Prostitution and Footbinding: Images of Chinese Womanhood in Late Nineteenth-Century San Francisco

Jingwoan Chang

Introduction

This paper examines the way in which anti-Chinese rhetoric exploited the institutions of Chinese prostitution and footbinding to create a notion of intrinsic Chinese immorality. Images of Chinese women as sex slaves or as having mutilated bodies formed the basis of beliefs regarding the Chinese nature. Such a delineation of Chinese women was particularly relevant to two groups of female Chinese immigrants to San Francisco: prostitutes and merchant wives. What they had in common was physical, financial, and intellectual bondage. The bound foot was an appropriate symbol of their restricted lives. Neither of these groups of women had very much control over their bodies or their destinies, and for the most part, depended on men for their well-being and happiness.

The Chinese women who came to America in the late nineteenth century fell into several categories: merchant wives, prostitutes, and the working women outside of the sex trade who worked as seamstresses, housekeepers, or helped their husbands in the agricultural or fishing industries. Numbers of imported Chinese women were sold as prostitutes, wives, or concubines to the much larger numbers of Chinese men living and working in San Francisco. Many of these prostitutes were sold into the sex trade by their impoverished families and suffered abuse at the hands of their owners as well as their clients. The sale of women, the prostitution trade itself, and the Chinese organized crime syndicate which controlled the prostitution trade were seen as signs of an evil Chinese disposition rather than as social problems of a neophyte urban population in the late 1800s. As debates over Chinese immigration often addressed the prostitution problem, tales of Chinese prostitutes appeared frequently in newspaper articles or speeches on this topic. In contrast, there is very little information about merchant wives because they led very cloistered lives, and many of them had bound feet which limited their ability to venture outside their homes. While footbinding was a uniquely Chinese custom that reflected Chinese ideas of feminine beauty, virtue, and social status, the non-Chinese population perceived it as barbaric, cruel, and a sign that the Chinese population needed Christianity.

The issues of prostitution and footbinding became entwined with the moral argument against Chinese immigration. Chinese prostitution and footbinding challenged Victorian concepts of family, morality, and good Christian behavior. The language in newspaper reports and public debates on Chinese prostitution and footbinding reinforced the opinion that the Chinese race was an inherently wicked one. The way that the non-Chinese population perceived these practices reinforced existing anti-Chinese sentiment, without a deeper understanding of the complex social and historical issues behind these Chinese practices involving women. The result: of such rhetoric was government legislation that attempted to restrict the immigration of Chinese
women into the country, including the Page Law of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.¹

Morality and Chinese prostitution

When the Gold Rush began in 1849, large numbers of Chinese men came to California to work as miners, farmers, railroad workers, and unskilled laborers.² Several factors contributed to the wave of Chinese workers seeking their fortunes in California: social unrest and poverty in southeastern China caused by the Taiping Rebellion, the relative ease of travel by sea from China to the west coast of the United States, and enterprising ship owners who promoted the “golden hills” of California in Chinese ports with all sorts of advertisements so that they could profit by shipping large numbers of Chinese men to California.³

While much smaller numbers of Chinese women came to the United States during this time, a significant number did make the journey. Most Chinese women worked as prostitutes upon their arrival. Some came of their own accord while others fell prey to a crime syndicate which lured or kidnapped Chinese women, smuggled them to the United States, and then sold them to brothel owners in San Francisco for a great profit. Chinese women tricked or coerced into becoming prostitutes were seen as gullible and powerless dupes, the easy targets of Chinese men who were deceitful and vicious. Western observers of the Chinese prostitution trade saw Chinese women as too stupid to know between good and evil, yet fatally beautiful and exotic. A San Francisco Chronicle article reported on the “strange adventures of a moon-eyed matron,” or in other words, the experiences of a young Chinese woman from Hong Kong who came to America with a man pretending to be a friend of her husband’s. This man, a “well-appearing Mongolian,” convinced her to travel to San Francisco with him so that she could meet her husband. When they arrived, she realized that his real purpose was to sell her into prostitution. She ended up at a brothel on Dupont Street for two months before two other Chinese men eventually turned her into the police. She was incarcerated in City Prison, after which she was sent to the Presbyterian Mission, a sanctuary for former Chinese prostitutes.⁴ Another article told about the “competitive sale of Chinawomen” brought into the city on a steamer from Hong Kong. Twenty-two Chinese women were consigned to a speculative Chinese firm which paid for their passage to the United States. On their arrival, the women were promptly auctioned off in one of the alleys running between Washington and Jackson streets, generating quite a considerable amount of excitement among local Chinese merchants and brothel owners. One young girl around the age of thirteen, described as having “the daintiest of feet and the flattest of noses” was sold to a “lecherous old Mongolian” for four hundred and fifty dollars.⁵

Popular lore about Chinese prostitutes led easily to the belief that the influx of both Chinese men and women had a negative impact on civilized Americans. Among various poems and songs about Chinese immigration, one described the plight of Ching Lee, a “maiden of very small feet,” who sailed to San Francisco expecting be reunited with her childhood love Hong Fat, only to find that Hong Fat had sold her to a rich merchant “for a song.” This Chinese ditty warned Chinese maidens not to leave China with dreams of a better life in America, where they might sit by their lovers to “masticate in unison the nice, plump pussy cat.”⁶ This poem reveals much about Western perceptions of the Chinese people. Once again, the Chinese woman is a victim to the Chinese man’s duplicity. The statement about the couple munching on a meal of
cat is also clearly aimed at offending the sensibilities of a Western reader and meant to portray the Chinese as vile and barbaric.

The view of Chinese women as mere prey in the prostitution industry was an inaccurate one. In reality, small numbers of Chinese women came to America voluntarily to work as independent prostitutes, and others were fully aware of their purpose and did not object to being sold into the sex trade because of filial obligations to their families. In fact, some became victimizers by speculating in the trade of human chattel and selling the services of other women. In San Francisco, a number of women escaped a lifetime of sexual slavery by rising out of the occupation to become “madams.” Three such madams were Dah Pa Tsin, Ah Toy, and Suey Hin. Dah Pa Tsin, together with a slave dealer Charley Hung, owned a hundred girls, all under fourteen years of age, working out of a building on Church Alley. Suey Hin, another slave owner, kept at least fifty girls of various ages, but eventually converted to Christianity and sold or freed all of her girl slaves. Ah Toy, one of the most famous madams of San Francisco, had once been a prostitute herself, and having bought her own freedom, became the owner of several prostitutes on Pike Street. She was so beautiful, reported a San Francisco newspaper, that white miners would line up around the block to pay an ounce of gold just to look at her.

The disproportionately large number of Chinese prostitutes who came to California, in comparison to the number of Chinese wives, helped reinforce the notion of Chinese wickedness. Women married to sojourning laborers were very unlikely to join their husbands in California. These laborers left their wives at home in China for various reasons, the most important of which related to Confucian notions of a daughter-in-law’s responsibilities to her husband’s family. Wives of laborers working in the United States preserved familial relationships back in China; she stayed behind to serve her in-laws and to fulfill filial duties to her husband’s family on his behalf. In addition, the vocations in which Chinese laborers engaged were mostly male occupations. Footbinding was still prevalent during this time in China, and women with bound feet were less able to help their husbands with manual labor. The costs of sustaining a family in the United States were prohibitive to a Chinese workman, and reports of anti-Chinese sentiment also deterred many who may have wanted to bring their families with them. These factors limited the number of Chinese women who came to America and prevented the formation of a stable Chinese community with a more balanced ratio of men and women. More significantly, they also limited the legal immigration of wives and focused attention on Chinese prostitutes.

The issue of Chinese labor became a controversial one, igniting debates about the nature of cheap Chinese labor and how Chinese immigration affected America. At first, Chinese immigrant workers were welcome in America; they were industrious and undemanding, filling menial jobs for low wages. While many Chinese men came in search of gold, many others were willing to labor as carpenters, cooks, laundry men, and servants. However, as mining yields slowed down, wages and employment levels began to fluctuate. Gold-seekers who had come hoping to make a vast fortune in the mines were bitterly disappointed when these dreams did not materialize. This resentment created much xenophobic feeling towards Chinese workers, a large and conspicuous body of foreigners in California. Anti-foreign voices started to declare that California’s resources belonged to Americans and not to outsiders. Along with the problem of Chinese competition for jobs and resources, many critics also cited the Chinese lack of virtue as a bad influence on Americans. These critics formed ideas about the Chinese nature partly through observations of the enslaved prostitution trade. The debates about Chinese immigration and
Chinese morality were active and controversial, as can be seen from exchanges between prominent San Francisco leaders such as California Attorney-General Frank. M. Pixley, Jesuit priest Father Buchard, Methodist preacher Otis Gibson, and H. C. Bennett.

The labor opposition to Chinese immigration evoked “us-versus-them” sentiments by stressing that Chinese workers displaced white workers. In February of 1873, the San Francisco Chronicle published the contents of a lecture that Pixley delivered to an enthusiastic audience, titled “Our Street Arabs: Who are Responsible for Them?” The primary assertion in Pixley’s speech was that large numbers of young men were understandably idle, or even criminal, because of the lack of employment, and that this “demoralization of our young people” was largely due to Chinese immigration. It is clear from his speech that cheap Chinese labor was to be feared because it took jobs away from “our” workers, namely, white men. Father Buchard also spoke out against Chinese immigration, in a lecture titled “Chinaman or White man, which?” Buchard argued that cheap labor was the product of despotic Chinese society and that the presence of Chinese immigrants in America would discourage the preferable immigration of enlightened Europeans.

Entwined with the labor debate was the belief in essential Chinese villainy, which focused on Chinese prostitution. Pixley referred to the existence of large numbers of Chinese prostitutes as a “fearfully demoralizing influence.” He focused on the issue of morality: he described the United States as having high virtue and ethics, a utopian state threatened by outsiders. His words also drew a clear demarcation between “us” and “them,” focusing on what Chinese immigration did to “our boys.” Although Pixley did not elaborate upon how Chinese prostitution was demoralizing, the issues of sex as a commodity, interracial relations, and venereal disease obviously come to mind. Clearly, prostitution was seen as a threat to the institution of family, and Chinese prostitution was more of an evil because of attitudes against interracial marriage and relations, as institutionalized in the California Civil Code in 1880.

On the other end of the debate, some contended that the Chinese community should not bear all the blame for Chinese prostitution. Otis Gibson, with support from a group of San Francisco Methodist preachers and the Six Chinese Companies, reacted to Buchard’s speech against Chinese immigration on March 14th, 1873. Gibson acknowledged and denounced the institution of Chinese slavery and prostitution, but did not place the responsibility of the sex trade entirely on the Chinese. Instead, he pointed to the “moral pestilence” that surrounded this vile trade. He suggested that “while pulling the mote from our neighbor’s eyes, let us extract the beams from our own eyes.” H. C. Bennett addressed the San Francisco Mechanics Institute in May of 1870, refuting charges made by Pixley against Chinese immigration. Bennett pointed out that white businessmen ran and benefited from the trade in Chinese women, making huge profits by buying and selling these slaves. White landlords also profited from Chinese prostitution by collecting exorbitant rents from Chinatown brothel owners, sometimes double or triple what they collected from white tenants. Bennett also portrayed the Chinese community as being sympathetic to this problem; he recounted the efforts of local businessmen to prevent the importation and kidnapping of Chinese women for American prostitution. Like Gibson, Bennett lays some responsibility for Chinese prostitution on the local and state governments, for allowing the landing of the women “against the will and wishes of the decent Chinese merchants.” However, Gibson’s and Bennett’s views of not condemning the entire Chinese race for Chinese prostitution were neither popular nor common.
While some attacked Chinese prostitution directly, others argued against Chinese immigration by describing the Chinese race as sexually depraved, in a way that was offensive to Victorian ideas of family, marriage, and sex. The underlying belief was that because Chinese practices were so unchristian and offensive, the Chinese presence would pollute the wholesome populace of America. John Swinton argued vehemently against Chinese immigration on the grounds of morality, citing the example of Californians who had for years been trying to prevent the influx of “ship-loads of lewd Chinese women” on American soil. He also described Chinese men as “incestuous Sodomites,” and pointed out the complete lack of virtue among the Chinese pagans.

Critics such as Swinton also cited biological reasons to argue the case of Chinese immorality. Evoking the Victorian belief that virtue was linked to physical health, Swinton contended that the most vile and disgusting diseases existed among the Chinese but not among Europeans because the Chinese were so evil. He believed that these diseases affected the corporeal and intellectual qualities of the Chinese, making them physically immoral on the level of their blood and cell organisms. It is hard to tell if Swinton’s argument had to do with venereal disease or with other diseases that were brought to America by Chinese immigrants. Certainly, Chinese prostitutes, particularly those at the bottom of the prostitution hierarchy who could not afford to turn customers away, succumbed easily to venereal disease and were then brought to die in so-called “hospitals” expressly for diseased prostitutes. The San Francisco Chronicle recounted how diseased prostitutes were brought to such a hospital at night and left alone with a small amount of food and water until they inevitably died of their illness, starvation, or suicide. According to this account, “Those who have immediate charge of the establishment....come for a corpse, and they never go away without it.” This account reinforced Swinton’s portrait of the Chinese as a callous and dirty race, even though an 1877 government study showed that sexually-transmitted diseases such as syphilis or gonorrhea were as prevalent among white prostitutes as they were among Chinese prostitutes, if not more.

The prostitution trade provided ammunition for critics using sexual perversion to support their assertions of an evil Chinese disposition. M. B. Starr’s 1873 book The Coming Struggle, or what the people on the Pacific Coast think of the Coolie invasion describes the Chinese as a race of Sodomites. He used the example of Chinese eunuchs and Chinese girls “designed” for prostitution as proof of the sexual depravity of a race who produced “a large number of beastly mutilated children of both sexes.” He depicted the traffic of Chinese women as a national system enforced by the Chinese government, transforming the United States of America into “one enormous brothel,” with numerous charnel houses staffed by “heathen courtesans that put the old Sodomites to blush.” Ultimately, Starr’s case was that these women were a moral threat to all decent people in America who had to set eyes upon them. He compared the sexual depravities of the Chinese to the Mormon practice of polygamy, and portrayed both groups as having the desire to subvert the sacred Christian institution of marriage.

Newspaper accounts of tong activities in San Francisco’s Chinatown, depicting the organized crime syndicate which controlled the Chinese prostitution trade, also reinforced notions of Chinese odiousness. These organizations made huge profits smuggling Chinese women into the country for prostitution; they managed brothels or collected tributes from brothel owners and prostitutes. The infamous Hip Yee Tong society is reputed to have started the traffic in Chinese women in 1852, and to have imported about six thousand women at a profit of $200,000 between 1852 and 1873. According to San Francisco newspapers, the tongs created
and implemented their own set of laws and punishments and were subversive to the local government and police. These reports portrayed the tong trade as a sign that the Chinese were such a barbarous race that they could not stand to live in a lawful manner, under the legitimate authority of a civilized nation. These news reports also portrayed tong activities as violent and arbitrary, likely to explode in frequent hatchet massacres on the streets of Chinatown. These fights were not seen as isolated incidents, but rather, as indicators of Chinese lawlessness. Also, these accounts portrayed tong men as being too shrewd and cunning for the San Francisco police, again, an indicator of the deceitful nature of the Chinese. In reality, corrupt policemen also profited from the trade in Chinese women; some law enforcement officers collected $10 for the sale of each woman from the Hip Yee Tong society.

Ironically, the restrictions on Chinese immigration designed to limit Chinese prostitution generated more opportunities for corruption and lawlessness, among the tongs as well as American police and government officers. Tong men would forge marriage certificates when bringing in Chinese women for prostitution. In 1873, a California law was passed in which the commissioner of immigration was responsible for determining if Chinese women applying to enter the United States were “lewd or debauched.” This law succeeded in making it more difficult for merchant wives to join their husbands in California and was easily abused by corrupt consular officials. Consul Bailey’s office in Hong Kong was reputed to have collected $10 to $15 for each woman shipped to the United States during his occupancy of this office.

In the rhetoric against Chinese immigration, there was a recurring use of sexual perversion to support the position that the Chinese were a nefarious race. Both Starr and Swinton referred to Chinese men as “sodomites.” It is possible that same-sex sexual relations occurred among Chinese men, in light of the facts that there were so few women in the Chinese communities relative to the number of men, most Chinese men were not allowed to bring their wives and families from China, and anti-miscegenation laws prohibited marriage between Chinese men and white women. Any type of non-heterosexual and non-procreative sex was seen as deviant by Victorians, and thus, this would have become another reason to think of the Chinese as intrinsically immoral. In contrast to the Victorian attitude towards non-procreative sex, Ming dynasty novels show that from the Chinese perspective, there was less stigma attached to men engaging in sexual relations with both women and men. In the Ming dynasty work of erotica, The Carnal Prayer Mat, the amorous scholar Vesperus engages in sex with his effeminate male servant when he cannot find a woman to satisfy his sexual needs.

There is great irony in these moral arguments against Chinese immigration, particularly in denouncing sodomy among Chinese men. Chinese men had few sexual outlets because of laws and attitudes that did not permit them to marry white women, and laws that did not permit working men to bring their wives from China to America. Chinese prostitution in San Francisco proliferated because of the great demand of these Chinese men, yet this created another indicator of Chinese wickedness. Another ironic point is the fact that the Chinese, like the Victorians, placed great emphasis on the institution of marriage. The Chinese believed that marriage was one of the three most significant events in one’s life (the others being birth and death), and that all men and women of marriageable age must marry and produce children to extend the family line. Thus, Chinese beliefs regarding family and marriage were very similar to Victorian views. Sadly, the great gender inequities, anti-Chinese legislation, and anti-miscegenation attitudes made it very difficult for Chinese men to marry and to have the kind of family life idealized in both Victorian and Chinese societies.
Those propagating the rhetoric of Chinese immorality ignored the fact that the institution of prostitution proliferated among other racial groups as well. The agricultural and mining industries, particularly in the Western settlements, drew large numbers of single male workers, which in turn, drew large numbers of prostitutes to serve their sexual needs. A nineteenth-century Western ballad depicts the relationship between mining and prostitution: “First came the miners to work in the mine / Then came the ladies who lived on the line.”\(^{35}\) The trade in women from China did not proliferate without the support of American clientele, businessmen, and government. Chinese prostitutes and the exotic opium-filled brothels in San Francisco drew non-Chinese clients as well as Chinese customers. In fact, Ivan Light’s comparative study into the Chinese and African-American vice industries estimates that white demand doubled the volume of prostitution in Chinatowns across America, and tripled it in Harlem and Bronzeville.\(^{36}\)

Even those who held benevolent attitudes towards Chinese women believed in the notion of inherent Chinese immorality. Donaldina Cameron (1868-1968), a moral crusader against Chinese prostitution, was one such example. One of many late-nineteenth century activist women who transcended the domestic sphere and engaged in “social housekeeping,” Cameron was a prominent figure in San Francisco public life. She served as director of the Presbyterian Mission Home for Women in San Francisco, a sanctuary and school for former prostitutes which came to be known as the Cameron House. Cameron rescued girls from “yellow slavery” and transformed them into good Christian women. While some biographers have painted her as a saintly and courageous rescuer who fought the forces of evil,\(^{37}\) others have questioned this legacy, suggesting that she held an attitude of paternalism and contempt towards the Chinese race. Cameron’s own writings about the women she rescued and her policies at the Cameron House illustrated her conviction that Chinese slavery and prostitution were inevitable, because the Chinese were Confucian rather than Christian.\(^{38}\) She believed that Chinese women desperately needed God to rescue them from the awful life that was the unavoidable fate of any Chinese woman.

**Footbinding in America: The Torturing of Children**

Yet another aspect of Chinese women immigrants that shocked the moral sensibilities of the non-Chinese population was that of footbinding. Footbinding was the practice by which women’s feet were made small by using a bandage to bend the toes under the sole of the foot, increasing the arch of the foot to an extreme so that the toes and heel were brought as close together as possible. The ideal foot was the *san ts’un chin lien*, the three-inch golden lotus.\(^{39}\) Mothers, grandmothers, and nannies, believing bones to be more malleable in childhood, applied this painful and crippling procedure to young girls. In Pang-Mei Natasha Chang’s biography of her grandaunt Chang Yu-I, she describes how at the age of three, Yu-I was given the rare treat of consuming an entire glutinous rice dumpling by herself. The sticky rice in the dumpling was believed to help soften the girl’s feet, in preparation for her initiation into the practice of footbinding. The next day, Yu-I shrieked in pain as her mother and nursemaid wrapped her feet tightly in wet bandages.\(^{40}\) The binding did not stop until her brother, disturbed by her cries of pain, declared that should Yu-I be unable to find a husband because of her large, unbound feet, he would support her for the rest of her life.\(^{41}\)

In America, the cruelty of footbinding became a focus for beliefs about the Chinese character. The rhetoric about footbinding, particularly with regard to the practice on small
children, showed the mutually suspicious and antagonistic relationship between American and Chinese communities. A *San Francisco Call* newspaper article, with the tone of exposing a great conspiracy, described a surprise raid on Chinese homes in an effort to find and rescue children who were being tortured and permanently crippled by having their feet bound. Members of the Eureka Society for the Protection of Children forced their way into Chinese homes seeking a good test case by which they could take the parents to court and have their parental rights removed. They found no children with signs of torture because, according to the article, the Chinese were too shrewd for the Americans. The “underground telegraph system in Chinatown” was too quick to spread the word of these raiders around the neighborhood. Yet another foil for those hoping to rescue children was the fact that “there were more runways and escape holes in the houses of that district than are used by rats.”  

Even though this particular raid was unsuccessful, in subsequent years, several cases of cruelty by Chinese parents for binding the feet of their daughters were brought before the courts. Yet, none of the little girls would testify to experiencing any pain. One journalist proposed that the girls denied the torture for fear of harsh punishment from their parents.

Missionary efforts to eliminate footbinding, in America as well as China, also played a part in the complex relationship between the Chinese and the non-Chinese. For the most part, missionaries seemed extremely exasperated at the stubborn insistence on the part of Chinese parents who refused to stop binding their daughters’ feet. Chinese parents believed that women with small feet would fetch a better price as a wife; they were seen as women of gentle birth, regardless of the family’s true social situation. The missionary interviewed by J. M. Scanland for his article about Chinatown’s reaction to the Empress Dowager’s ban on footbinding believed that the Chinese would never stop binding the feet of their daughters. She was quoted as saying that the Chinese only pretended to be loyal to the ruling government in China, but in truth, would ignore the edict because of their stubborn attachment to the practice. This article did not include any interviews with Chinese persons; instead, it mostly expressed the views of the unnamed missionary who, clearly, had been trying to purge the practice of footbinding.

Certain types of missionary efforts among Chinese people, such as stamping out footbinding, involved changing essential Chinese concepts of gender. Missionary efforts did not stop at evangelism and education; there is evidence that missionaries in China sought to change fundamental Chinese beliefs about how men and women should behave. For example, American missionaries promoted Western-style sports and physical education in their schools in China, with the goal of creating in their Chinese students a sense of “Christian manhood,” consisting of physical strength and moral discipline. This was difficult because the Chinese believed that physical exertion was only for menial laborers, and that boisterous behavior was unseemly for the elite and educated. While Chinese young men avoided any kind of exercise and had no interest in games like basketball, American missionaries tried to mold their Chinese male students in the image of idealized American boys, who were supposed to be energetic and athletic. This effort involved reconstructing Chinese conceptions of gender to reflect American standards. In the same way, anti-footbinding activists may not have grasped the extent to which the bound foot was a part of the Chinese paradigm of culture and femininity. Eradicating footbinding in China involved more than convincing Chinese parents that this was a harmful practice; missionaries had to change deeply-ingrained Chinese sentiments regarding the body, female beauty, and female virtue.
Footbinding intensified missionaries’ conviction that Chinese women “needed Christ.” Mission schools denied entry to any girls with bound feet, and taught their male students that they could help end the ancient custom of footbinding by being open to marrying women with natural feet. Yet, the practice continued in the rural areas of China, frustrating missionaries such as Bertha Magness, who complained in 1919 that “these freakish, foggish, old-time, undentable, un bendable Yuhsien women” simply refused to stop binding the feet of their daughters. At the root of this frustration was a lack of understanding of what the bound foot meant to the Chinese.

Those arguing against footbinding failed to understand the complex and protean meanings embodied by the bound foot. Around 1900, anti-footbinding activists, both Chinese and foreign, attacked footbinding as a practice that epitomized China’s internal weaknesses: a nation weakened by the fact that half of its population was voluntarily crippled. Julie Broadwin, a contemporary scholar of footbinding and its multiple meanings to women, argues that the political rhetoric espoused by the anti-footbinding campaign failed to address the way footbinding had become an essential aspect of a woman’s life. According to Broadwin, footbinding was seen by women in China as a sign of perseverance, beauty, civility, and productivity. All the rites of passage in a young Chinese girl’s life surrounded footbinding. When a girl’s feet were being bound, what she shared with her mother, instead of the sadism that was seen by the non-Chinese, was a relationship of empathy and endurance. Ning Lao T’ai-t’ai (Old Lady Ning), born in 1867, suffered so much pain when her feet were being bound that she crawled around on her hands and feet for two years. She recalls: “Sometimes at night they hurt so much I could not sleep. I stuck my feet under my mother and she lay on them so they hurt less and I could sleep.”

Another quote from Ning Lao T’ai-t’ai testifies to the virtues attributed to small feet: “Matchmakers were not asked ‘Is she beautiful?’ but ‘How small are her feet?’ A plain face is given by heaven but poorly bound feet are a sign of laziness.”

Qing dynasty (1644-1911) prohibitions against footbinding only served to illustrate the appeal of the bound foot. While China’s Manchu rulers tried to ban the practice, Manchurian court women sought to emulate the sexy, swaying gait of Chinese women’s tiny feet by inventing a form of high-heeled shoe. In 1903, the Empress Dowager Cixi declared a ban on the practice of footbinding. Yet, she herself wore shoes which fit her naturally-sized feet but were elevated from the ground by a tapered platform which supported the instep of her foot. These early platform shoes created for its wearers the semblance of instability and frailty believed to be so attractive in women with bound feet. In America, a San Francisco journalist reported on the local belief that the Empress Dowager banned footbinding because she herself had very large feet, and thus objected to the idea that only women with tiny feet were of good family.

Dorothy Ko, a modern scholar of footbinding, believes that “there is no neutral or objective knowledge about footbinding.” Certainly, footbinding in San Francisco was seen by the missionaries and the non-Chinese as yet another revelation into the base character of the Chinese race, a group of people so inhumane that they would maliciously torture their own children. There is no denying that footbinding was a painful and harmful practice, and indisputably misogynistic from a contemporary, Western perspective. Yet, the zeal and indignation of those who tried to halt the practice in the late 1800s clouded any knowledge or understanding of how deeply this thousand-year-old tradition had become a part of Chinese ideas of gender and feminine beauty.

Like the enslaved prostitutes, Chinese merchant wives with bound feet led very restricted lives, had little freedom, no choice of vocation, and were dependent on others for their physical
and emotional well-being. Judy Yung, who has done extensive research in the social history of early Chinese women immigrants, uses bound feet as a metaphor for the "bound lives" of these merchant wives. San Francisco newspapers did not have as much to stay about these women as they did about Chinese prostitutes, but when they wrote about the merchant wives, the articles were imbued with a sense of revulsion mixed with fascination: revulsion with the patriarchal aspects of Chinese marriages, fascination with the exotic tiny feet and the elaborately-embroidered shoes.

A newspaper article about Mrs. Sing, the wife of a wealthy businessman in Chinatown, illustrates two points: the merchant wife's circumscribed existence and the complex sentiments experienced by the Western observer of a Chinese woman. Mrs. Sing had the euphonious nickname "Lily of Gold" because her feet were no more than three inches long. The article reported that she was one of only six Chinese women in Chinatown with truly small feet, all of whom were "eagerly snatched up" as wives by wealthy and powerful members of the Chinese tongs. Mrs. Sing made and embroidered her own shoes, for "she has nothing else to do," reported her husband, who was so proud of his wife's small feet that he ordered her to pose for a photograph, ignoring her pleas that this might be deemed immodest. In contrast to Mrs. Sing's feet, her servant girl's feet were almost twice as large, despite the fact that the servant girl's feet were also bound as a child. Mr. Sing attributed this to the fact that the servant girl's family was of the "common people" and did not know the great family secrets of proper footbinding that had been passed down through generations in the elite Chinese families. The journalist depicted Mrs. Sing tottering precariously around the room, using a parasol to steady herself. When she left the house, she had a servant on each side to help support her. She also did not speak a single word of English and her story was told to the reporter entirely through the words of her husband, who happily reported that "some Chinese girls verra cute."

Clearly, Mrs. Sing's life was a juxtaposition of material leisure with physical and intellectual imprisonment. She was incapable of leaving her house without attendants, and like many other bound-feet women in America and China, spent most of her time indoors. Her husband ignored her desire not to pose for a photograph, the newspaper reported that he "condescends to argue with her" for a few minutes before simply ordering her to obey his wishes. Another merchant wife openly lamented her fate to a San Francisco Chronicle reporter, relating her fear of being sold "like a cow" if her husband tired of her, and being shut indoors all her life, in China as well as in America. She even professed her envy of working women with large feet who had physical freedom and the ability to earn money as seamstresses, laundry women, fisherwomen, or domestic servants.

Not all Chinese women who came to America in the late-nineteenth century had tightly-bound feet. Some Chinese women worked outside of the sex trade; they were numerous in comparison to the number of merchant wives. These working women were mostly married to men who performed physical labor, who did not value bound feet because of the nature of their work. During the years following the Gold Rush, many Chinese women married Chinese men in America whom they had never met. These women were known as "picture brides" because the marriage agreement was based on an exchange of photographs between the prospective bride and groom. In Beverly Jackson's collection of photographs related to footbinding, one such picture bride proudly displayed her large, unbound feet as a sign that she would be a competent worker to help her future husband.
Ultimately, Chinese wives who could be bought for a sum of money (the size of which depended on many factors including the size of their bound feet) were, like Chinese prostitutes and slave girls, the property of men; they knew few avenues of escape from the lives into which they were born or sold. If anything, it seems that the women who performed laborious tasks such as washing, sewing, or cooking had the most freedom and guarantee of happiness. Such a woman had not been brought up in a life of leisure, and probably had unbound or loosely-bound feet allowing her to move about more freely and to provide some living for herself should she be unmarried or widowed.

Conclusion

The issues of footbinding and enslaved prostitution in the late nineteenth-century overlapped in many ways. To borrow a term from Judy Yung, both practices reflected the “bound lives” of Chinese women. Both practices illustrated ideas regarding femininity and womanhood in Chinese society. Non-Chinese eyes perceived both practices as barbaric and indicative of a heathen population that needed Christianity. Also, Chinese footbinding and enslaved prostitution shared a sense of an exotic, Oriental eroticism that was so enticing, not just to Chinese men but to non-Chinese men as well.

The perceptions of Chinese immorality were based on one-dimensional judgments rather than a deeper understanding of the intricate issues underlying footbinding and Chinese prostitution. The thousand-year-old practice of footbinding was a complex, exclusively-female institution, having multiple meanings to Chinese women which involved virtues such as civility, perseverance, and feminine beauty. Footbinding embodied all the rites of passage of a girl’s life, and sometimes fostered a bond of empathy between mother and daughter. The Western perception of footbinding was also complex, basing itself on how different and strange Chinese practices were from the Western consciousness of the nineteenth century. At best, Westerners saw women with bound feet as fascinating but pitiable creatures living under a misogynistic Chinese patriarchy; at worst, they saw footbinding as a grotesque form of torture inflicted upon helpless children, poor souls who needed morally superior Christians to rescue them.

Footbinding apologists have frequently discussed the similarities between footbinding and corseting, or even the more modern practice of wearing high-heeled shoes. During the Victorian age, Westerners saw footbinding as an unnatural and crippling practice, but one might argue that wearing a corset, like binding the feet, also sought to change the natural shape of the woman’s body to reach some arbitrary physical ideal. Men as well as women idealized and coveted the three-inch golden lotus like they did the sixteen-inch waist; at the same time, these practices were both harmful and crippling to women’s health and matched a restricted lifestyle of languor rather than activity. Both practices were imbued with a sense of eroticism linked to bondage, and they symbolized an exclusive life of leisure. Finally, both practices embodied notions of fashion, conformity, and constructed ideals of feminine beauty.

In the climate of fervent anti-Chinese sentiment, prostitution became a moral issue rather than a social one. There can be no doubt that the sexual exploitation of Chinese women was deplorable, but nineteenth-century critics may have failed to recognize the social factors that led to the proliferation of prostitution, not just among the Chinese, but among other immigrant groups as well. Many women of other ethnicities also worked as prostitutes because of the dearth of viable jobs for women and the great gender imbalance in the population. Tong
activities and their involvement in the prostitution trade also led people to think of the Chinese population as violent, lawless, and unable to live under the principles of a civilized Christian society. Finally, Western interpretations of Chinese prostitution also reinforced a sense that Chinese women were defenseless victims while Chinese men were devious exploiters. While Victorian ideology defined a woman’s responsibilities as domestic in nature, which meant that it was important for women to look after their husbands and children, these beliefs did not extend to the Chinese population in San Francisco. The prohibition on the immigration of Chinese women reflected upon a double standard which did not value Chinese men’s needs to have a domestic life.

Thus, the two institutions of footbinding and prostitution exerted great influence on American views of Chinese womanhood. The non-Chinese populace saw Chinese women’s bodies as subjugated and mutilated. The belief was that Chinese men visited these bodily violations on the women’s bodies, while the women were powerless commodities and sexual objects. This led to the view that Chinese people were innately immoral, and that Chinese immigration would pollute America.

8 Ashbury, The Barbary Coast, 178.
9 Ibid.; Yung, Unbound Feet, 34.
10 Yung, Unbound Feet, 33.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Yung, Unbound Feet, 29.
20 H. C. Bennett, “Chinese Labor” (a lecture delivered before the San Francisco Mechanics Institute, San Francisco, California, May 1870).
22 Ibid.
26 M. B. Starr, The Coming Struggle, or what the people on the Pacific Coast think of the Coolie invasion (San Francisco: Bacon, 1873) 22, 23, 31.
31 Alta California (December 14, 1869).
32 Statues of California and Amendments, 1873-74 (Sacramento: State Office, 1875)
41 Ibid., 23.
42 “Torturing Helpless Children,” San Francisco Call, July 18, 1897.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 31.
47 Ibid., 38.
48 Bertha Magness Papers, May 2, 1919, record group Ax846, University of Oregon Special Collections, Eugene, as quoted in Gael Graham, “Exercising Control,” 39.
51 Ibid.
56 Yung, Unbound Feet, 24.
57 “Smallest Feet in America,” San Francisco Call, March 20, 1898.
Ibid.
60 Jackson, Splendid Slippers, 169.