From Tradition to Modernity: Footbinding and Its End (1839-1911) – the History of the Anti-Footbinding Movement and the Histories of Bound-feet Women in China

Author(s): Saman Rejali


Published by: The Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga

Stable URL: http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/prandium/editor/submission/21844/
From Tradition to Modernity: Footbinding and Its End (1839-1911) – the History of the Anti-Footbinding Movement and the Histories of Bound-feet Women in China

Saman Rejali

The historiography of footbinding in China is a dichotomy of ‘gigantic’ histories of anti-foot-binding campaigns and policies, accompanied by male narratives, which overshadow the ‘contained’ histories of the foot-bound women themselves whose voices have been marginalized in the history of modern China. This paper will analyze the major factors that contributed to the demise of footbinding from 1860 to 1911, but contrary to the dominant historiography, will consider the point of view of these silenced Chinese women. Specifically, this paper argues that the enforcement of ‘natural feet’ upon foot-bound Chinese women, did not arise through their own choice, but rather was a result of intervention by ‘reformist’ Chinese men, a minority of educated ‘modern’ Chinese women, as well as western missionaries, who through the anti-foot-binding movement and a culture of shame robbed these women of the liberty to choose to transition from tradition to ‘modernity.’

In the process of giving voice to these marginalized histories of foot-bound women, this analysis of the factors that led to the demise of footbinding first seeks to answer the central question: what is footbinding? There is no one single meaning for footbinding since both the technique and meaning of the practice changed over centuries, but two central points persist across the practice’s history: footbinding was at no point in China’s history practiced amongst all women

1 Saman Rejali is a graduate of the University of Toronto. She completed her undergraduate degree with a specialization in political science and a minor in history. She’s passionate about social justice and human rights—particularly as they pertain to women in developing countries—and plans to pursue a graduate degree in development studies where she can explore the intersection between public policy and postcolonial feminism.


3 Dorothy Ko, "Footbinding and Anti-Footbinding in China: The Subject of Pain in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism, ed. Steven Pierce and Anupama Rao. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 218, 235. As Ko points out there were two strands of women in China during the second half of the nineteenth century: the educated women who acted as political actors in public arenas, organized anti-footbinding efforts, and made speeches in school assemblies, and other Chinese women who had no political agency, did not attend schools, and whose speeches were “out of sync with modern language.” For the purposes of this essay, male reformers and educated females will both be categorized as Ko suggests, under the “male category since they “assumed a male subject opposition.”
of China, and footbinding was an exclusively female practice amongst females that was not directly enforced by Chinese men. 

The footbinding process, or the forming of the ‘Lotus Foot,’ was achieved by binding the feet of girls, usually aged three to seven years old, by drawing their toes back toward the heel, and maintaining the bound feet through constant care and binding. Due to both class and ethnicity, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, footbinding was not a prevalent practice amongst many women in the Chinese empire. Footbinding originally emerged from the imperial place of the Song dynasty (960-1279), where the bound feet and “sensual grace” of palace dancers fascinated court circles and inspired a symbolic appreciation of small feet. The practice of footbinding extended primarily to the elite upper classes, but by the nineteenth century, footbinding had also risen in popularity amongst the middle and lower classes — particularly after 1847 when the Manchu Qing dynasty passed an edict against the practice. Ethnicity also influenced the proliferation of the practice. While footbinding was common amongst the Han Chinese from the Han Dynasty (140 BCE-220 BCE), it was not practiced amongst the ethnic minority of Manchus from the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). During the nineteenth-century, the practice increased amongst the non-Han minority along the southwestern border of China, but it was still by no means practiced amongst all Chinese women.

Historians have many diverse and sometimes contradictory theories on why footbinding was started and maintained as a cultural practice. Howard Levy, who wrote the most ‘comprehensive’ English work on footbinding in 1966, Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom, writes that footbinding originated in appreciation of the small foot, but was maintained by male erotic interest which created a ‘feminine mystique’ that was practiced by women to please men. On the other hand, putting forth a diverging premise for the cultural maintenance of footbinding Thorstein Veblen argues that woman’s footbinding was maintained as a display of her family’s wealth. Over time, footbinding in China became a symbolic status of wealth: the higher a woman's social status, the smaller the foot. Rather than laboring away these ‘upper-class’ feet-bound women were viewed as being of a higher calibre due to foot-binding’s symbolic representation of the female as concomitantly “sexual and maternal.”

8 Ko, Every Step, 12.
11 Mackie, 1000.
12 Blake, 678.
Footbinding was thus simultaneously representative of a ‘higher’ level of sexual experience for men due to the ‘feminine mystique’ that the small bound feet created. Accordingly, as Gerry Mackie points out, many mothers bound their daughters’ feet to secure a proper marriage for their offspring. Sigmund Freud asserted that footbinding as a female foot mutilation, appeased male castration anxieties. In a different interpretation, Patricia Ebrey argues that footbinding arose as a way of ethically differentiating the Chinese from ‘barbarians’ such as the Mongols. Together, these varied interpretations for the persistence of footbinding in China offer a multifaceted historical analysis of a prevalent cultural practice.

Even though most of these Histories fail to give voice to the perceptions of feet-bound women themselves, works by historians such as Susan Greenhalgh and Mary Daly all together falter in the historical perspectives they offer in respect to the practice of footbinding in China. Daly adopts the perspective of Christian missionaries by arguing that footbinding was an indication of a flawed national character tied to the patriarchal Chinese family within which footbinding was a criterion for “marriageability.” Greenhalgh echoes these sentiments by calling footbinding an example of female victimhood, “in the grip of patriarchy.” Within this historiography, written by Americans and Europeans who imposed moral perceptions onto Chinese culture, the voices of the concerned subjects—namely, foot-bound women—are missing. Thus, this is an incomplete history of footbinding.

The marginalized history of foot-bound Chinese women reveals that footbinding was a cultural practice that was voluntarily passed between generations of mothers and daughters. As Dorothy Ko writes, from the thirteenth to the nineteenth-century footbinding was, for those who practiced the art, the "single most important experience in a woman's life." Chinese women bound their feet in adherence to the neo-Confucian family system. It was a practice that mothers passed on to their daughters, which reinforced the necessity of women sacrificing their bodies and comfort to maintain this family system and uphold culture and tradition.

The symbolic and emotional bond that footbinding created between females, especially mothers and daughters, meant that the practice was upheld by foot-bound women despite the anti-footbinding movement. For a daughter, footbinding was symbolic of the “lived memory of her mother.” Furthermore, it was seen as a testament to a mother’s love and a daughter’s virtue. The process of footbinding required maintenance, and consequently ‘women’s quarters’ where women gathered to care for their feet. A woman’s bound feet were thus also an extension of a woman’s place in the female network, and were linked with many other rituals.

---

13 Mackie, 1001.
14 Ibid.
16 Butler, 59; Mackie, 1001.
17 Mackie, 1002; Sieber, 142.
18 Blake, 676; Mackie, 1002.
20 Blake, 676.
21 Ibid.; Sieber, 143.
22 Blake, 676.
including gift giving of bound-feet accessories and shoes. Consequently, footbinding was transmitted by women from its inception, and defended by foot-bound women during its demise.

While footbinding was a female activity transmitted amongst Chinese women, it was interrupted and eventually terminated as a practice because of direct intervention by reform-minded Chinese men, and western missionaries and colonialists in China. The anti-footbinding movement originated from the end of the Second Opium War in 1860, and was rooted in the colonial conditions that China was subjected to by western powers during the second half of the nineteenth-century.

By 1860, China was humiliated on the global stage after its military defeats in both Opium wars. China’s concessions of the Second Opium War to the Empire of France, and de facto the British Empire as well, included the opening up of five new treaty ports and allowing more foreign commerce, as well as free access to missionaries to move inland into China’s interior regions. These conditions consequently increased the exposure of Chinese men to western ideas and perspectives. As well, China was exposed to western inventions such as the printing press, through which the nation was faced with a stark reality: China was no longer the centre; it was necessary to identify China’s socio-political status in relation to countries that had previously been outside of the empire’s periphery.

As Hershatter points out, nineteenth-century missionaries and westerners in China concentrated two particular issues concerning women: abolishing footbinding and educating Chinese girls. In 1875, Reverend MacGowan of the London Missionary Society founded the first anti-footbinding association, the Heavenly Foot Society, in the southern treaty port of Amoy (Xiamen). MacGowan, who coined the term Tianzu—“natural feet” or “heavenly feet” was one of the first to contribute to the anti-footbinding modernist reform literature that suppressed the perspective of foot-bound Chinese women.

Nineteenth-century western imperialists and missionaries, men and women alike, regarded footbinding as an “iconic touchstone of patriarchal violence against women.” At first sight, footbinding was seen and judged by these western gazes as “senseless, grotesque, and barbaric.” These foreigners ranked other nations and cultures according to how they treated

---

23 Sieber, 143.
24 Mackie, 1000.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 219.
32 Ko, “Footbinding,” 225.
33 Sieber, 142.
34 Ibid.
women. The idea of a “universal human body” was synonymous with a western body that adhered to western practices. This is witnessed in works such as the 1878 “Discourse on Quitting Footbinding” by the prominent Chinese pastor Reverend Ye, in which the Reverend labeled China as “uniquely barbaric.” He noted: “looking around the world today, no women other than those in China bind their feet. This shows that when God made men, there was no divergence in the shape of male and female feet.” Such western-centric views on the cultural inferiority of the practice of footbinding, as put forth by influential figures such as Reverend Ye, thus by-and-large shaped a skewed view of China and its History.

As a result of such publications, the practice of footbinding gained global exposure in the latter half of the nineteenth-century; yet this exposure was seen only through the lens of western cultural superiority. Like Reverend Ye, other missionaries condemned footbinding as a barbaric act unique to the Chinese. Western writings on Chinese women criticized many other Chinese customs besides footbinding including: the finances surrounding marriage; the seclusion of females in women’s quarters; the lack of opportunities for women’s education; child rearing practices; and sexual segregation in activities such as eating meals. These negative representations of Chinese culture enabled colonialists to exert power over that culture.

This culture of “shaming” by western colonialists and footbinding’s global visibility put Chinese men in a position to either accept this negative gaze and be ashamed, or reject it by refusing to adopt the gaze of the “advanced West.” Male Chinese reformers accepted this culture of shaming, and consequently treated footbinding as the cause of China’s weaknesses and shortcomings compared to the West. They sought to reform China’s ‘backward’ traditions, such as footbinding, by adopting a western view in their perception of Chinese cultural and traditions. In 1883 eight years after the founding of the first anti-footbinding association, reformist Kang Youwei (1858-1927) in an attempt to emulate western reform movements, helped found the Do Not Bind Feet Society. The Society was part of this national self-strengthening movement by reform-minded Chinese male intellectuals. As Gail Hershatter points out, Chinese reformers positioned footbinding as the ‘other’ of modernity. Reformers saw the end of footbinding as the path for China to reach parity with modern Europe and America.

35 Ibid., 143.
37 Ko, “Footbinding,” 220.
38 Patricia Ebrey, “Gender and Sinology: Shifting Western Interpretations of Footbinding, 1300-1890,” Late Imperial China 20.2 (1999): 6, 9; Mackie, 1001; Ko, “Footbinding,” 218. Condemnation of footbinding by Western colonialists was present even prior to the second half of the nineteenth century in works such as The Chinese (1836) by John Francis Davis (1795-1890). With regard to footbinding, Davis writes: “[the Chinese] have departed from the standard of nature, and sought distinction even in deformity.”
39 Hunter, 22.
41 Hershatter, 37.
42 Hunter, 24.
43 Ko, Revisionist, 18.
After China’s defeat in the Japan war in 1895, the reformers’ interest in modernizing China by creating a strong, and healthy nation intensified. In that same year, the national Natural Foot Society was founded by Western women in Shanghai, aimed at the non-Christian elite of China. Anti-footbinding associations such as the Natural Foot Society and the myriad of other associations run by Chinese reformers brought forth the demise of footbinding by propagandizing the disadvantages of footbinding in Chinese cultural terms; making its members pledge not to bind their daughter’s feet or let their sons marry women with bound feet; and most effectively, conveying the international disapproval of the practice. The Natural Foot Society also used the new technology of photography to disrupt the perception of bound feet as culturally significant and sexually erotic. Exposés in form of posters with photographs, such as the widely distributed “A New Way to See Through Bones,” sought to convey the suffering and deformation that was caused by the practice.

The decade of the 1890s marked a shift in the expected role of women. As Chinese reformist men began to prioritize socio-political and economic growth as defined by western ‘modernism,’ there was a general ethos across the country that the progress of Chinese society was dependent upon the working bodies of both men and women. Thus, women were pushed to become formally educated and work, rather than stay indoors with bound feet. As Dorothy Ko explains, anti-footbinding reformists introduced a “view of the body as machine.” The body functioned most productively if each citizen, including every woman, could use every part of their body and maintain optimal health for the benefit of the Chinese nation. This view of an optimally productive body increased the support for and virility of the anti-footbinding movement during the decade. It was at this time that footbinding diminished in its prevalence and schools for girls were established so future generations of Chinese women could contribute to the Chinese nation.

In 1896, Liang Qichao (1873-1929), one of China’s most famous public intellectuals and reformers, wrote “On Women’s Education.” The foot-bound traditional Chinese women were portrayed as useless “parasites, beasts, and slaves.” Because of his immense influence on Chinese society at the time through the printing press, Qichao in great part contributed to suppression, silence, and for the most part, eradication of the voices and histories of feet-bound Chinese women from Chinese history. Dismissing these females’ traditional learning and domestic labour, he put forth what Ko aptly describes as an “insulting and erroneous image of women.” On the subject of how productive and efficient Chinese women were, Qichao 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.” As a result of Qichao’s

44 Hershatter, 37; Hunter, 24.
45 Mackie, 1001.
46 Ibid.
48 Hershatter, 37.
49 Ko, Revisionist, 5.
50 Hunter, 24.
51 Ko, Revisionist, 21.
52 Ko, Cinderella’s Sisters, 21.
writings, large numbers of readers were motivated to join the reformists’ cause and collectively support and contribute to the anti-footbinding movement as part of a national agenda to have a more productive, competitive, and modern Chinese nation.  

One year after Qichao’s publication the Anti-footbinding Society was founded in Shanghai; it had more than 300,000 members. However, after the Hundred Day’s Reform, the repression of 1898 terminated the efforts of reformists such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao to modernize and strengthen China based on the western model. Nevertheless, after the Boxer Rebellion of 1902, the Qing court itself took steps to include the reformist plans that it had previously dismissed in order to strengthen the Chinese empire. Amongst these reform plans was the anti-footbinding movement, which the Qing court also passed edicts to support.

In 1903, the male scholar-reformer Jin Yi published “The Women’s Tocsin (Nujie Zhong)” as the “first systematic manifesto of women’s liberation in China.” In this piece, footbinding was labeled as the first of four “cardinal harms” on women of “Old China,” alongside ornamentation, superstition, and cloistering. Alongside this logic echoed in previous reform efforts and by Jin Yi, bound-feet women were symbolic of everything “New China” was not supposed to be.

During the decades following the turn of the century, Chinese reformers such Ye adopted Social Darwinism as an ideology. Influenced by this conception of the world, Jin Yi wrote: “if we want to avoid the perils of distinction, we must begin with liberating feet.” Throughout the campaigns of the 1890s and 1900s, male reformers like Jin Yi adopted the colonial mindset of westerns and came to equate the “necessary condition” for the “liberation” of their women from traditional practices such as footbinding as a “necessary condition” of their own liberation.

By 1908, the majority Chinese public opinion was against footbinding. While the Qing Empire finally met its downfall by 1911, the ban against footbinding carried onto the 1912 Nationalist Revolution. Footbinding started to terminate as a cultural practice at a rapid pace from the Boxer Rebellion (1900) until the collapse of the Qing dynasty (1911). Even though the end of footbinding was by no means homogenous across China, as Mackie points out, “whenever footbinding did end, it ended rapidly.” Dorothy Ko argues that footbinding came to end

---

54 Mackie, 1001.
55 Hunter, 24. Both Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were exiled after the repression of 1898.
57 Ibid., 216.
58 Ibid., 217.
59 Ibid., 216.
60 Ibid., 216.
61 Mackie, 1001.
63 Mackie, 1001.
64 The ‘end’ of footbinding was not homogenous, because as Dorothy Ko points out, women continued to practice footbinding in some interior regions of China into the 1930s and as late as the 1950s. See Ko, “Footbinding,” 217,
because of two dominant factors: when the individual lives of feet-bound women came to an end, and when footbinding lost its cultural prestige. However, as has been surmised, for the most part this ‘progressive’ movement of Chinese History was not taken and initiated by the feet-bound Chinese women, but rather by ‘reformist’ Chinese men, a minority of educated ‘modern’ Chinese women, and western missionaries as well.

Interestingly, foot-bound women were the strongest proponents of the practice in the face of the anti-footbinding movement. As Patricia Angela Sieber notes, from the perspective of these silenced Chinese women, footbinding was a “symbolic iconography of domesticity rather than [of] the deformed who hid themselves from government inspection and who reapplied binders as inspectors left.” Why did the women who were being ‘liberated’ resist these policies for liberation? Because the anti-footbinding movement was not a movement for the ‘liberation’ of feet-bound women as missionaries and reformers claimed, but was rather a product of “colonial conditions of global unevenness.”

The presence of Western missionaries and colonialists in China led to an anti-footbinding movement, which gained exposure on a global scale. Male reformers, who were already shamed by China’s military defeats, were further shamed by westerners who through anti-footbinding tactics brought forth a colonial perspective of ‘acceptable’ cultural practices, which these Chinese reformers accepted. As Kenneth Butler notes “exploitation” occurs when an individual or group with power utilizes that power to his or her own advantage, at the expense of another individual or group without it. A review of the anti-footbinding historiography and feet-bound Chinese women’s histories reveals two acts of exploitation. The first was the colonialist imposition of morality upon the Chinese reformers and the second was the enforcement of anti-footbinding measures through imperial decrees, missionaries, and reform movements. Through the termination of practices such as footbinding, the Chinese nation did make the transition from tradition to modernity, but the end of footbinding was by no means achieved in the interest of foot-bound women whose voices and wants have since been marginalized in Chinese history.

---

and Revisionist 11. On the speed at which footbinding declined, Mackie notes that in conservative, rural Tinghsien, 99% of women had bound feet in 1889, 94% in 1899, and 0% in 1919 (1001).
65 Ko, Revisionist, 14.
66 Butler, 60; Mackie, 1000.
67 Sieber, 143. Such resistance against the Natural Foot Campaign of the government towards rural China was evident in the Shanxi province. There both village women and families resisted the imposition of ‘natural feet.’ See Hershatter, 37 and Ko, Revisionist, 11.
68 Ko, “Footbinding” 235.
70 Butler, 61.
71 Ko, Revisionist, 13; Hunter 22.