The Anti-Footbinding Movement of the Qing-Republic Transitional Era: A Joint Venture of Western Travelers and Chinese Reformers

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By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the practice of footbinding had become a symbol of wealth, sexuality, and fertility in China. But as the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) gave way to the Republican era (1912–1949), globalization and international contact helped to create a national anti-footbinding movement. Prior to the arrival of British imperialist convoys and Western Christian missionaries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, little contact had been established between Western travelers and Chinese people outside the merchant or ruling classes due to the prevailing Canton system. The Canton system limited access to mainland China because it blocked Westerners from traveling into the heart of China and forced them to conduct all business within Canton (Guangzhou). As Westerners began to travel deeper into China, they discovered that female footbinding—described by previous travelers such as Matteo Ricci—had become a nearly universal practice throughout most of the country.

The practice of footbinding was applied primarily to young females throughout mainland China. Traditionally performed by the mother, footbinding involved taking the front part of the foot and bending it to the center. There were variations in the type and extent of the binding, which enabled different degrees of mobility for those with the bound feet. Women of the lower classes benefited from more mobility because they needed to be able to work the fields or perform hard labor, while upper class women underwent a more restrictive form of footbinding. For these upper class women, the ideal was the four-inch lotus flower foot, which made it difficult to stand and walk. Class also influenced the practice; as binding feet was costly for girls whose feet were still growing, the lower-class binding did not need to be as refined as the upper-class.

Historically, footbinding was not limited to women in China, but to anyone that was considered to have feet that were too large. A man was expected to have a larger foot than a woman. However, for the sake of limited space, this essay limits itself to the story of female footbinding, which constituted the overwhelming majority of cases of footbinding. Howard S. Levy, The Lotus Lovers: The Complete History of the Curious Erotic Custom of Footbinding in China (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1992).

unbound feet was considered a slave, a social deviation, ugly, and lazy. As a result, the small foot came to be understood as an erotic symbol, leading to theories of smaller-footed women being more sexually active and better at childbearing.

By the late Qing Dynasty footbinding, which had become a widespread practice in China for several centuries, became the target of international scrutiny. Calls to end footbinding were issued by foreigners and Chinese alike at the same time that China faced turmoil at the hands of Western expansionists. Western missionaries condemned the practice as “perverse” and “horrific” and launched anti-footbinding campaigns throughout the country. Social Darwinists further cited footbinding as proof that Chinese people were inferior beings. Chinese scholars, ashamed of their lack of modern technology and these attacks on China, began to call for the end of footbinding.

There were distinct differences but overwhelming similarities between the Western and Chinese approaches to eliminating footbinding as the late Qing Dynasty gave way to the early Republican era. Travel accounts of Reverend John MacGowan and Alicia Little demonstrate the Western and Christian views of the anti-footbinding movement. The essays, propaganda literature, poems, and narratives written by Chinese scholars and officials of the period, including Liang Qichao, Qiu Jin, and Xue Shaohui, convey various opinions on the Chinese perspectives on footbinding. Instrumental to the comprehension of the anti-footbinding movement is the understanding of the beginning of the globalization movement. The gradual western influence on inland China introduced ideas as well as discussions of femininity and beauty, which, in turn, led to the emergence of the anti-footbinding movement.

Western Travelers to China—On a Mission to Observe and Convert

The opening of China to the West was gradual due to policies by the Chinese government limiting immigration. Among the first Western travelers to inland China were the Christian missionaries, who believed that by converting the Chinese population to Christianity they would save them from eternal damnation. These missionaries represented a number of sects, but the most prevalent were the Jesuits, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox denominations. Despite the spurning of Christianity by Chinese authorities, missionaries snuck into inner China to profess their belief.

Among the many Western travelers to Europe during the late Qing era was Reverend John MacGowan (d. 1922), a devout Protestant. MacGowan

5 Ibid. and MacGowan, 60-5.
believed that all English people and Christians had a mission to convert the “heathens” of China to Christianity, as he described in the preface of his book, *How England Saved China*. The book details his spiritual journey of converting Chinese people and his attempts to save Chinese women from footbinding. He described the horrible pains of footbinding he had witnessed, such as seeing a young girl who “wished to have [her feet] bandaged so tightly” that it resulted in one of her feet “hanging simply by a thread to the thin, emaciated leg.”

Typical for the Christian writers of the nineteenth century, MacGowan adopted a condescending tone and placed blame on the mothers who bound the feet of their daughters. As a result, MacGowan, along with his wife, made cursory attempts to stop individual families from binding the feet of their daughters in 1860; his efforts, however, were unsuccessful.

Later, in 1875, MacGowan experienced what he described as “a veritable suggestion from God” as he called for a meeting of all Christian women in the city of Amoy (Xiamen) in an effort to end footbinding. His request invoked anger among the citizens of Amoy, and rumors of rioting spread throughout the city; a woman leaving the traditional nei (inner) sphere was tantamount to a rebellion. Additionally, the discussion of such a taboo subject was sure to arouse suspicion in the city. Despite the outspoken opposition, a group of sixty to seventy uneducated women from a working-class background attended MacGowan’s meeting and signed an agreement in which they promised that none of them would bind the feet of their daughters, nor marry their sons to women with bound feet. This accord laid the foundation for the “Jie chanzu hui (Quit Binding-Feet Society).” MacGowan praises the “heroic women” who step forward and likens them to Christ, their savior. MacGowan, who had previously blamed the horrors of footbinding on women, now places the culpability on the men who continued to enslave their women by morally and socially enforcing the practice. Yet, his paramount objective was to praise God for making MacGowan his instrument in the fight against the atrocities of footbinding that were practiced throughout China. This idea also lent MacGowan the unsubtle title for his book, *How England Saved China*.

However, MacGowan’s influence was limited in that it did not reach far outside Amoy, due perhaps to the minimal appeal to Chinese men and non-Christians. This challenge was left to the English traveler and novelist Alicia Little (1845—1926). Upon arriving in China in 1887 with her husband, she was able to pervade into the interior of the country. The details of their journey along the Yangtze River can be found in her husband’s published journal entitled *Through the Yang-tze Gorges*. The journal scarcely touches upon the topics of

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8 MacGowan, 5-6.
9 Ibid., 38.
10 Ibid., 46.
11 Gendering of Chinese society is often described through the nei-wai division. Nei, or the private, is typically affiliated with the feminine. Wai, or the public sphere, is typically associated with the masculine. For more information on the nei-wai concept, refer to the introductory chapter of Bryna Goodman et al., *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 1-25.
12 MacGowan, 64-5; Ko, 16.
footbinding and the fight against it, indicating that Alicia and her husband either did not think themselves able to put an end to footbinding or that they did not yet have sufficient motivation.\[^{13}\]

Notwithstanding her earlier silence on the issue of footbinding, starting in the late 1880s and continuing into the early 1890s, Little invited Reverend MacGowan to a meeting of Shanghai's foreign elite to give a speech concerning the anti-footbinding movement.\[^{14}\] Even though she was inspired by MacGowan's "Quit Binding-Feet Society," Little wanted to take a more secular approach to the anti-footbinding movement. As a result, in April 1895, she founded the *Tianzu hui* ("Natural Feet Society" or "Heavenly Foot Society"), which would not be strictly associated with the societies of the Christian missionaries.\[^{15}\] In writing discourses about ending the tradition of footbinding in Chinese, Little did not only reach out to men and scholars, but she also transformed the discussion of footbinding into a subject that was less taboo and sexualized and, as a result, more scholarly.\[^{16}\] Little organized meetings in the largest cities of China to guarantee the attendance of influential men and women. Little saw the Chinese women as unable to reach this core group of elites, and so she took up the challenge herself, giving rise to the "white women's burden" against footbinding.\[^{17}\]

The message of Little's "Natural Feet Society" spread throughout the country and led to the end of footbinding for many families. Little's approach toward ending footbinding followed two steps: prevent girls from having their feet bound, and unbind all women and girls who already had their feet bound.\[^{18}\] Whereas the first measure caused no physical pain, the latter induced crippling pain and was not always successful because the process involved unbending the bones to return to their "natural" state.\[^{19}\] Little did not interpret the bound feet as part of a woman's life, but rather as a mere symbol of backwardness. Thus, the unbound foot was a symbol of modernity and liberated awareness. This idea would be picked up by Chinese male scholars and be slightly transformed in order to cast a different shadow on anti-footbinding during the Qing–Republic transitional era.

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\[^{14}\] Macgowan, 90.

\[^{15}\] While MacGowan referred to *tianzu* as "heavenly feet" due to his interpretation of the human body belonging to god, Little translated *tianzu* as "natural feet" for a more secular and health-oriented approach. Angela Zito, "Secularizing the Pain of Footbinding in China: Missionary and Medical Stagings of the Universal Body," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 1 (2007), 5.


\[^{17}\] Ibid., 99–103.

\[^{18}\] Ibid., 101.

While the role of footbinding in Chinese society and its impact on women had been discussed prior to Western intervention, discourse had not been taken seriously either by the masses or by most scholars. Opposition to footbinding was met with derision and backlash from the Han scholars. When the Qing imperial family declared footbinding illegal at the beginning of the dynasty, the ethnic majority ignored the edict, declaring that women and their customs were not subject to the *wai* (outer) sphere. Due to this rationale, discussion of footbinding was, for the most part, restricted to the *nei* (private) sphere. For this reason, typically, other than dwelling on the elegance of the Han Chinese custom, policy makers did not discuss the subject.

Western travelers broke the silence around footbinding. Fueled by the anti-footbinding societies created by Westerners, the forced opening of trade through the opium wars, and the growing realization that China did not have the sufficient tools and technology to throw itself into the imperialist race, footbinding came to the forefront of Chinese thought through both scholarly and public avenues. The approach toward footbinding was thus shadowed by the growing need for complete technological, martial, and governmental reform. The anti-footbinding movement was, however, not only influenced by Western travelers, but also by Chinese travelers who, by going to Europe, America, and Japan, were exposed to and influenced by different education systems and cultures. As a result, the propaganda surrounding the anti-footbinding movement became linked to modernity; and in turn, those who supported modernity should become the ruling class rather than remain the ruled body.

Hence, the anti-footbinding movement became associated with the Nationalist Revolution, Sun Yat-sen’s “Revive China Society,” and Kang Youwei’s and Liang Qichao’s “Protect the Emperor Society.” After the Chinese defeat in the Second Opium War and the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, the growing need for modernity became more apparent. The Nationalist Revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1912, put an end to imperial rule in China, and established the Republic of China, a democratic government. In response to China’s struggle to gain acceptance in the imperial sphere, Nationalists called for a social, political, and economic reform. Among the many Nationalists who helped to form the Republic of China, Kang Youwei (1858-1927), Liang Qichao (1873-1929), and Jiu Qin (1875-1907) were among the most important in initiating the revolution and connecting it with the ideology of modernity and consequently the anti-footbinding movement.

Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei, adopting prevailing Western opinions and drawing on their combined Chinese and Western educations, established the widespread opinion of footbinding as a symbol of humiliation and China’s inability to catch up with imperialist powers. Unlike Little and MacGowan who

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20 Ibid., 1-20.
21 Ibid., 40-41.
sympathized with women with bound feet, Qichao and Youwei selected a more hostile approach toward women’s role in the footbinding process. Qichao, in his 1896-1897 essay “On Women’s Education,” wrote, “all two hundred million of our women are consumers; not a single one has produced anything of profit...No wonder men keep them as dogs, horses, and slaves.” He further described women as parasites, beasts, uneducated, and ignorant, all the while making references to Mencius and calling upon women to educate themselves and unbind their feet in order to better the nation and lighten the load on men. Qichao thus placed the blame on women as they failed to serve their nation and their male relatives. Propaganda flyers and newspaper articles further propagated this image to the extent by which it came to be the common view of women.

It was in this damning atmosphere that Kang Youwei sent his memorial calling upon Emperor Guangxu to ban footbinding in 1898. Around the same time, Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei created the infamous “Hundred Days Reform” in order to “self-strengthen” China. In addition, Kang Youwei wished to remove all signs of footbinding, associating it with the “evils” of China’s inability to modernize.

Liang Qichao was not the only prominent figure to connect uneducated women with footbinding and backwardness: it became a common theme for the anti-footbinding and Nationalist movements after Liang and Kang fled the country amidst the backlash from Empress Dowager Cixi against the Hundred Days Reformists. Qiu Jin took up the cause to end footbinding along these same lines and also to put an end to the Qing Dynasty. Notorious for her outspokenness against Manchu rule and her devotion to Nationalist ideas, Qiu traveled to Japan in 1904 in order to educate herself. She had never had her feet bound and ardously practiced martial arts, both of which contradicted the traditional female gender role. Upon her return to China in 1905, Qiu helped to start a feminist magazine entitled Chinese Women’s News, which espoused women’s education and Western economic policies. It featured discussions of women’s roles in society and other prevailing issues, including footbinding and its impact on women.

Qiu’s magazine helped raise awareness among Chinese women about the national and international discourse on controversial subjects such as footbinding.

Qiu actively participated in promoting her magazine even when the Nationalists started taking action against the Qing government. In fact, she wrote abundant literature on anti-footbinding such as essays, compilations of poetry, and non-fictionalized books. Qiu, in calling for women’s independence, challenged them to “unbind [their] feet to unbind [their] minds,” once again likening footbinding to uneducated women. Unlike Kang and Liang, Qiu took a

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22 Ibid., 21.
23 Ibid., 21.
24 Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao fled to Japan and actively rallied against the Qing government, emphasizing the need for reform. Xiaobing Tang, Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
subtler approach, as she was probably able to relate better to all the women who were regularly forced into the practice. Although she followed the popular Nationalist idea that bound feet meant ignorance, Qiu appeals to the female reader by using first-person plural pronouns ("we" and "us"), and thus does not intend to insult women, unlike Liang in his derogatory essay. She also adopts a strategy that would be emulated by future Nationalists by placing a divide between the Han Chinese who had been oppressed and forced to bind their feet, and the Manchu rulers who did not care for their ailing women.\(^\text{26}\) This argument served to further associate modernity with unbound feet, and the defunct Qing government with bound feet.

Nonetheless, these Nationalists once again failed to recognize the incredible pain that accompanied the unbinding of already bound feet. Each called for women to unbind their feet in order to help themselves, their families, and their countries; however, none of them had ever undergone footbinding themselves. Their inexperience regarding the actual practice of footbinding compromised their credibility. Each of these activists used derivative knowledge and international views of footbinding in order to propagandize and implement policies against it. Although China needed to end footbinding, the women did not assume an active role but, rather, they were acted upon. While policies and propaganda literature against new footbinding were not physically harmful to women, the generations of females that had bound their feet no longer had a say over their bodies; scholars, missionaries, Nationalists, reformers, and Westerners who had not experienced footbinding were calling upon all women to unbind their feet without considering their point of view. The process of unbinding the feet was undoubtedly painful and, since it was not always successful, it often led to more deformities and the possibility of never returning to a normal life.\(^\text{27}\)

While most of the public discourse during the transitional period was maintained by either the major players of the revolution or the Westerners in natural feet societies, there were many more who adopted a different approach to footbinding. Xue Shaohui (1855-1911), editor in chief of the women’s journal *Chinese Girls' Progress*, was a poet, translator, and writer who argued against footbinding in a different way from the dominant writers and propagandists of her time.\(^\text{28}\) In response to a letter from a Madame Shen in 1898 that based her argument on the literature produced by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, Xue adopted a contrasting stance: she blatantly opposed the anti-footbinding movement. Xue saw the tradition as more of a fashion trend and, at the same time, an irreversible process. She argued that unbinding a woman’s feet would

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\(^\text{26}\) In reality, the early Qing imperial family had issued a proclamation that footbinding was banned. This decree was largely ignored due to the pervading nei-wai division of private and public spheres—the government represented the public sphere whereas women and the home embodied the private sphere. Several Han officials and scholars asked for the emperor to drop all challenges to footbinding soon after the decree was issued. After this, Han Chinese women were not expected to have unbound feet, while Manchu women were expected to follow the decree and were prohibited from footbinding. See Lingzhen Wang, 27-55.


\(^\text{28}\) Ibid., 38-40.
not restore what the said woman had lost. She also asserted that women could provide for the family even with bound feet by means of traditional methods (e.g. sewing) and self-education. Xue did not, however, argue against the prevention of binding daughters’ feet, but reminded the reader that the process of unbinding feet always entails consequences.29 The response may have been partially reactionary to the harsh and accusatory tones of the Nationalists and other anti-footbindists who had been led to believe that the process of unbinding feet was passive. However, this unique narrative did not affect mainstream attitudes towards footbinding and was, therefore, largely ignored amidst a sea of international and Nationalist opinions.30

The same opinions led to the mass unbinding of feet and to the prohibition of binding their daughter’s feet. Some families were empowered by the anti-footbinding movement, as women were no longer forced by societal standards to harm their daughters’ feet nor pressured to maintain bound feet themselves. Indeed, many, just like K’ung Hui-Chung, expressed their jubilation:

I have always had my unquiet thoughts about footbinding and felt pity for the many sufferers. Yet I could not venture to say it publicly. Now there are happily certain benevolent gentlemen and virtuous daughters of ability, wise daughters from foreign lands, who have initiated a truly noble enterprise. They have addressed our women in animated exhortation and founded a society for the prohibition of footbinding.31

This comment demonstrates the extent by which the widespread influence of the Christian missionaries and the upper class perpetuated the change. Others wrote poetry, which functioned as propaganda for the anti-footbinding campaign but also as a means to invoke compassion amongst mothers who considered binding their daughters’ feet. Once again, these poems followed a familiar trope of identifying women with bound feet as uneducated and unloved. For example, one poem ends: I can’t walk by day nor sleep at night./But the neighbor’s girl, with feet unbound,/Walks to school to improve her learning.32 This poem clearly represents the Westerners’ and Chinese scholars’ view of footbinding as an evil of China, which disrupts, if not incapacitates, the education of women.

Whereas the beneficiaries of the anti-footbinding campaign became national heroes, those that left their feet bound and continued to bind their daughters’ feet became centers of ridicule and shame in China. In addition, there were still many women who either were not allowed or were unwilling to unbind their feet. In a study performed by Sidney Gamble, an American photographer and surveyor, in 1929 over 50% of the 1,736 women who were surveyed still had bound feet, despite the Republican government’s mandates

29 Ibid., 40.
30 Ibid., 40-41.
31 Levy, 78.
32 Ibid., 86.

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that banned footbinding. This kind of resistance occurred in several regions, including Shanxi, where the local warlord was determined to eliminate footbinding altogether. The women that maintained this lifestyle insisted that footbinding was a part of the nei sphere, which was not subject to government interference. Feelings of animosity towards the Chinese government emerged as the latter was accused of erasing their culture and following the foreigners' lead in destroying their customs. The transition to the unbound foot proved to be uneasy due to strict officials invading the privacy of the home, the implications of foreign intervention, and the Christian origins of the anti-footbinding movement.

The unbound foot never became a universal norm under the Republic of China, and while footbinding became nearly extinct as a practice during Mao's Communist era, remnants of the custom still remained in some parts of China. It was during the Qing—Republic transitional period that footbinding became a complicated and multi-faceted issue within the greater Chinese society. This phenomenon was mostly due to Western intervention at the local level and Chinese scholars who were educated in the Western fashion, who thus began to contribute to the battle against footbinding. While the Western traveler was typically Christian, there were secularized attempts to end footbinding, as conducted by Alicia Little. The Western approach consisted, for the most part, of the demonization of the Chinese people—even though there were individuals that led a crusade against footbinding with attempts to not insult the culture.

While the Westerners' attempts to end footbinding achieved much on a local and individual level, propaganda literature and public policy issued by Chinese activists allowed more women to be exposed to the anti-footbinding movement. Chinese scholars were able to pursue the topic due to their higher class status, their Han Chinese heritage, and their familiarity and contact with European, American, and/or Japanese education. These Chinese influentials cast more light upon the subject of footbinding for the common person, but in doing so, alienated many women and citizens of rural regions where customs did not swiftly change. As a result, there was much contention over footbinding between over half of the Chinese population and the reformists who took control after the fall of the Qing Dynasty. Like the anti-footbinding Western travelers, these reformists did not treat Chinese women as entities, but instead as bodies incapable of feeling physical pain or the pangs of losing oneself through the repeated enforcement of change upon the body. This phenomenon was, perhaps, inevitable at a time when China needed to catch up and grab a foothold in the capitalist enterprise in modernizing by means of utilizing all available resources in reaction to the expansionist policies of the global community. Due to the dynamic globalization process, footbinding could not be maintained as a universal practice, thus putting an end to a widespread and socially accepted

33 Ibid., 91.
34 Ko, 50.
35 Ibid., 50-55.
36 Often their personal accounts reveal their true feelings on the matter, as seen in MacGowan’s memoir.
custom, which had for centuries represented a unique emblem of China's culture.

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