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Political, Scientific, and Public Dimensions: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the People's Daily's Coverage of "Cervical Erosion"

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Abstract

This study examines the discourse surrounding cervical erosion in People's Daily over the period 1949—2026. It investigates how the newspaper has mediated, framed, and constructed this women's health issue. Across seven decades of textual analysis, cervical erosion underwent a process of de-medicalization, coinciding with advances in medical diagnostics and treatment. The observed shifts in discourse contexts are not merely reflections of mainstream media's political agendas. However, they mirror the intricate transformations in China's sociopolitical system, especially reforms in the healthcare sector. Across different historical periods, media representations of cervical erosion have emphasized varying dimensions of political, scientific, and public concern: the first three decades emphasized state-led care and hygiene practices targeting women's bodies; the final two decades of the twentieth century reflected intensified medicalization and scientific rationalization of female health; and the twenty- first century has witnessed a turn toward public engagement and visibility. The discursive construction of women's health in the mainstream media reflects the complex interplay of political agendas, economic restructuring, scientific developments, and enduring cultural beliefs. This study offers both theoretical insight and practical implications for advancing women's health and promoting gender equality in China.

Keywords: women's bodies; disease construction; health communication; critical discourse analysis; cervical erosion

Since its emergence, disease has extended beyond the purely biomedical domain, encompassing multidimensional meanings embedded in political, cultural, social, and economic contexts. Examining the relationship between medicine and politics and analyzing their underlying logic provides a crucial pathway for understanding social realities (Li, 2009). From the perspective of social constructionism of disease, the categories of disease and the discourses surrounding

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disease are regarded as continuous components of the social construction process (Yan et al., 2021). Within this process, media representation, articulation, and absence carry profound significance, making the media an important arena in which discourses of disease and medicine are constructed.

In the field of women's health, the dissemination of health information concerning cervical erosion presents a particularly paradoxical case (Liu & Zou, 2026). For a considerable period of time, the term "cervical erosion" was widely used as a medical diagnostic label (Liu & Lu, 2026). Since the 1980s, with advances in colposcopy and pathology, the international medical community has re-examined the clinical implications of this term. In fact, cervical erosion does not refer to the pathological shedding of cervical epithelium; rather, it describes a condition characterized by the presence of columnar epithelium and immature squamous epithelium on the cervical surface (Duan, 2021). Based on this revised understanding, international obstetrics and gynecology textbooks, monographs, and journal articles have gradually abandoned the use of "cervical erosion" and adopted the more accurate term "cervical columnar ectopy" to describe this physiological condition. The clinical term "cervical erosion," which had been used for more than 150 years, was thus considered inappropriate (Xue, 2009).

A similar transformation also occurred in China. In the widely used Chinese medical textbook Obstetrics and Gynecology (Fuchan kexue), cervical erosion was once explicitly defined as a typical manifestation of gynecological disease, with detailed descriptions of its clinical symptoms, diagnostic criteria, and corresponding treatment approaches. However, in the revised 2008 edition of Obstetrics and Gynecology, the term "cervical erosion" was replaced by "cervical columnar ectopy" (Bai, 2014). Despite this terminological shift, the concept of "cervical erosion" has continued to exert a lasting influence in discussions of women's health, shaping women's understandings of their own physiological experiences. Against the broader backdrop of women's medical experiences being historically overlooked and marginalized, this issue warrants further scholarly investigation.

For a long time, the state has shaped public understandings of gynecological health information through policy documents and mass media, occupying a dominant position in the dissemination of women's health knowledge (Li, 2009). Accordingly, this study examines the discursive construction of "cervical erosion" as a so-called gynecological "disease," using relevant reports from People's Daily published between October 1949 and July 2026 as the analytical materials. Through an in-depth analysis of the discursive forms and transformations surrounding "cervical erosion" in mainstream media, this study explores the disease-related information conveyed through these reports and investigates how such representations reflect the state's broader perceptions and understandings of this women's health issue.

Literature Review

State-led conceptions of women's health

The connection between medicine and the state represents a defining feature of modern society. From the perspective of technological development, it was not until the nineteenth century, with the flourishing of public health movements and significant advances in medical technologies, that governments and philanthropic organizations began to increase investment in medical

technologies, enabling substantial development in the field (Porter, 2000). As Foucault (2001) pointed out, public health movements did not emerge merely from the natural progression of scientific advancement. Instead, they were deeply intertwined with political and economic forces, through which state institutions were established and consolidated.

In the realm of health, the histories of hygiene and the body cannot be understood as separate from social and cultural contexts. By contrast, they are closely connected to the history of disease prevention and control. These histories are products of modern political and cultural transformations, leaving some of the most profound, concrete, and direct imprints on various aspects of traditional societies (Lei, 2011). Modern states regulate matters related to the human body, health, reproduction, and other aspects of biological life through multiple institutions, including medical, public health, and cultural organizations (Liu, 2017). Critically examining the complex relationship between medicine and politics, while uncovering and interpreting its underlying logic, provides a crucial pathway for gaining a deeper understanding of social realities (Li, 2009).

During the Republican era, the Chinese government launched the "New Life Movement," attempting to improve individuals' spiritual, moral, and ethical qualities by transforming personal hygiene practices (Lei, 2011). In the early years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, China initiated campaigns promoting maternal and infant health, in which the combined efforts of medicine and the state played an important role. By contrasting "new" and "old" concepts and symbolically framing women's reproductive struggles, the state strategically established a metaphorical connection between reproductive reform and political stability. This metaphorical relationship not only constructed a narrative logic linking women's liberation with national identity (Yu, 2008), but also incorporated reproductive reform into a political context centered on mobilizing the population. Furthermore, in order to safeguard women's rights and interests, the Chinese government rapidly established legal and social mechanisms to promote gender equality. The slogan "women hold up half the sky" subsequently became a widely circulated saying and a symbol of the era (Zhong & Ren, 2009).

However, certain problematic traditional beliefs have continued to influence perceptions of women, positioning women as occupying a relatively subordinate status and imposing specific expectations regarding their social roles (Liu & Zou, 2024). For example, the traditional Confucian notion that "Before marriage, a woman was subject to her father; after marriage, to her husband; and after her husband's death, to her son." reflects, to some extent, women's historically limited autonomy in making decisions about their own affairs, including matters concerning their bodies, within familial and social structures. Today, some outdated traditional beliefs continue to exert influence. Economic and social progress has not entirely eliminated the constraints and negative effects that these ideas impose on women's lives within the family context (Tang, 2022).

Mainstream Media Discourse and Health Information Dissemination

As an important theoretical framework in the social sciences, Disease construction theory does not regard disease merely as a biological phenomenon. However, it emphasizes the social factors involved in the construction of disease. This perspective can be used to examine how social and cultural contexts shape people's understandings, diagnoses, and treatments of diseases. From this theoretical perspective, diseases are influenced by social, cultural, and gender-related factors, including medical communities, political power, media representations, social values, and

cultural traditions (Brown, 1995). Within different social and cultural contexts, the same disease may be interpreted and defined in fundamentally different ways.

Disease narratives in news media reveal how the state utilizes official channels to demonstrate transformations in its governing functions and subsequently construct new frameworks through which the public understands the relationship between the state and citizens. In contemporary China, mass media are extensively utilized. They not only serve as a stage for "representation" but also participate in social practices such as institutional construction. From the perspective of Disease Construction Theory, the definition of disease and the discourses surrounding disease constitute indispensable components of the social construction process. Other key elements of this process include individuals' experiences of illness, choices of treatment strategies, and society's perceptions and interpretations of the consequences associated with disease. Through the process of "othering," the media's representation of particular groups constitutes a "politics of representation" (Yan et al., 2021), reflecting and reproducing implicit ideological meanings. In other words, media constructions of social reality are deeply shaped by social conventions and institutional structures (Tong & Pan, 2012). As a legitimized symbolic system, mainstream media continuously disseminate dominant social values, enabling the public to gradually internalize and accept prevailing ideologies.

Through news reporting, mainstream media transmit particular understandings of disease during specific historical periods and shape public perceptions of health issues. Under the profound influence of dominant power mechanisms, an in-depth analysis of media discourses surrounding disease can reveal how disease-related issues, discourses, and their underlying meanings are carefully constructed, systematically organized, and gradually developed. Such analysis also helps illuminate the operational logic and mechanisms of the broader power structures embedded within these discourses (Bisiada, 2021).

Discourse analysis of mainstream media content can therefore provide insights into the concepts and rationales underlying the dissemination of health information. For example, one study examining People's Daily's reports on tuberculosis since the founding of the People's Republic of China found that tuberculosis had long been constructed within dominant Chinese discourses as a "disease of poverty," carrying distinctive political implications and closely associated with transformations in the national political system. In the field of obstetrics and gynecology, another study investigated how medical and media discourses problematized advanced maternal age among first-time mothers, revealing that, within the broader context of safeguarding population security and social stability, the combination of medical knowledge and social prejudice became increasingly intensified and influential. This process ultimately produced a new form of ideology that appeared to be grounded in medical knowledge while containing underlying biases (Guo, 2016). Based on the above review, the construction of women's health issues by mainstream media requires further examination and scholarly investigation.

Method

By conducting full-text searches for the terms "gongjing milan"(cervical erosion) and "gongjing zhuzhuang shangpi yiwei"(cervical columnar ectopy) in the People's Daily Database, this study identified a total of 36 valid articles as the analytical sample. Among these, 11 articles were published during the first three decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China

(October 1949–1979), 15 articles were published during the final two decades of the twentieth century (1980–1999), and 10 articles were published from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the end of the data collection period (2000– July 2026). This temporal division aims to capture the discursive transformations surrounding women's health issues across different stages of China's social development.

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine media texts. Critical discourse analysis provides a framework for further interpreting the dynamics of meaning and power relations embedded within texts, offering analytical possibilities for exploring the interaction between discourse practices and power structures. From this perspective, language is understood as a multidimensional social construction that reflects internal power dynamics, belief systems, and inequalities within economic and social structures (Wodak & Meyer, 2012). Fairclough (2010) proposed a three-dimensional framework for discourse analysis consisting of text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. The analysis of texts focuses primarily on distinctive textual features, including grammar, vocabulary, and structural characteristics. Discourse practice examines the processes through which texts are produced, disseminated, and consumed, while sociocultural practice analysis reveals the ideologies and power relations embedded within discourse.

Findings

State-Influenced Health Practices about Women's Healthcare (1949-1979)

The analysis of People's Daily reports from October 1949 to 1979 reveals that, cervical erosion appeared in media coverage as a significant gynecological condition. The frequent occurrence of terms such as "work," "barefoot doctors," "rural areas," and "medical teams" indicates that mainstream media continuously constructed a politicized landscape surrounding cervical erosion through positive and affirmative discourses. Media narratives during this period primarily emphasized the integration of traditional Chinese medicine and modern scientific approaches under policy guidance, as well as the care provided to women by barefoot doctors, thereby directly serving the broader goal of constructing social stability.

The Integration of Traditional and Modern Medicine under Policy Guidance

During this period, class struggle penetrated deeply into the medical field, producing a distinct pattern of medical politicization. In the realm of women's health, this was particularly evident in the emphasis placed on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). News reports highlighted the effectiveness of various TCM treatments for cervical erosion. For example, one report stated: "Her cervical pills are a secret formula passed down through fourteen generations. According to her, these pills can treat erosion, inflammation, trichomoniasis, uterine prolapse, and infertility" (Zhang, 1958). These therapeutic experiences and methods received certain degrees of recognition and development, providing new approaches and possibilities for addressing women's health concerns at the time. This political narrative of legitimizing the newly established state reflected how TCM, as a form of cultural heritage, was mobilized to promote women's health. In traditional folk medical sayings, there had long existed the expression that "it is better to treat ten men than one woman" (Zhao, 2018). Historically, TCM had paid relatively limited attention to women's health. Therefore, the media's emphasis on a "secret formula

passed down through fourteen generations" highlighted the rediscovery and utilization of traditional medicine in addressing health issues.

In addition to emphasizing the exploration of traditional medicine, media reports during this period also highlighted the application of modern scientific methods to systematically investigate and organize traditional medical knowledge, as well as the integration of Chinese and Western medicine to explore new therapeutic approaches and improve disease treatment outcomes. For instance, one report noted that:

Clinical research has summarized and confirmed the effectiveness of traditional Chinese medicine, integrated Chinese and Western medical approaches, and treatments such as cervical pills for cervical erosion... These achievements demonstrate that medical science can develop rapidly as long as leadership is strengthened, political priorities are maintained, mass movements are promoted, and the principle of 'walking on two legs' is implemented.(Zhou, 1960)

The idea that "using modern methods to study and organize China's traditional medicine, integrating Chinese and Western medicine, and establishing a new medical discipline with Chinese characteristics constitute both an established policy of the Party and a glorious mission of medical professionals" (Huang, 1960) was repeatedly emphasized in media discourse.

Generally, in the early stages of state formation, governments often rely on ideological legitimacy to consolidate their authority (Yuan, 2004). By integrating the strengths of Chinese and Western medicine, the state framed medical advancement as an important component of maintaining social stability. These efforts not only shaped the realities of medical practice but also profoundly influenced the trajectory of medical development and social understandings of health issues. In fact, traditional Chinese medicine historically contained relatively limited investigations into gynecological conditions, and its identification and understanding of such diseases remained insufficient. The media's emphasis on the integration of Chinese and Western medicine therefore represented not merely the combination of different medical techniques but also a deeper convergence of political, cultural, and social forces, symbolizing the coexistence of diversity and unity. Media representations reflected the profound imprint of political power on medical practices, and the state's significant role in shaping medical behaviors and health policies.

Barefoot doctors' care for women

Within traditional Chinese culture, the gendered division of labor characterized by the notion that "men work outside while women stay inside" shaped women's perceptions of time and space. It was not until the 1950s, when China initiated a new wave of women's liberation movements, that women's opportunities to participate in socialized production expanded significantly. The growing importance attached to women's health constituted one of the historical contexts in which state discourse highlighted the care provided by barefoot doctors to women.

The widespread implementation of the barefoot doctor system was particularly significant for rural women whose lives were largely confined to the domestic sphere, as it enabled them to access medical care more conveniently. For example, one report stated:

Zhang Jinmei, a female poor peasant member, also recovered from her illness during this mass examination and treatment campaign. With tears of excitement in her eyes, she said: "The benefits that cooperative medical care has brought to us women are something I would never even have dared to dream of in the past!" (Mao, 1974)

Issues such as inadequate social medical systems and limited access to primary healthcare resources represented major social challenges at the time. Through narratives that contrasted the past and present experiences of interviewees, media reports revealed how medical workers, including barefoot doctors and midwives, helped address gaps in healthcare provision through their efforts. Smilarly, a report portrayed women as having acquired a new destiny after the founding of the People's Republic of China:

Whenever Cong Meiying recalled the different experiences of herself and her daughter under the old and new societies, she was often moved to tears. She said: "The old and new societies are like two different worlds. Women's destinies are no longer the same. Chairman Mao's revolutionary health policy is our path to happiness, and barefoot doctors are our closest companions." (People's Daily, 1975)

Reports from this period largely centered on the role of grassroots medical workers represented by barefoot doctors. By filling gaps caused by insufficient primary healthcare resources, these medical workers contributed to the early detection and treatment of women's health problems. Such practices not only supported the consolidation of the newly established state but also mobilized women's productive capacities, enabling them to participate more actively in the construction of the new nation.

In certain regions, compared with men, women experienced greater restrictions in terms of time allocation and spatial mobility. Their activities were often concentrated around the household, while daily responsibilities such as domestic labor played a dominant role in determining their schedules and movements (Feng & Yuan, 2022). Initiatives such as sending medical services to rural communities and establishing barefoot doctor networks undoubtedly had profound and lasting impacts on women's health. They alleviated the difficulties women faced in accessing medical care and provided new possibilities for treatment and recovery. The practices of barefoot doctors represented an organic extension of state policies in the early PRC period. Their persistent efforts left an enduring mark on the country's developmental trajectory.

It is worth noting, however, that in these reports, medical personnel served as the dominant keywords, occupying the central position of discourse and becoming the primary focus of attention. By contrast, individualized descriptions of patients diagnosed with cervical erosion were rarely mentioned.

Technology-Driven in the Prevention and Treatment of Cervical Erosion (1980-1999)

In news reports published between 1980 and 1999, discussions of cervical erosion were primarily framed within a scientific discourse system, focusing on the rapid development of China's medical and pharmaceutical technologies and highlighting the growing strength of national scientific and technological capabilities. The frequent appearance of terms such as "laser," "technology," "new drugs," and "effectiveness" indicates that these reports primarily emphasized the cutting-edge application of modern medical technologies, the research and promotion of new pharmaceuticals, the expansion of women's health screening and healthcare initiatives, and increased attention to precancerous lesions. It can be observed that representations of cervical erosion gradually moved away from overtly political discourse and returned to a more specialized medical framework. These reports demonstrated the state's emphasis on women's health and its confidence in scientific and technological advancement.

The Development of New Technologies and Pharmaceuticals

During this period, media reports introduced the development of new drugs and medical technologies. For example, on November 20, 1980, People's Daily reported that "Lin Zhengyi, a female technician of Taiwanese origin at Guiyang Pharmaceutical Factory, successfully developed a new drug for the treatment of cervical erosion, 'Fudekang,' with the assistance and cooperation of her husband, technician Tang Gangguo"(Tian, 1980). Another report stated that "the new drug 'porcine spleen cell interferon,' developed by the Institute of Military Medicine of the Guangzhou Military Region, achieved a 100% effective rate and a 79% significant improvement rate in clinical treatment involving 238 patients with cervical erosion, vulvar pruritus, and other gynecological conditions" (Zeng, 1987). The emergence of these new therapeutic approaches provided new possibilities for the prevention and treatment of cervical erosion. Whether developed by the Guizhou Pharmaceutical Factory or the research institute affiliated with the Guangzhou Military Region, these pharmaceutical innovations demonstrated the close relationship between medical research and national policy orientations. They reflected the role of political power in guiding medical research and health innovation, highlighting the influence of government investment and direction in the field of women's health while enhancing the state's reputation and authority in healthcare.

Beyond pharmaceutical innovation, another defining feature of this period was the clinical application of technological advancements, particularly laser technology, in medical treatment. Cervical erosion, alongside other diseases, became a major target of these emerging therapeutic methods (Yang, 1988). One physician successfully treated hemorrhoids and gynecological diseases, including cervical erosion, through laser surgery, receiving widespread recognition. As reported, "Zang Xiaoqing, deputy director of the Fushun Laser Hospital in Liaoning Province, attracted international attention for his outstanding laser surgical techniques and won the gold medal at the 16th International Exhibition of Inventions, Technological Progress and Innovation held in Yugoslavia in April of that year" (Qiao, 1988). By highlighting successful cases, media reports showcased China's medical innovation and technological development while enhancing the international visibility of Chinese medical expertise.

Furthermore, the introduction of advanced technologies through Sino-foreign joint ventures demonstrated China's active promotion of international cooperation and the adoption of modern medical achievements. For example, "the Bome phototherapy device developed by the Beijing branch of Dalian Bome Instrument Equipment Company, a Sino-American joint venture, was used in nearly 100 hospitals among 40,000 patients with gynecological diseases and was shown to have favorable therapeutic effects on cervical erosion, vulvar leukoplakia, and condyloma acuminatum"(Wang et al., 1992). In these reports, cervical erosion was no longer presented as synonymous with gynecological disease; instead, other conditions such as vulvar leukoplakia and condyloma acuminatum also gradually entered media discussions. These representations contributed to the construction of medical authority within society, demonstrating the state's active role in promoting technological innovation and the development of modern medicine.

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping (1978) proposed the restoration of the Four Modernizations agenda and reaffirmed the Marxist proposition that "science and technology constitute productive forces," thereby establishing the central position of science and technology in China's reform and opening-up process. He explicitly emphasized that the core of the Four Modernizations lay in achieving the modernization of science and technology. The state's aspiration for modernization, the public's urgent pursuit of progress, and the indispensable role of technology in the

modernization process collectively shaped the authoritative status of "science" as a conceptual framework, cultural phenomenon, and social mentality.

Gynecological Screening and Healthcare under Scientific Guidance

In addition to new technologies and pharmaceuticals, news reports during this period also documented large-scale gynecological disease screening and treatment initiatives in rural areas. These programs identified and treated a substantial number of women with cervical erosion. Beyond cervical erosion, these gynecological screening campaigns also brought greater public attention to conditions that had previously been regarded as difficult or obscure diseases, such as vulvar leukoplakia and vaginal trichomoniasis. Media coverage reflected the increasingly in-depth investigation and specialization of women's health issues within the medical field.

During this period, modern medical concepts such as prenatal diagnosis gradually gained recognition. As a diagnostic approach closely related to gynecology, prenatal diagnosis contributed to the early detection and diagnosis of gynecological conditions. One report noted that "more than one hundred institutions across twenty-six provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions nationwide had conducted research on prenatal diagnosis for pregnant women... Many cities and some rural areas had also carried out screening and treatment campaigns for women's diseases, with cervical cancer as a primary focus" (Zou, 1985). Furthermore, cervical erosion was categorized alongside uterine fibroids and adnexitis as one of the most prevalent gynecological diseases: "Since May this year, the station has conducted comprehensive examinations of 946 female employees from 76 enterprises and public institutions in the city. The examinations identified 325 cases of gynecological diseases, including cervical erosion, uterine fibroids, and adnexitis, with the overall prevalence rate of women's diseases reaching as high as 89.1%"(Cui, 1992). The intervention of political power encouraged greater attention to women's health in rural healthcare initiatives and created favorable conditions for improving women's reproductive health.

Reports on rural healthcare during this period also moved beyond their previous focus on barefoot doctors and began to highlight a wider range of actors. For example, a medical service team composed of surgeons from Fuzhou and female members of the China Zhi Gong Party organized multidisciplinary medical teams, including gynecologists and internists, to conduct medical visits in rural townships throughout Fujian Province. One report stated:

For many years, an active medical team composed primarily of female overseas Chinese returnees has operated in Fuzhou, a hometown of overseas Chinese in Fujian Province. This medical service team was organized by the Fuzhou Municipal Committee of the China Zhi Gong Party... The committee provided sufficient medicines and equipment, and through cumulative cryosurgical treatments for more than 3,000 cases of gynecological diseases, it made important contributions to the early detection and prevention of breast cancer and cervical erosion among rural women. (Chen, 1994)

In addition, the contributions of ethnic hospitals were also prominently featured in media coverage: "In the spring of the following year, the medical team returned to Yanhe Korean Ethnic Township in Yushu County and conducted gynecological disease screenings among 597 women. The results were even more striking, with the prevalence rate of gynecological diseases reaching 94%. Many patients with cervical erosion had already entered the early stages of malignant transformation" (Han et al., 1996). These reports emphasized the significant contributions of democratic parties and relevant medical institutions, helping strengthen

cooperation and exchange among healthcare organizations across different regions. They also promoted a more balanced allocation of medical resources and contributed to expanding access to healthcare services on a broader scale.

Scientific Approaches in Female Contraception

Since the development of public health systems, the human body has increasingly become an object of state governance, as demonstrated by the emphasis placed on vaccination programs and health examinations. News reports also reveal how traditional cultural beliefs influenced women's reproductive decisions, as well as the various challenges encountered in implementing reproductive policies. Within these reports, cervical erosion was closely associated with women's reproductive health. For example, one report stated:

There was a woman named Wang Fuzhi in the village who had not adopted contraceptive measures for a long time after giving birth. Repeated efforts by township and village officials to persuade her were unsuccessful... It was later discovered that Wang was unwilling to have an intrauterine device inserted because she had cervical erosion and felt ashamed to discuss it. Peng Shufang enthusiastically helped her seek medical treatment. Now, Wang Fuzhi has not only recovered from her illness but has also voluntarily adopted contraceptive measures.(Xu, 1989)

This narrative reflects the state's involvement in individual bodily management and the protection of women's rights and interests. On the one hand, women's physical examinations enabled objective diagnoses of conditions such as cervical erosion; on the other hand, these examinations also reflected state intervention in health management, and they were sometimes integrated with the implementation of reproductive policies. For example, one report stated: "Whenever members of the medical team arrived at a location, they conducted comprehensive physical examinations for women who had undergone sterilization procedures or adopted contraceptive measures. They also assisted local healthcare workers in performing sterilization procedures, thereby ensuring more effective implementation of family planning efforts" (Feng & Yuan, 2022).

As Michel Foucault's concept of biopower suggests, by incorporating bodies purposefully into the production process, societies can achieve effective population management and promote economic development (Foucault, 2001). Within this framework, the relationship between individuals and the collective is redefined. Through comprehensive regulation and optimization of life processes, power achieves a profound reshaping of social structures.

The De-pathologization of Cervical Erosion and the Shift toward Public-Oriented Reporting in the 21st Century

From 2000 to 2026, People's Daily revealed and reflected the various challenges confronting women's health issues, aiming to draw public and institutional attention and ultimately promote the resolution of these problems. The frequent appearance of terms related to public concerns, such as "premarital examination," "physical examination," "Baidu," "health bureau," "advertisement," "law," and "regulations," indicates that, alongside advances in medicine and growing attention to public issues, People's Daily adopted an increasingly diverse perspective. The newspaper gradually clarified that cervical erosion has no direct causal relationship with cervical cancer, advocated sexual education and premarital examinations for populations of appropriate age, and emphasized the importance of compliant medical advertising and professional integrity within the healthcare sector. It can be observed that media discourse during

this period increasingly focused on public issues. By exposing a series of social problems, the media revealed the difficulties faced by women in accessing healthcare, stimulated public and institutional awareness, and encouraged these issues to be recognized and addressed.

Health Education and De-pathologization of Cervical Erosion

The first manifestation of public orientation during this period was the exposure of weaknesses in sexual education in China and the advocacy of large-scale sexual health education and premarital examinations. Media reports revealed that deeply rooted traditional beliefs prevented many women suffering from gynecological diseases from receiving effective medical treatment and support from family members. One report noted: "In some remote mountainous areas, sex education remains a 'forgotten corner'... Some husbands continues to demand sexual intercourse while their wives' menstrual periods, pregnancy, and breastfeeding periods, causing many women to suffer from severe gynecological diseases" (Wang, 2006). In the past, many women with gynecological illnesses were reluctant to seek treatment from local health departments due to stigmatization, sexual taboos, and avoidance among relatives (Cheng & Huang, 2014). Traditional beliefs continued to exert strong influence over individuals' health perceptions and decision-making power, and such lack of knowledge ultimately contributed to the prevalence of various gynecological diseases among women.

It is worth noting that mainstream media reports demonstrate that reproductive health issues, such as premarital examinations, gradually entered everyday public life. Cervical erosion was also identified as a condition requiring attention during premarital health screenings: "Among the 235 newlywed couples who received free premarital examinations... 69 women were found to have health problems, primarily including vaginitis, cervical erosion, and ovarian cysts"(Yu & Ou, 2004). Mainstream media played a positive role in promoting sexual health education and the adoption of premarital examinations, contributing significantly to improving public health awareness and women's health conditions.

In reports published in 2014 and 2017, with the updating of medical knowledge, People's Daily emphasized that cervical erosion should not be regarded as a genuine disease. The 2017 article "Is Cervical Erosion a Disease?" stated: "The medical community believes that cervical erosion is not a real disease. It is likely a physiological change of the female cervix, and authoritative experts have even recommended abandoning the disease term 'cervical erosion'"(Tan, 2017). Mainstream media reconstructed the social cognitive framework surrounding cervical erosion, aiming to reduce unnecessary medical interventions and public anxiety. It challenged previously established stereotypes regarding cervical health and created new possibilities for redefining understandings of women's health.

Protecting Public Rights and Exposing Illegal Activies

The illegal promotion of medical advertisements became another major focus of reporting during this period. These reports exposed cases in which certain hospitals seriously violated advertising regulations and deceived consumers. For example, one report stated that "Korean minimally invasive technology that completely cures cervical erosion, these content seriously violated the laws and regulations governing medical advertisements"(Fu, 2006).

Beyond exposing misleading advertisements in local media, People's Daily also highlighted deceptive promotional practices emerging on internet platforms. Some private hospitals used search engines such as Baidu to publish false information and sensational claims for profit. One

report stated: "When searching for 'cervical erosion,' the first results that appear are websites of several private hospitals specializing in gynecological diseases, some of which even prominently display shocking images of 'cervical erosion.' In reality, this is a complete scam because cervical erosion is not a disease at all"(Bai, 2014). These phenomena demonstrated that, while China's healthcare sector underwent market-oriented reforms, regulatory mechanisms remained insufficient. In particular, the cooperation between Internet companies and private hospitals complicated the circulation of medical information, exposing patients to risks associated with unnecessary treatment.

Beyond fraudulent advertising, the complex problems within the medical industry itself were also deeply concerning. One report noted: "The website of Saime Alliance Company at that time, as well as the product manual accompanying its 'radiofrequency comprehensive therapeutic device,' had arbitrarily expanded its approved indications to include diseases such as 'cervical erosion' and 'condyloma acuminatum'" (Ao, 2007). Media coverage exposed hidden illegal sales practices within the healthcare industry. Such violations not only involved encouraging patients to receive treatments that failed to meet medical standards but also significantly increased medical risks and infringed upon patients' legitimate rights and personal safety.

More seriously, some private specialized hospitals operated under the names of local health bureaus and women's federations, organizing large numbers of rural women to undergo examinations at their facilities. They then used alarming claims about potential cancer risks to persuade women to pay for unnecessary surgeries. For example, one report stated: "More than 40 female villagers from Liaoyuan Village, Hanchuan Economic Development Zone, once visited the hospital for free examinations. The examination results showed that all of them had cervical erosion. Following doctors' recommendations, most underwent a surgical procedure lasting only a few minutes, costing between 900 and more than 1,600 yuan"(Tian et al., n.d.).

Media reports revealed that the term "cervical erosion" had become embedded within a complex network of interests involving pharmaceutical manufacturers, medical institutions, physicians, and broader social actors. Within this network, women's health needs were transformed into commercial opportunities, while their physical and psychological well-being became vulnerable to exploitation by various interest groups. The mainstream media's explicit de-pathologization of cervical erosion reflected the state's attempt to address disorder within the healthcare industry and to safeguard women's health and fundamental rights.

Discussion

"Medicine is politics, and politics is merely a larger form of medicine"(Virchow, 1848). Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, this study examines mainstream media reports on cervical erosion as an entry point to investigate the power dynamics among women's health, state discourse, medical discourse, commercial discourse, and traditional beliefs. It explores the mediated construction of cervical erosion as a medical term itself, with the aim of revealing the processes through which knowledge and power operate among the state, medicine, and the market. As a culturally embedded concept, the definition of cervical erosion, its media representations, treatment approaches, and meanings within social life are all products shaped by broader sociocultural contexts. Cervical erosion has constituted an important issue throughout the ongoing process of addressing women's reproductive health challenges. The health

information conveyed through mainstream media reports reflects the state's fundamental perceptions and attitudes toward women's health.

During the first three decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949–1979), cervical erosion, together with other gynecological diseases, became a key target of state-led administrative intervention. Improving women's health was regarded as a means of enhancing public welfare, promoting productivity, and strengthening the legitimacy of the new political regime. Media reports during this period were characterized by strong political orientations, repeatedly emphasizing communist ideals such as women's liberation and gender equality. Chinese women completed the process of collective "socialization" in less than a decade, creating a historical rupture from previous generations of women in China (Li X., 2000).

Mainstream media constructed a politicized practice of women's health by emphasizing the integration of traditional medicine and modern science, as well as the care provided by barefoot doctors. On the one hand, these practices demonstrate that the integration of Chinese and Western medicine not only generated medical advancements but also extended its influence to the realm of social stability, highlighting the significant role of political power in shaping healthcare practices. On the other hand, barefoot doctors helped compensate for deficiencies in grassroots medical resources, improved women's health conditions, and reflected the deep integration of political environments and traditional cultural factors into women's health issues. At the same time, due to the needs of political mobilization and public communication, these disease narratives tended to overlook the limitations of China's medical technologies at the time and the long-term neglect of gynecological health issues.

During the final two decades of the twentieth century (1980–1999), rapid advances in medical technologies transformed the prevention and treatment of cervical erosion into a process characterized by extensive scientific efforts and substantial investment in technological development. Scientific discourse became particularly significant during this period. By disseminating scientific health knowledge and promoting regular health examinations and guidance, medical practices reflected the state's increasing use of modern scientific approaches to address women's health concerns. This approach highlighted the close interaction between women's health and the broader process of national modernization, demonstrating the state's growing attention to women's health and its important role in advancing modernization. This phenomenon illustrates the considerable influence of scientific discourse and medical authority in shaping public understandings and practices of health.

From the twenty-first century to the end of the data collection period (2000–2026), mainstream media increasingly emphasized public-oriented elements and actively participated in the de-pathologization of cervical erosion. During this period, China deepened its international engagement, including accession to the World Trade Organization and hosting of the Beijing Olympic Games. Media perspectives also expanded, with mainstream news reporting adopting increasingly public-oriented approaches. This transformation was closely associated with gradual reforms in China's healthcare system and the growing diversification of healthcare providers (Guo, 2016). Within these media texts, factors including gender roles, commercial interests, medical concepts, and traditional culture interacted with one another, revealing a complex network of power relations. On the one hand, the state remained an important provider of healthcare services; on the other hand, its role as a regulator became increasingly prominent, resulting in stricter governance and supervision of medical and health-related fields. Media

reports exposed social neglect of women's health issues as well as various forms of illegal and non-compliant practices.

Furthermore, this study finds that although mainstream media have adopted increasingly rational and restrained language when constructing representations of cervical erosion, issues of stigmatization, sexualization, and reproductive framing had already emerged in earlier reports. Aligning with previous findings, excessive exaggeration of this physiological phenomenon may generate negative perceptions and intensify stigma surrounding women's bodies (Liu, 2024). Media reports also repeatedly linked cervical erosion with contraception and reproductive practices, reinforcing its reproductive framing. Before explicitly clarifying that cervical erosion is not a disease, mainstream media discourse also associated it with various forms of perceived sexual misconduct, further contributing to its sexualization. In terms of de-pathologization, the most significant contribution of mainstream media has been its role in exercising public oversight: exposing misleading medical advertisements, revealing illegal profit-making practices within the healthcare industry, and publishing reports that restored the legitimacy of cervical erosion as a non-disease condition. These reports demonstrate that the cultural and commercial inertia behind viewing cervical erosion as a disease continues to exert influence and should not be underestimated.

Previous studies have primarily focused on the media construction of diseases, while research examining mediated disease construction from a gender perspective remains relatively limited. By incorporating gender and historical dimensions and situating the analysis within China's unique cultural context, this study seeks to contribute richer and more diverse theoretical perspectives to global women's health research. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. To examine the issue from a longitudinal perspective, it selected only relevant reports from People's Daily, resulting in a relatively limited sample size and textual scope. Future research could collect data from a broader range of actors and platforms, including social media, to provide a more comprehensive understanding. In addition, qualitative interviews with women diagnosed with cervical erosion, healthcare professionals, and employees of pharmaceutical companies could generate richer empirical data. Finally, questionnaire surveys exploring broader public perceptions and attitudes would provide a valuable complementary approach. Through these multidimensional research methods, future studies may achieve a more comprehensive understanding of women's health and related social issues.

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Ethical statement

There are no human participants in this article and informed consent is not required. All analytical texts are derived from publicly available social media content.

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The data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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