li Zhishan's political activism in the May Fourth era transformed her into an emancipated woman who pursued both national interests and her individual happiness. In the years of 1923-25, she gained the reputation as a woman editor, a champion of female education, and a feminist activist. During those two years, she taught at Daren Women's Primary School in Tianjin, and served as the editor-in-chief of two feminist periodicals *Nüxing* (Women's Star) and *Funü ribao* (Women's Daily). She was also the principal of the Supplementary School of Women's Star Society (*Nüxingshe buxi xuexiao*), an activist in promoting mass education, and a representative at the educational boards in Tianjin county and Zhili Province. Her periodicals were a public forum for readers to contribute their opinions and make comments on specific women's issues. She kept readers' correspondence columns, listened to women's voices of sufferings, and explored the path of women's emancipation. Her school educated housewives and women workers, and prepared them for independence and advanced education. She used her papers and social connections to assist women to escape family oppression and gain educational right. She employed print media and legal channel to expose and punish men who violated women. Li Zhishan gained social reputation in Tianjin as a feminist editor and a social activist, and won many readers' trust, respect, and friendship. Her feminist speech and activities in 1923-25 had prepared the way for her rise in the 1930s as a leading journalist and an important GMD politician.

Li Zhishan's years as a teacher at Daren Women's Primary School was crucial for her feminist activism. The school was a cradle to train leaders for women's movements. In 1921, a liberal Tianjin capitalist Le Daren invited the famous May Fourth Tianjin patriot and educationalist Ma Qianli to start Daren Women's Primary School. Despite his reputation and prominent social status, Ma Qianli was willing to be a primary school's principal, taking no salary. He called Deng Yingchao, Li Zhishan, and Wang Zhenru back to Tianjin to teach at the school. The school opened on August 20, 1921. Le Daren provided six hundred *yuan* each month to support the school, and students paid tuition and fees.¹⁸ Most teachers were young women in their twenties and had democratic ideas and patriotic spirit. The school was located at Daren Lane Hebei Street, and had a building in the front and a courtyard in the back. Ma Qianli supported women teachers to create progressive societies and to advocate women's emancipation and gender equality. Besides teaching knowledge, the school offered students Speech Class, Citizenship Class, and Girl Scout Training, encouraging students to involve in patriotic activities.

In 1926 the school criticized warlords harshly and was twice occupied by warlords. Le Daren had to close the school at the end of 1926.

It is important to point out that Women's Star Society was not under direct leadership of the Communist party or the Youth League. According to Deng Yingchao, Women's Star Society was founded in March 1923, yet the Tianjin Youth League was created in January 1924.¹⁹ Women's Star Society was created by progressive youth who were genuinely concerned about women's issues— Li Zhishan, Deng Yingchao, and Chen Xiaocen. They first met in January 1923 to plan for the Society, and then on April 25, 1923, Women's Star Society was officially established at No. 10, Wuchang Lane, Dajing Road. Later it moved to No. 10, Daren Lane Hebei Street. Those founders recruited “friends of the Women's Star Society” from intellectuals in cultural and educational fields.²⁰ Most members had known each other in the May Fourth Movement, and some were members of the dissolved Awakening Society. Women's Star Society had a clear feminist agenda and very strict rules. All members “must have passion for women's movements, and share the interest of the society;” “must follow the rules of the society,” and “must be introduced by two other members and received unanimous vote.” Besides, “any member who insults women...visits brothel, ruins the reputation of the Society, or misses three meetings” would be expelled.

Women's Star Society edited *Women's Star* and *Women's Daily* (Funü ribao) to explore the path of women's emancipation and to attack social evils against women. The goal to create *Women's Star* was to preach “women's self-salvation and self-determination.”²¹ Wang Zhenru remembered that the journal advocated women's movements, and discussed gender equality, marriage and independence. Most members of Women's Star Society were teachers at Daren Women's School, and many used to be members of Tianjin Women's Patriotic Association. Male members included He Xue from Tianjin Polytech Institute, Gu Junxiao from *Xin minyibao*, and Chen Xiaocen who was unemployed then. *Women's Star* was first published as a supplement to *Xin minyibao* edited by Ma Qianli.²² Each issue of *Women's Star* had four pages. Seven hundred and sixty copies of each issue were circulated together with *Xin minyibao*, but an additional one thousand copies were to be sent to other newspapers, organizations, and editorial members' friends all over China. *Women's Star* began as a *xunkan*, published three times a month, on the fifth, fifteenth and twenty-fifth. The first issue came out on April 25, 1923. By early June 1923, it had seventeen sales agencies in other major cities, and established exchange relations with more than twenty newspapers.

Chen Xiaocen remembered that labor was divided among three founders of the Women's Star Society. Li Zhishan answered reader's questions, and was the principal of the Supplementary School of Women's Star Society. Deng Yingchao reviewed articles submitted to *Women's Star*, and taught at the Supplementary School. Chen Xiaocen was in charge of publishing, proof-reading and printing. They discussed the content of each issue together before its publication. Before Li Zhishan wrote her reply to readers' questions on women's issues, she discussed her opinion with the other two, and listened to their advices. Her replies not only helped solve readers' specific problems but also had greater social significance. Such correspondences always caught readers' attention and interests.²³ *Women's Star* had thirty-six issues published as *xunkan*. In April 1924, starting from the thirty-seventh issue, the paper became a weekly, circulated as a supplement to *Funü ribao* (Women's Daily).²⁴ Since then the

printing of *Women's Star* and *Women's Daily* received generous support from the manager of *Xin minyibao* Liu Tie'an, a brother of Liu Qingyang.²⁵

Women's Daily was not a paper under Women's Star Society, but members of the Society founded and edited *Women's Daily*, and were able to influence the daily. In late 1923 Liu Qingyang returned to Tianjin from France, and joined Li Zhishan and Deng Yingchao and Chen Xiaocen in starting *Women's Daily* on January 1, 1924, to "explore women's sufferings, and to study women's movements in China." It was the only daily in China then which explored the solutions to women's issues.²⁶ Liu Qingyang was the manager of the daily, Li Zhishan was the editor-in-chief, Deng Yingchao and Zhou Yi were editors. But Deng Yingchao was busy with her works at Daren Women's School and other things. She joined Liu Qingyang and Zhou Yi to resign from their positions at the daily at the end of June 1924. After July 1924, *Women's Daily* was mainly edited by Li Zhishan and Chen Xiaocen.²⁷ Chen remembered that in the beginning the daily was not well edited. As the circulation of the daily increased, and it earned money from carrying advertisements. Li Zhishan and Chen Xiaocen subscribed more than twenty major newspapers from other cities, and selectively edited all news and articles on women's issues. They successfully turned *Women's Daily* into a real paper for women. By August 1924, the paper enjoyed a circulation of more than 3000 copies, very impressive at that time.²⁸

Women of different backgrounds competed for their voices at *Women's Star* and *Women's Daily*. Both *Women's Star* and *Women's Daily* had readers' correspondence columns. Women journalists received letters from young girls, women workers, and female overseas students. Rao Yusheng, a woman worker at a Shanghai socks factory asked *Women's Star* to carry more articles on women workers' lives and to conduct surveys on working women. Editor Li Zhishan wrote back respectfully, addressing Rao as "*xiansheng*." She explained that the paper had not received any contribution on women workers' lives yet, but welcomed Rao Yusheng and her friends to contribute their writings. She expressed that *Women's Star* was willing to open a column for women workers.²⁹ A reader, Yu Yueying, suggested that *Women's Daily* carry easier articles so that women with a smattering of literacy could read it. Li Zhishan basically accepted this advice and planned to do so, but she also informed that the paper need provide reading sources for those engaged in women's movements therefore could not make all articles easy.³⁰ Guo Longzhen and Zhang Ruoming, two old friends of Li Zhishan and Women's Star Society, wrote *Women's Daily* from France. They suggest that the daily carry more articles on proletarian women's lives in order to win middle class women's sympathy with their working sisters. They also suggested this paper open an academic column to draw women in academic closer to political issues.³¹

Besides communicating with readers, members of Women's Star Society also built connections with other women's journals over China. In the early 1920s, communication and mutual support among women journalists across the country helped create a professional solidarity in promoting women's emancipation. Members at Women's Star society showed deep interest in women's periodicals edited by other societies. On June 5, 1923, *Women's Star* mentioned that the paper exchanged issues with more than twenty women's papers and progressive journals.³² In "Welcome the *Women's Daily* in Changsha," Li Zhishan generously congratulated the preparation of a new *Women's Daily* in Changsha, Hunan, by Zhang Shuhe, a woman who had studied in France. Li Zhishan was not bothered by the fact that the new paper

adopted the same title as her already popular daily.³³ In a similar fashion, papers edited by Tianjin Women's Star Society were introduced to other parts of China by other feminists. Tan Sheying, the head of the propaganda branch of Shanghai Nüquan Yundong Tongmenghui, and the editor of "women and family" column in *Zhonghua xinbao*, rejoiced at the creation of *Women's Daily* by Li Zhishan and Deng Yingchao. Tan Sheying promoted the daily in southern cities with enthusiasm.³⁴ The fame of Women's Star Society even reached abroad—in the summer 1924, the wife of Borodin (the Russian Com-intern agent in Canton) visited Liu Qingyang in Tianjin, and took a photo with Deng Yingchao, Liu Qingyang and Li Zhishan. That photo was published in the newspaper in the Soviet Union.³⁵

Women's Star carried articles on women's sufferings in patriarchal families, and attacked social injustice against women. At the tragic death of Zhang Cijing, a member of the former Awakening Society, Li Zhishan criticized the victimizing effect of the compulsory in-law relationship which was completely unnatural because it was neither based on blood relation nor on emotional tie. She called on enlightened women to break that in-law relationship, arguing "to serve parents in-law is equivalent to submission to men, being their captives and their families' slaves." Li Zhishan proposed that women should reject the in-law bond, defend their independent personalities, and fight for their human rights (*renquan*).³⁶

Li Zhishan often turned papers edited by Women's Star Society into a public space for readers to consider solutions for individual women's problems. By either claiming justice for women or exposing social evils against women, she was able to enhance the social influence of the Society and its papers. In July 1924, a Sichuan woman, Li Yichao, asked for help from *Women's Star*. She lived in a family controlled by her brother who refused to send her to school by the excuses that "girls' school had corruptive atmosphere," "women students got pregnant at schools," "girls eloped with others," and "teachers and students had unspeakable relationships." The brother squandered the family fortune visiting brothels and gambling, but was unwilling to buy Li Yichao any book. Li Yichao failed asking her dowry money to study. Her two married sisters tried to help her at their own expenses, but the brother did not let Yichao step out of the household because he planned to marry her soon.

The editor of *Women's Star* Li Zhishan decided to publish Li Yichao's letter, asking readers to give their advices.³⁷ More than thirty readers' responses were received, and Li Zhishan selected seven letters for publication. Most letters suggested Li Yichao break with her brother and leave the family first. Then she should find help from a women's organization like Women's Star Society. A Nanjing reader Xiping informed that Wang Jiafu had opened a women's work-study school in Beijing, which might be a possibility for Li Yichao. Xiping even suggested Women's Star Society organize a work-study program for women who were deprived of their educational rights, and women who escaped unhappy marriages. Another Nanjing reader, Yi'nong, suggested that Li Yichao find a job either at Women's Star Supplementary School or at *Women's Star* to support herself, then to ask her sisters to help her with tuition. Yi'nong also suggested that Li Yichao could study on her own rather than attend a middle school or a teacher's school. Yi'nong hoped the editor of *Women's Star* Li Zhishan could get books for Li Yichao, meanwhile he/she promised to send ten *yuan* each year for Li Yichao to Women's Star Society, to lend her study materials for English published by the Commercial Press, and to help her with mathematics and physics.³⁸ In Yi'nong's mind, the paper *Women's Star* was a meeting

place for him/her to meet and help a reader like Li Yichao; and the editor-in-chief of *Women's Star* Li Zhishan was a trustworthy friend and a bridge for him/her to reach unfortunate Li Yichao.

Besides employing her papers to advance women's interests, Li Zhishan was capable of taking actions to help women in need. The most well-known case in Tianjin in the mid 1920s was that editor Li Zhishan had successfully helped two girls in Republican Financial Minister Zhou Xuexi's family to pursue their education. As the editor-in-chief of popular women's papers, Li Zhishan employed the power of print media and her social connections with progressive figures to help Zhou Zhongzheng and her sister obtain educational rights. The Zhou girls were raised in an old-fashioned wealthy family. Their family pierced their ears, bound their feet when they were young, and taught them poetry and composition for marriage prospects. Zhou Zhongzheng hated such an arranged life and secretly read the progressive newspaper *Xinminyibao* (New People's Will) to which *Women's Star* was a supplement. She longed for a society where men and women could be equals, and the rich and the poor were treated the same. She knew her only hope was outside her family. She wrote editor of *Women's Star* Li Zhishan asking for help. Li Zhishan carefully planned out everything and wrote her back.³⁹

Many years later, as an overseas Chinese artist in Germany, Zhou Zhongzheng fondly recalled how Li Zhishan helped her. On one autumn day, Zhou left home with some clothes, three hundred *yuan* and Li Zhishan's letter. She met Li at a theater, and Li Zhishan brought her to a family where she changed her look and left for Beijing. In Beijing, Zhou lived with Li Jiongru, a member of the former Awakening Society, and now a female student at Peking University. At Li Jiongru's place, Zhou Zhongzheng luckily met the famous New Culture figure Li Dazhao. Zhou Zhongzheng negotiated with her father on *Xinminyibao*, requesting the freedom of her sister and her to study and to choose their own marriage prospects. Later, another prominent New culture figure Hu Shi arranged Zhou Zhongzheng to live at the YWCA in Beijing for two months until her father openly accepted her request on the newspaper. Soon the Zhou girls were sent to Beiyang Women's Teacher College by their family carriage.⁴⁰

The help from Li Zhishan totally changed Zhou Zhongzheng's life—from an enclosed *guixiu* (gentry girl) to a feminist and social activist. Zhou frequently visited Daren Women's School where members of Women's Star Society taught. She befriended with Li Zhishan, Deng Yingchao and others, and devoted herself to anti-imperialism and women's movements. She made public speeches and published some articles. More than half a century later, living in Germany, Zhou Zhongzheng was still very grateful to Li Zhishan who had long deceased during the War of Resisting Japanese. "Li Zhishan was a strong willed and sharp minded person with good judgment. She was a courageous fighter, and a young revolutionary who was willing to help others."⁴¹ Zhou Zhongzheng had encountered Hu Shi and Li Dazhao, and became a woman activist under the influence of progressive women at Women's Star Society.

In September 1924, *Women's Daily* carried articles against warlords of Zhili province—Cao Kun and Wu Peifu, and was pressured by warlords to close down. Suffered from insufficient funding, Women's Star Society closed down *Women's Daily* on October 1, 1924. Since *Women's Star* weekly was a supplement to *Women's Daily*, it also closed down after publishing its No. 57 issue.⁴² Women's Star Society dissolved in Spring 1925 after Li Zhishan and Chen Xiaocen left for Hunan to join Worker's Labor Union. Daren Women's Primary school was dissolved at the

end of 1926 because the founder Le Daren was threatened by warlords that the school teachers were radicals.⁴³

A Champion of Women's Education

Women's Star Society founded Women's Star Supplementary School on July 5, 1923, with the goal to "help women who lost their educational opportunities by teaching them knowledge and simple skills so that they could make a living."⁴⁴ Li Zhishan was the principal of the school. She converted two rooms at her own home at Daren Lane, Hebei Road to school site, and got some desks and chairs from Liu Tie'an whose supplementary school just closed down. Women's Star Supplementary School had two classes. The junior class lasted for one and a half years, and offered courses in Chinese, Composition, Abacus, Mathematics, Calligraphy, Basic Skills, Music, Epistolary Art, Women's Knowledge, Household Book-keeping, and others, a total of seventeen classes. The senior class was a continuation of the junior class, and offered Geography, History, General Science, Commercial Bookkeeping, Basic Teaching Methodology. Both classes had seventeen instructional hours per week, mainly in the afternoons. Teachers were mostly from Daren Women's Primary School, and they taught here voluntarily without any salary.

The school was for educating adult women, and equipped them with knowledge and skills to improve their lives. Anyone between the ages of fifteen to thirty-five could enroll in the junior class. Those who had four years of elementary school or those graduated from the junior class could enroll in the senior class. In the first year, the school had forty students, mostly housewives from middle class. Among those seven women who registered for the senior class, upon their graduation, one was kept by the school as a teacher, three continued their education elsewhere, and three were introduced by the school to be shop assistants at Tianjin National Products Department Store. Thirty students attended the school in the second year in the summer 1924. Li Zhishan taught science and epistolary art, and Deng Yingchao taught book-keeping. To help housewives from middle and lower classes, Women's Star Society also opened a free school in 1924. The free school's classes lasted for a year, and a graduate could learn one thousand characters and read vernacular newspaper. Students at the free school would learn Chinese, Abacus, Handicrafts, Music and Science. On June 1, 1924, the free school opened with more than twenty students.⁴⁵ Women's Star Supplementary school and the free school had helped many housewives and adult women to fulfill their dream of receiving an education, and prepared them for independence. A woman worker at the free school even published her letter in *Women's Star*, expressed her gratitude to her teachers.

Besides running their own school, members of Women's Star Society were also active in the mass education movement in Tianjin and nationwide. They organized Mass Education Promotion Society in Tianjin, and helped create many schools for common people (*pingmin xuexiao*), including Daren School for People. Li Zhishan, Deng Yingchao, Wang Zhenru and Feng Wuwo also joined the national organization for mass education—Education Reform Society of China (Zhonghua Jiaoyu Gaijinhui), and represented Tianjin women to attend its third annual conference in Nanjing. As teachers at Daren Women's School, they were also invited to Educational Boards at Zhili Province or Tianjin County. Deng Yinchao and Zhou Zhilian

became members of Zhili Provincial Educational Board, and Li Zhishan and Wang Zhenru became members at Education Evaluation Board in Tianjin county.

Women educators employed the power of women's press and their legal knowledge to fight male ruffians who publicly insulted women students. As representatives at Educational Boards, members of Women's Star Society fought against practices that despised and repelled women in educational field. In 1924, the story of how members of Women's Star Society punished male ruffians was circulated in *Women's Daily*, and was well known in Tianjin. In early 1920s, several groups of ruffians called "*Hebeidang*" or "*Chaibaidang*" openly insulted women students in Tianjin. When women students returned home in the afternoon, they took photos of women students and rode bicycles to chase them. Some ruffians would stand in a row, leaving a narrow opening for women students to pass one by one; then they insulted women students when they passed.⁴⁶ On January 6, 1924, when Zhili Provincial Educational Bureau held a conference at Anhui *huiguan*, several women representatives went to attend the conference. Two male students approached those women gaily hand in hand, and one purposely bumped into a woman. At first, women students ignored them because too many men were like that. At the conference, those two men sat beside women representatives and did a lot of silly things. After the conference, they still stalked those women, and bumped into them again. When they tried to insult women representatives again in the afternoon, Li Zhishan and Ms. Zhang who was good at boxing approached them aggressively, cornered them and asked their names. Ms. Zhang boxed a man. When a policeman came, those two men tried to escape but were caught. They were forced to give out their name cards before they could go. They turned out to be Li Xinghua and Mr. Wang, both were students of The School of Law and Political Science.

Later that night, a friend of Li Xinghua called those women to negotiate. Li Xinghua hoped those women would not carry the story in their newspaper. But women representatives raised their requests: 1. The president of The School of Law and Political Science should inform all their students with the story, and those women would audit the occasion; 2. Women representatives would still carry the story on their newspaper, but they would not mention Li Xinghua and Mr. Wang's names; 3. Women representatives need talk directly to those two men. 4. Those two men need four guarantors, include their school President and their parents. When their requests were not accepted, those women—Zhang Xinming, Sun Yaping, Li Zhishan, Lu Ziran, Wang Xingyong, Deng Wenshu (Deng Yingchao), Zhou Zhilian, and Yuchun jointly publicized the story of Li Xinghua's evil deeds in their newspaper *Women's Daily*.⁴⁷ YFC (a penname) made such comments, "A male student with knowledge and manners should behave naturally in front of a woman, no matter how she looks. How could Li Xinghua treat women in such an obscene manner?" "If he dreams of making a girl friend by insulting her on the street, he assumes wrongly that women have no dignity at all."⁴⁸

However, Li Xinghua sued Li Zhishan and other women at court for ruining his reputation. Li Zhishan was not afraid at all. She argued those ruffians had insulted women students in the public and written nasty letters to women students which could ruin women students at their schools or homes. She went on to give advice in *Women's Daily* on how to deal with male ruffians: first, get their true names. Second, use a newspaper to expose the ruffians, and let the society teach them a hard lesson. Li Zhishan was ready to go to court at any level to confront Li Xinghua. She urged the court to invite more audience for the trial, and let more

people see the true faces of those ruffians.⁴⁹ Those women not only went to the court, but also sued Li Xinghua in return, based on Republican Penal Code Article 284 on the crime of indecent acts.⁵⁰ When Li Zhishan and Li Xinghua confronted each other at the court, more than two hundred women audited the trial. Both parties hired lawyers, and Li Zhishan won the case. Republican law provided those women activists the legal base in defending women's rights and interests. Members at Women's Star Society employed law and media to defend women's dignity in the public, and punished men who bullied women.⁵¹

Besides being a feminist activist, Li Zhishan was also a well-known patriotic leader in Tianjin in the early 1920s. In November 1924, Sun Yat-sen in Canton planned to go to the North to negotiate with Northern warlords for peace. Li Zhishan, Ma Qianli and other Tianjin patriots made a statement in the influential *Dagongbao*, calling on Tianjin citizens to welcome Dr. Sun's Northern trip.⁵² Li Zhishan played a leading role in preparing for the welcome ceremony in Tianjin. The same year, she joined Deng Yingchao and other women in organizing Tianjin women to support the National Congress, founded Tianjin Women's Society in Promoting National Congress, and wrote Sun Yat-sen a letter of support.⁵³ When Sun Yat-sen came to Tianjin on December 4, 1924, Li Zhishan represented Women's Star Society and *Women's Daily* and greeted Sun Yat-sen at the port. Limited by the purpose of this paper, Li Zhishan's patriotic activism in the 1920s is not investigated here.

Conclusion

As a new woman privileged by modern education and public career, Li Zhishan came to feminist movement and social activism through participating the May Fourth nationalist movement. She went through the transformation from a woman who pursued individualistic career fulfillment to a feminist who had broad concerns about problems in women's lives and an activist who explored the path of women's emancipation. In editing women's papers, she listened to women's sufferings and misery, and informed readers the situation of women's lives. As the voices of women and for women, her papers explored potential solutions to women's problems, aroused public attention to women's issues, and defended women's immediate interests, such as educational rights, autonomous love and consensual marriage.

As a social reformer with democratic ideas, she took women's education for an important means to achieve women's emancipation, and opened schools to train women with knowledge and skills to make a living. In pursuing women's emancipation through social and educational reforms, she courageously fought against evil forces victimizing women, exposed evildoers in the press, and claimed justice for women through legal channels. As a progressive woman leader, she was genuinely concerned about the fate and the future of the nation, and mobilized people for nationalist movements. Her feminist and nationalist activism in the 1920s paved the way for her rise in the early 1930s as a powerful woman journalist and a prominent GMD woman leader. Though Li Zhishan later joined the GMD, edited an influential GMD woman journal *Funü gongming*, and was elected as a female legislative member in the Nationalist government, her progressive role and importance in Tianjin feminist movements in the early 1920s should not be forgotten.

NOTES:

- ¹ Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* (University of California Press, 1998), 19-20. The masculine liberal feminist discourse argues that women are modern human being, the same as men.
- ² After May 4, 1919, male liberal feminist discussion of women was contested by Socialist and Marxist languages. See Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 63, 94.
- ³ Liang Youchen, “Wusi yundong qianhoude Zhili nüshi,” [Zhili Women Teacher’s College around May Fourth Movement] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* [Deng Yinchao and the Early Women’s Movement in Tianjin] (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987): 552-558.
- ⁴ Lu Kairong, “Wusi shiqi de Tianjin funüyundong” [Women’s movement in Tianjin in the May Fourth era] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987): 129-155.
- ⁵ “Tianjin Nüjie Aiguo Tongzhihui jianzhang” [The agenda of Tianjin Patriotic Society of Women Comrades] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987): 6-8.
- ⁶ Wong Yin Lee, “Deng Yingchao” in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Twentieth Century, 1912-2000* (University of Hong Kong Libraries Publication, 2004), 131-135.
- ⁷ Lu Kairong, 146-147.
- ⁸ Chen Xiaocen, “Guanyu Nüxing xunkan he *Funüribao*” [On Women’s Star and Women’s Daily] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987): 587-590.
- ⁹ “Wode hunyin guannian de bianqian” [The change in my view on marriage] *Xinghuo*, March 20-21, 1923.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Roxane Heater Witke, “Transformation of Attitudes Towards Women During the May Fourth Era of Modern China.” (diss. University of California, Berkeley, 1970), 98.
- ¹⁵ “Jiehunhuo nüzi chenhu de shanghe” [A discussion on women’s names after marriage] *Funüpinglun* 28, (February 15, 1922).
- ¹⁶ “Zenyang cai keyi dezhaomeiman de lian’ ai” [How to get ideal love] *Nüxing* 12 (Aug. 15, 1923).
- ¹⁷ Chen Xiaocen, “Gaizao tushang de hunyin—Xu Yao jiehun ji” [Marriage on the road of reform—a record of the wedding between Xu and Yao] *Xinghuo* (April 3, 4, 7, 1923). Li Zhishan, “Zai Xu-Yao jiehun shi de jianghua” [A speech made at the wedding between Xu and Yao] *Nüxing* 1, 2 (April 25, and May 5, 1925).
- ¹⁸ Ma Cuiguan, “Daren nüxiao yu Tianjin funü jiefangyundong” [Daren Women’s School and Tianjin women’s emancipation movement] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987): 601-610.
- ¹⁹ “Deng Yingchao tongzhi tan Tianjin Nüxingshe” [Deng Yinchao’s reflection on Tianjin Women’s Star Society] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987): 578-584. Deng Yingchao mentioned that Li Zhishan and Chen Xiaocen were early members of the Youth League, but they detached from it later and joined the GMD. Li Zhishan died in Sino-Japanese War, and Chen Xiaocen lived in Beijing in the 1980s.
- ²⁰ Yin Zichun, “Tianjin Nüxingshe jiqi zhuyao huodong” [Tianjin Women’s Star Society and its main activities] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987):381-404.
- ²¹ Yin Zichun, 386.
- ²² Zhao Jingshen, “Nüxingshe yu xinminyi baoguan” [Women’s Star Society and the *Xinminyibao* press] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987): 594,
- ²³ Chen Xiaoqin, “Guanyu Nüxing xunkan he *Funüribao*,” *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987): 587-590.
- ²⁴ Yin Zichun, 386.
- ²⁵ Chen Xiaocen, “Guanyu Nüxing xunkan he *Funüribao*,” 587-590.
- ²⁶ Yin Zichun, 386.
- ²⁷ Ibid. 367-387.
- ²⁸ Ibid. 387.
- ²⁹ “Yige nügong de xin” [A letter from a women worker] *Nüxing* 10. (July 25, 1923).
- ³⁰ “Yu Yueying gei benbaoshe de jianyi” [Advice from Yu Yueying to this paper] *Funüribao* (January 4, 1924).

- ³¹ “Liangge (lüju) Faguo pengyou de laixin” [A letter from two friends who study in France] *Funüribao* (March 23, 1924).
- ³² *Nüxing* 5 (June 5, 1923). This article mentioned that twenty journals exchanged their issues with *Nüxing*, including women’s journals such as *Nüquan tekan*, *Xin funü* (Guangzhou), *Funüpinglun* (Shanghai), *Funüxunkan* (Hangzhou).
- ³³ *Funüribao* (February 12, 1924).
- ³⁴ “Tan Sheying nüshi dui benbao zhi yiyan” [Ms. Tan Sheying praised our newspaper] *Funüribao* (August 2, 1924).
- ³⁵ Chen Xiaocen, “Guanyu *Nüxing* xunkan he *Funüribao*,” 587-590.
- ³⁶ “Juewu de nüzi kuailai dapo wenggu erxi de guanxi” [Enlightened women, hurry up! Break the relationship between parents in-law and daughter in-law] *Nüquan yundong tongmenghui zhili zhibu tekan* 3 [The special issue of Zhili branch of the alliance of women’s rights movement] (May 23, 1923).
- ³⁷ “Zai jiazhangshi de gesao xia shenghuo de Li Yichao nüshi qiuyuan” [Ms Li Yichao, who lived under her despotic brother and sister in law, asked for help] *Nüxing* 51, (August 11, 1924).
- ³⁸ Yi’ning, “Yuanzhu Li Yichao” [Support Li Yichao] *Nüxing* 53, (Aug 25, 1924).
- ³⁹ Zhou Zhongzeng, “Wo yu Nüquan Yundong Tongmenghui Zhili Zhibu ji Nüxingshe de laiwang” [My contact with the Zhili Branch of the Alliance of Women’s Rights Movement and the Women’s Star Society] *Tianjin nüxingshe funü yundong shi ziliao xuanbian* [A collection of historical sources of women’s movement at Tianjin Women’s Star society]. 491-494.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Yin Zhichun, 387.
- ⁴³ Wang Zhenru, “Nüxingshe jiqi huodong” [Women’s Star Society and its activities] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong*, (Beijing, Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1987): 584-587.
- ⁴⁴ Yin Zichun, 393.
- ⁴⁵ Yin Zichun, 393-394.
- ⁴⁶ “‘Hebeidang’ yu shejiao gongkai” [Hebei ruffians and public social contact] *Xinghuo* (April 18, 1923).
- ⁴⁷ “Wo’men da jiaoxun ‘Hebeidang’ shi de xuesheng zhi jingguo” [The story of how we taught students like Hebei ruffians a lesson] *Funüribao* (January 9-10, 1924).
- ⁴⁸ “Kanle ‘Hebeidang’ shi de xuesheng zhi ganyan” [Thought on students who behaved like Hebei ruffians] *Funü ribao* (January 14, 1924).
- ⁴⁹ “Zen yang chuzhi ‘Hebeidang’ ” [How to deal with those Hebei ruffians] *Funüribao* (January 29, 1924).
- ⁵⁰ “‘Hebeidang’ you zuiming” [The crime of Hebei ruffians] *Funüribao* (February 19, 1924).
- ⁵¹ “Li Xinhua an zuo you kaiting” [Li Xinhua case was on court again yesterday]. *Funüribao* (March 16, 1924).
- ⁵² “Nannüjie lianhe faqi Tianjin shimin huaying Sun Zhongshan xiansheng choubeichu qishi” [Notice from the preparation society of men and women who jointly mobilize Tianjin citizens to welcome Mr. Sun Yat-sen] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987): 405.
- ⁵³ “Tianjin Funü guominhuiyi cuchenghui zhi Sun Zhongshan xiansheng han” [Letter from Tianjin Women’s Society of Promoting National Assembly to Mr. Sun Yat-sen] *Deng Yingchao yu Tianjin Zaoqi Funüyundong* (Beijing: Zhongguo Funü chubanshe, 1987), 419-420.

