THE CHANGING OTHER:

FOOTBINDING, CHINA, AND THE WEST, 1300-1911

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Abbreviations

Primary sources of John MacGowan and Mrs Archibald Little are cited in this dissertation using the following abbreviations:

Works by Mrs Archibald Little

IC  Intimate China: The Chinese as I Have Seen Them

LBG  The Land of the Blue Gown

RMPG  Round about My Peking Garden

Works by John MacGowan

HESC  How England Saved China

MMMC  Men and Manners of Modern China
Summary

During centuries of interaction between China and the West (Europe and America), footbinding, for its uniqueness and otherness, had always served as the perpetual symbol of China in Western imagination and narration of the land and its people. This thesis describes the shifting circumstances through which Westerners attempted at first to justify and then to eradicate the practice of footbinding. With a focus on the nineteenth century, this thesis covers a historical span of five centuries, from the fourteenth century, when the first Westerner, the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone, wrote about footbinding, to 1911 when the practice was officially outlawed by the Republic of China. It argues that Western interpretations of footbinding roughly corresponded to Western images of China. During the period when China was the more powerful party in interactions with Western nations, Western descriptions of footbinding tended to be positive, as one of many admirable elements of Chinese civilisation. During the nineteenth century, when the power relations were reversed, dominant Western interpretations of footbinding were negative, as one of many barbaric customs that marked China as a backward nation. Therefore, missionaries and other groups of Westerners initiated campaigns to eradicate footbinding. Seeing their nation through Western eyes, Chinese elites joined anti-footbinding movements in the hopes both of modernising the nation and of saving China’s international face.

The sources used in this thesis consist of Western travel accounts and missionary reports, and Chinese journals and newspapers published from the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries. The first chapter examines representative Western travel writings of footbinding from the 1300s to the 1900s, during which the meaning of footbinding changed dramatically, from the positive one in earlier centuries to a vastly negative one in the nineteenth century. Essentially, what these travellers made of footbinding is
consistent with the shifting relationships between China and the West. The second chapter focuses on Western discourses of footbinding produced by nineteenth-century missionaries and feminists who resided in China. In light of the idea that posited that nonconformity with Western ways and values meant backwardness, China’s difference – embodied in the bound foot – was used to justify a sense of superiority and subjectivity in saving Chinese women. Missionaries initiated anti-footbinding campaigns, which reached their peak when Mrs Archibald Little, a non-missionary and feminist, established the Natural Feet Society in 1895. Although Westerners were not necessarily the decisive force in the eradication of footbinding, they exerted an indispensable influence on the Chinese, especially the elites; and, more importantly, they popularised a cause whose time had come. China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 heavily struck the Chinese, and roused their awareness of a national crisis. The enlightened Chinese woke up to the call of Western anti-footbinders. They appropriated footbinding as the scapegoat for China’s weakness, and brought the anti-footbinding movement to the service of nationalism, with the ultimate purpose of preventing China from being colonised by the West. Therefore, the Chinese anti-footbinding discourse I review in the last chapter presents the responses of the Chinese “Other” to the gaze of the West.
Introduction

A woman with a pair of bound feet has been a horrible image for the West, but bound feet were once admired in China as a “golden lotus,” a marker of beauty and gentility. The practice of footbinding that created such an image of horror and beauty has lasted for over a thousand years in China. Throughout the centuries, enlightened and liberal thinkers often criticised footbinding, and actions were taken by Chinese rulers in various dynasties to abolish this practice, which turned out to be in vain. It was between the late nineteenth century – when Western missionaries took the initiative in the anti-footbinding movement – and the early twentieth century – when some radical Chinese reformers and revolutionaries integrated the abolition movement with other emancipation reforms for the Chinese woman – that footbinding was outlawed and gradually eradicated. Even though its origins remain a myth, footbinding, be it in China or in the West, has always been an object of praise and criticism, of admiration and condemnation, of elegance and barbarism.

My thesis focuses on Western representations of footbinding in travel accounts, journals, official reports and other sources from 1300-1911, with an emphasis on the period between 1840 and 1911, when relations between China and the West underwent a sea change. With a study of the rise and fall of footbinding, I will argue that how writers interpreted footbinding is actually a product of a series of historical and social changes within the West and in China, and of the power relations between these two regions. In spite of the numerous writings about footbinding, the custom itself, or the distorted women’s bodies, was neither the prime concern of, nor culturally significant to, the Westerners nor the Chinese. Instead, the circumcised feet

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1 In this thesis, “the West” refers to Europe and America, and “Western” means Euro-American.
served as the quintessential symbol of otherness through which the West could express its praise and criticism of the Chinese Other, be it an admirable one, or a contemptible one, which had served as a contrastive image of the West itself. Chinese interpretations of footbinding as a barbaric and shameful practice, particularly from the late nineteenth century, were an echo of the Western gaze at the Chinese Other. They also reflected the self-adjustment China made during its interactions with the West, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My aim here is to open up and extend the perspective of analysing the interpretations of footbinding, both in China and in the West, by considering its relationship with other social and cultural changes such as the orientalism, imperialism, colonialism, feminism, and nationalism of the period.

In both China and the West, quests for footbinding’s origins have never stopped. However, its origin remains a myth. Footbinding has caused much comment in Western writings about China since the first mention of it by the friar Odoric of Pordenone (d. 1331) in the 1300s. In centuries following Odoric’s arrival, particularly from the second half of the nineteenth century, more and more Westerners stepped foot on Chinese land. Among these were merchants, diplomats, and missionaries. During centuries of interactions with the Chinese people, these Westerners had also witnessed or participated in the historical and social changes in the country, and produced a large number of comprehensive literary materials about this country, including its history, politics, geography, arts, sciences, literature, religion, laws,

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customs, and the social and moral condition of the people. The accounts and comments on footbinding in these writings are the materials of my thesis. The literature that they produced is substantial, but I will focus on those sources which are more readily available – works that have appeared in print and mainly in English. Some of the materials are the first-hand experiences of writers who held high positions in organisations or who could claim expertise on the footbinding such as diplomats or missionaries; some are travellers who took account of everything they saw or experienced, or even took on the tinge of their own imagination or affections. In many cases, the print sources that are being drawn upon are the personal narratives of missionaries, but there are sources published in other forms and for other purposes. The various contexts in which the narratives were published, either as an article in a mission periodical, a book of memoir by a mission press, or a travelogue for popular consumption, alter the kind of foreign observers’ impression of footbinding.

As a heated topic within China and outside, various minds have applied themselves to the interpretation of footbinding. Perhaps the most powerful and influential is Freud’s psychological-sexual explanation which regarded footbinding as fetishism (1963). This idea has been supported by Julia Kristeva in About Chinese Women (1991: 81-85) and Howard Levy in Chinese Footbinding: The History of A Curious Erotic Custom (1966). Similarly, Jackson Beverley (1997) dubbed footbinding an “erotic tradition,” which was contested by Hill Gates (2008) who found little evidence for its sexiness (58-70). In addition to the psychological interpretation of footbinding, another popular explanation is the attachment to gentility. The sociologist Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class (1925) attributed the idea of footbinding to so-called “conspicuous consumption,” which demanded that the figure of women of the leisure class be hazardously delicate and slender, with “diminutive hands and feet and
a slender waist” (148). He argued that one of the rationales behind footbinding was to
demonstrate the “pecuniary reputability” and “pecuniary strength” of the male owner
by showing that he could afford the idleness of his woman, who was “useless,
expensive, and must be supported in idleness” (148-149). Veblen’s theory sounds
reasonable only in relation to the early history of footbinding, when it was a privilege
of the leisure class. However, when the practice was widely adopted by peasant
women in the Qing dynasty, it became a cult that was no longer a privilege of the
upper class and no longer served solely as a mark of gentility.

One theory for the flourishing of footbinding among commoners was the
“marrying-up” thesis (Ko 2005, 3; Greenhalgh 1977, 9). Many girls believed that it
was not a beautiful face but a pair of bound feet that was the essential criterion to
catch their prospective husbands. Thus, bound feet were translated into a
marriageable sign and became the ticket for many girls and families to the brighter
future. However, surveys by Bossen, Wang, Brown, and Gates (2011) have contested
the “marrying-up” theory,” as they proposed that footbinding in rural area was not just
a symbol of beauty, but also an integral part of economic system, dependent on
women’s intensive domestic handwork such as spinning yarn, processing tea and
chucking oysters, which required females to sit for hours (439). The illuminating
theories of Freud, Levy, Veblen, Bossen and Wang explain some, but not all, of the
reasons behind the spread and endurance of this practice. Fetishism is an
interpretation of some Chinese men’s sexual fantasies of small-footed women

3 As a lady in Shangdong recalled, “Match-makers 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.” See Ida Pruitt, A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 1967) 22.
4 They did surveys of rural bound-foot women in two counties in Shaanxi province. They found that only a small proportion of bound-foot women married someone of a higher class. About fifty percent married the same class and some ended up in a lower one. For details, see Bossen, Laurel, et al. “Feet and Fabrication; Footbinding and Early Twentieth-Century Rural Women's Labor in Shaanxi.” Modern China 37.4 (2011): 347-383.
depicted in erotic paintings or literary works. Hill, Gates, Laurel and Bossen’s “mystification of female labor” theory has explanatory power mainly for the modern period, when footbinding was widely carried out by peasant women.

As Dorothy Ko (1997) has pointed out, footbinding is an ongoing and enduring process that cannot be assumed as a uniform and timeless practice motivated by a single cause. It is “not one monolithic, unchanging experience that all unfortunate women in each succeeding dynasty went through”, but is “an amorphous practice that meant different things to different people”; in other words, a “situated practice” (15). In another essay, Ko (2002) explores the dialectics of body and text in the male-centred Confucian discourse before the nineteenth century, and analyses the aesthetics of fashion and ornamentation. The basic tenet of her essay is that “any effort in making sense of footbinding has to begin with an appreciation of the enormous power of writing and the written world in the production and maintenance of Confucian traditions” (177). Contradictory to the prevalent view that regarded footbinding as a barbaric practice, Ko explains it as a form of the female expression of *wen* (civility and gentility) in the Confucian cultural world (149-150). Ko (1994) argues that footbinding reinforced the spatial organisation that embodied the separate domains of the inner/outer and male/female, and restructured the woman’s body itself (147). The female-exclusive rituals of footbinding, including the materials needed and the specifically selected date of binding with a prayer to the gods, served as an effective tool of socialisation. It also helped define the mother-daughter relationship, as well as the girl’s interaction with other women (149-150). In other words, the practice was internalised within the private space barred to men, and was thus an essential feature of femininity. These help valorise women’s cooperation in the practice of footbinding, and therefore help explain the perpetuation and spread of the custom.
Most authors on footbinding referred to Chinese sources to interpret the practice and mainly concentrated on the earlier periods before the twentieth century, since the meaning of footbinding shifted from the mid-nineteenth century. This is despite the fact that the credibility of Western sources is questioned, for example by Ko (1997) who argues that the Westerners’ accounts of footbinding “cannot be accepted at face value” because they were written “either in a scientific tone of objective observation or as an impassioned plea for abolition” (9). I agree that some Western observers, especially travellers, may not be professionally trained or may be unreliable witness. Some of them took down what they heard without judging its accuracy; some generalised what they saw in a certain parts of China to cover the whole country; and some expressed a sense of superiority, interpreting the practice without probing into the cultural meanings behind it. From this point of view, Western sources are not objective, but most writers have a certain bias, especially those who went to China with an explicit purpose like merchants, diplomats, and missionaries. However, Western sources still contain more valuable information about other aspects related to footbinding than about the practice itself, such as inconsistent Western attitudes, a changing Western society, and the shifting power relations between China and the West. Their subjective and even prejudiced opinions of footbinding are determined by and also a reflection of the times, which were also in a changing state. Therefore, judging whether the accounts or opinions are accurate or seeking truth is not as challenging or meaningful as analysing factors that have attributed to those opinions. It is, therefore, valuable to analyse Western interpretations of footbinding, not only to decode cultural meanings embodied in this traditional custom, but also to enrich our understanding of the changing China and the West, and the shifting relationships between these two regions within the period examined. They are consequently an
important area of study.

The title of this thesis is intended to foreground the importance of the changing historical and social context in assessing the interpretations of footbinding in China and the West over centuries. “Changing” is the key word, both in terms of footbinding as a cultural practice itself and the centuries’ interactions between these two regions. The early history of Western interpretations of footbinding before the nineteenth century reveals a long-standing Western desire and fantasy for the Chinese Other. The relentless quest for the origins of this custom, and the generally positive attitude toward it, were projections of such a desire and fantasy of Chinese culture during this period. With the opening of China from the 1840s, the myth that had covered footbinding as well as China was gradually removed. What was exposed was a practice and a country that was vastly different from what was previously imagined or seen by the West. Responses in both China and the West to such a change forged a shifted image of footbinding, which in return projected the observer’s own historical moment and context.

This thesis is divided into three sections. In the first chapter,5 I examine selected Western interpretations of footbinding from the 1300s-1900s. These interpretations were produced by Westerners who went, or imagined their journeys to China in the same period. I will argue that footbinding was taken by most of these writers as an allegory of China, or rather, the otherness of China, and its meaning changed with the altering Western image of China, both of which were products of the shifting relationships between China and the West.

While the first chapter covers the whole period from the first mention of footbinding in the West in the 1300s to its heyday, and until 1911 when it was.

5 Part of this chapter was presented as a paper entitled “Changing Self and Other: Shifting Western Interpretations of Footbinding, 1300-1900,” in the Twelfth Humanities Graduate Research Conference, Curtin University, Australia, 19-20 October 2011.
officially outlawed in China, the second chapter focuses only on the final part of the period from the 1840s when the meaning of footbinding was rapidly shifting to the negative. In the light of a nineteenth-century prevailing Western idea positing that change meant progress, China’s restrictive trade policies and stagnant social norms appeared artificially confining and retrograde. Western responses to China were reflected in their denunciation of footbinding. Many attacked footbinding for its mutilation of women’s bodies, and as a backward and barbaric practice, but their attitude was formed within the context of Western superiority and of a prejudiced denunciation of other aspects of Chinese civilisation. The missionaries whose writings I take up in this chapter commented fervently on footbinding, which set the prevailing tone for the interpretation of footbinding since the 1840s. Their predominant outlook in this period displayed a thoroughgoing defiance of this practice. Missionaries took the initiative in the anti-footbinding movement in China by establishing anti-footbinding societies and mission schools. In condemnations of footbinding, they conveyed to the Chinese the Christian ideology of body, and the new notions of ideal womanhood. As a complementary force for Western participation in eradicating footbinding, Mrs Archibald Little, a non-missionary, played an indispensable role. The values she advocated in her anti-footbinding society epitomised what was upheld about the New Woman, a feminist ideal emerging in England in the late nineteenth century.

Together, a mixture of missionaries and non-missionaries built a nationwide movement for change to eradicate the hard-dying practice of footbinding. While it

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6 Missionaries were not unanimously active against footbinding. Some societies, particularly the London Missionary Society, was more inclined to describe and act against this practice. However, owing to the limitation of my knowledge of the history of missionary societies in China, I do not, in this thesis, clearly differentiate different sects of missionaries, or explain the historical reasons why a certain group was more active than others in crusading against footbinding during the late nineteenth century. This is an issue that I intend to explore in my further study of this topic.
was Westerners who initiated the anti-footbinding movement, and they were instrumental in the early period of the movement in terms of popularising anti-footbinding ideas, from 1890s onwards, however, the leadership passed to the local “modernised” Chinese. Therefore, the last chapter concentrates on the Chinese appropriation of the Western discourse on footbinding as a response to the West’s gaze at the Chinese Other. This chapter specifically deals with Chinese actions in the anti-footbinding movement from the 1890s to 1911, from perspectives of nationalism and feminism. Based on the analysis of the perspectives of both male and female Chinese, I will argue that although they protested against footbinding from different standpoints, they fell into the Western way of thinking of it as an allegory of the nation itself, and took advantage of the anti-footbinding agitation to realise their purposes of national reform or revolution. Finally, with the joint forces of campaigning outsiders and modernising insiders, footbinding as the otherness of China, as well as the Chinese Other itself, changed.
CHAPTER ONE

The Changing Other: Shifting Western Interpretations of Footbinding

Ever since the first century A.D., when contacts between China and the West began through the Eurasian land routes known as the Silk Road, the two opposite sides of the same landmass envisioned each other as strange places with strange people and cultures. From the sixteenth century, after the discovery of sea routes to ports in Asia, Western traders and missionaries began over two hundred years of interaction with China. During centuries of contact between these two regions, China in the West’s narration was intentionally described as peculiar and odd; in effect, the Other. Many Western authors deliberately stressed those qualities that made China different, and relegated it to an irretrievable state of otherness. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, thousands of Westerners ventured to China. These travellers, who were often officials, missionaries, or merchants, usually began their journeys with support from a nation or an empire of military or economic strength, or with intellectual and spiritual faith. Most of them felt compelled and obliged to note down observations for their particular audience: generally their fellow-countrymen, colleagues, patrons or monarch. Aware of their audience, they consciously selected certain pieces of information in which this audience might be interested, or stressed aspects of a country or characteristics of its people that would resonate with the perceptions of their own cultures. Thus, from the very start, footbinding, as a unique characteristic of China and its people, came to be viewed by many Western travellers as a symbol and validation of Western beliefs regarding Chinese myth. Therefore, from the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone – the very first Westerner to write about footbinding in the

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7 For a discussion on European travel writers’ awareness of the readership, see Rana Kabbani, Europe’s Myths of Orient (London: Macmillan, 1896) 1.
fourteenth century – to missionaries, diplomats, and merchants in the early twentieth century, Western travellers to China never failed to notice and comment on the small feet of Chinese women. So what captured these Westerners’ enduring interest in the feet of exotic women? What symbolic meanings did the small feet entail throughout the centuries’ interactions between China and the West?

The focus of this chapter is on the discourse of footbinding produced by Western travellers during interactions with their Chinese counterpart between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries. I will argue that the Western interpretation changes according to the period in which the author writes, and is influenced by the culture and knowledge in which s/he grows and is schooled. As such, the shifting interpretations reveal the changing historical and cultural backgrounds in general, particular the shifting power relationships between China and the West.

1.1. The Beautiful Other: Footbinding as Uniqueness

Although the present public image of footbinding is negative, owing to the great damage it did to women’s bodies, footbinding has not always been seen as backward or inferior in Western narrations. From the start, when the first Westerners who journeyed to China mentioned footbinding, it glittered in positive light. Early Western travellers deemed it a sign of China’s uniqueness and a symbol of the Chinese taste of beauty. The friar Odoric of Pordenone, who arrived in China in 1322, was the first Westerner to refer to footbinding as a parallel to the male custom of growing long fingernails, both of which were markers of gentility. Although the authenticity of Odoric’s various descriptions and accounts of China has frequently been questioned,

since he usually accepted at face value stories told by others, modern scholars accept them as essentially reliable (Yule 2: 23-25). Ever since then, footbinding became a topic so popular that few Western writers on China failed to mention it, and travellers to China expected to see it.

The sixteenth century was an age of relatively benign and limited relations between China and the West, when tales of the admirable Cathay told by Marco Polo were still vivid in Westerners’ minds. Most Western travellers who wrote about China during this period tended to regard footbinding as an admirable sign of China’s civility to secure female chastity. Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza (c. 1540-1617), the author of the first Western history of China, in his book *Historia de las cosas mas notables de la China* (1588) offered a comprehensive descriptive and geographical survey of China’s history and culture. The largely positive coverage of China in the book set the tone for Western descriptions of China in the next century. He used the word “ingenious” in describing the practice of footbinding:

> Amongst them they account it for gentilitie and a gallant thing to have little feet, and therefore from their youth they do swadell and binde them verie straight, and do suffer it with patience: for that she who hath the least feete is accounted the gallantest dame…the lameness of their feete is a great helpe ther-unto. The women as well as the men be ingenious. (21)

Here, Mendoza commented on the symbolic meaning of little feet as a mark of gentility and gallantry, which he believed was the connoted reason for women’s willingness to suffer the pain with patience from childhood. By calling footbinding “ingenious,” Mendoza’s tone was ethnographic and impartial, which neither explicitly nor implicitly approved the practice. However, he did set a relatively gentle and positive tone of interpreting footbinding for his successors. At roughly the same time,
the Portuguese Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz (c. 1520-1570) expressed a similar idea when commenting on Chinese women’s appearance:

The women commonly, excepting those of the sea coast and of the mountains, are very white and gentlewomen, some having their noses and eyes well proportioned. From their childhood they squeeze their feet in cloths, so that they may remain small, and they do it because the Chinese do hold them for finer gentlewomen that have small noses and feet. This withal is the custom among the well-bred people, and not among the basest.10

Here, in Chinese women (the Other, “them”), described as “white” as a marker of superiority, and “gentlewomen,” this friar actually saw images of the ideal women in his own country (Self, us): fine-skinned and gentle. Surely, daintiness and whiteness were also prized by the Chinese themselves, which was evident in portraits of upper-class Chinese women, with a special emphasis on the whiteness of the face. In this sense, like small noses and white skin, a pair of small feet was a distinction between the “well-bred” and the “basest.”

Footbinding, according to Mendoza, was not only a marker of gentility, but was also designed by men to keep women at home and, hence, to safeguard feminine chastity. He stated that “the men hath induced them unto this custom,” and because of “the lameness of their feet,” women could not “go but little abroad.” Thus, footbinding was “invented only for the same intent” (32). The later travellers of the seventeenth century – for example, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (d. 1610), the French historian Michael Baudier (c. 1589-1645), and the Spanish friar Domingo Fernandez Navarrete (c.1610-1689) – all contributed to Mendoza’s interpretation of footbinding as a Chinese invention to keep women virtuously at home. They thought

this invention was a strong point of China and was advisable for other countries to adopt. In the eighteenth century, this instrumentalist view of footbinding was even developed into a design with political purposes.

There were two major factors accounting for the positive image of footbinding in the West before the nineteenth century. First, although footbinding was widespread in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), it was still exclusively practiced by upper-class women. Thus, small feet were indeed a mark of gentility, as only the rich could afford the idleness of women. Besides, naked feet were considered by the Chinese at that time to be relatively private, and it was offensive and almost impossible for men (except the woman’s husband or family) to look at them. Therefore, this invisibility eroticised the bound feet and intensified their mystery, which was consistent with the Western image of China that was as mysterious and as erotic. Second, the positive Western attitude toward footbinding was also in keeping with the benign relationship between China and the West during each of these centuries. The period before the first half of the eighteenth century could be condensed into “sinomania” in the West, which was at its height from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. The general tone of writings on China during this period – for example, Marco Polo, Matteo Ricci, and others – was rosy, positive, and admiring, seeing China as “Cathay,” or the “Central Kingdom,” representing a serious, if not necessarily superior, alternative to the West. Therefore, different as it might be, footbinding, like China itself, was viewed as the Other that was positive, admirable, and beautiful.

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12 For example, both Du Halde and Abbe Grosier believed footbinding was a “political design” or “political expedient” to keep women in the permanent state of dependence by confining them within the most inward part of the house, preventing women from participating in political activities or asking about political issues. See J. B. Du Halde, The General History of China, 4 vols. (London: J. Watts, 1736) 2: 139; Jean Baptiste Grosier, A General Description of China, 2 vols. (London: Printed for G. G. J. And J. Robinson, 1788) 2: 300.
1.2. The Double-faced Other: Footbinding in the Nineteenth-century Encounter

Ania Loomba (1998) has reminded us that the images of the Orient as a timeless opposition of the West, or as the Other, had circulated for a long time before colonialism. Images of the Other were “moulded” and “remoulded” through various contacts between Western and non-Western peoples (58). Late nineteenth-century travellers to China were still heirs of earlier traditions of representations of the country and its people. They expected to encounter, and seldom failed to mention, the differences they observed. John Scarth (1860), a Briton who spent twelve years in China, recalled that on his first arrival in China in the 1840s, he was struck and amused by the “contrariety of the native modes of doing anything,” and soon he made out a long list of the “opposites” of the Chinese manner and character to those of the British. Right after this comment, he concluded that “the Chinese character is the exact opposite to that of Europeans generally” (95). More than a half-century later, when the American traveller William Jennings Bryan (1907) arrived in China in the early twentieth century, he still cherished the image of China as the Other and could not help delineating the great difference between the “Flowery Kingdom” and the United States. As he put it, even though China and America shared the same stars overhead and abided by the same laws of nature, “in modes of living appearance, customs and habits of thought the Chinese people could scarcely be more different from ours” (101). To a certain extent, travellers who journeyed to China in the nineteenth century continued to contribute to the image of China as the Other, whether the image was the same as or different from their ancestors’. On the one hand, they arrived in China expecting to see and therefore instinctively attracted to issues that had been mentioned and had captured audiences’ interest in their home countries, such as little feet and long nails. Naturally, there was a continuum in terms of topics
raised by newcomers. On the other hand, these new arrivals were more likely to seek differences in the same issue, trying to add values and credibility to their own travelling by pointing out errors in their ancestors’ writings. In other words, these encounters necessitated both the continuity and affirmation of the previous images of some cultural practices, when the images were just what they expected, and a reconstruction of them, if different to the previous ones.

Footbinding, as a perfect symbol of China’s difference to the West and a long-lasting topic in Western writings about the Chinese Other, appeared as catchy to Western travellers in the nineteenth century as it did to those in previous centuries, and they never failed to note it down in their observations of this practice in the new era. Taking with them some previous interpretations of footbinding in the print of their ancestors, there was, to a certain extent, some consistency in what they made of footbinding in this later period.

John Francis Davis (1795-1890), a British diplomat who was chosen to accompany Lord Amherst on his embassy to Peking in 1816, and who was governor of Hong Kong from 1844 to 1848, inherited his predecessors’ views of footbinding. Davis (1840) commented on the custom as “the most unaccountable species of taste … for which the Chinese are so remarkable.” He deemed:

As it would seem next to impossible to refer to any notions of physical beauty, however arbitrary, such shocking mutilation as that produced by the cramping of the foot in early childhood, [footbinding] may partly be ascribed to the principle which dictates the fashion of long nails. The idea conveyed by these is exemption from labour, and as the small feet make cripples of the women, it is fair to conclude that the idea of gentility which they convey arises from a similar association. That appearance of helplessness which is induced by the
mutilation they admire extremely … and the tottering gait of the poor 
women … they compare to the waving of a willow agitated by the breeze … 
[With] this odious custom … the women are fully revenged in the diminution 
of their charms and domestic usefulness.(1: 255-256)

Here, in attempting to explain footbinding, Davis paralleled it with long nails, a 
feature that was familiar to Western readers as a symbol of gentility, since it was 
ubiquitous in previous descriptions of Chinese characteristics. He attributed 
footbinding to the idea of “exemption from labour” or “gentility,” but his comments – 
such as “it would seem” and “may partly be” – indicate that Davis was uncertain 
about the exact reason why footbinding was practiced. As with many other travellers, 
he followed his predecessors’ description of the custom. Be that as it may, compared 
with the word choice of his ancestors in commenting on footbinding – for example, 
Mendoza’s “ingenious” – Davis used the words “mutilation,” “odious,” and 
“diminution of charms.” Not only did these words reflect Davis’s disgust toward 
footbinding and sympathy to “the poor women,” but they also indicated at least a 
changed tone in describing this custom.

Similarly, Justus Doolittle (1824-1880), who sailed to China in 1849, believed that 
footbinding was “fashionable”, and small feet, considered by the Chinese as 
“beautiful” and “good-looking”, were an “index of gentility” (2:201). William C. 
Milne (1785-1822), the second Protestant missionary to China, introduced 
footbinding when describing his life in China. Although he described the bound feet 
as “the cramped foot,” like Davis, who called the practice “artificial deformity” 
(Davis 1: 255), he acknowledged that “the bandaged feet of Chinese ladies”, 
complimented as “golden lilies”, was “an essential among the elements of feminine 
beauty” (Milne 12). Like Milne, Thomas Thornville Cooper (1839-1878), who
journeyed along the Yangtze River into the Western part of China, in his travelogue published in 1871, expressed his understanding of the reasons for footbinding:

It is very strange that Queen Fashion should, even amongst the practical Chinese, reign supreme, in defiance of comfort. The Chinese, however, claim a show of reason for the deformity, which, they say, prevents the women gadding about, and jeopardising the honour of their husbands, while it adds to that helpless dependence on man which, even to our European ideas, adds so much to the natural charms of woman. Chinese poets liken the helpless, tottering gait of the small-footed woman to the graceful waving to and fro of the lily … It is a fashion that exists everywhere as a mark of respectability. (47)

Cooper shared certain similarities with his peer travellers such as Davis, Doolittle and Milne in contributing to their ancestors’ perception of footbinding as an emblem of respectability. At the same time, he and his peers believed that the practice of footbinding originated in “the caprice of fashion” (Cooper 48; Davis 1: 255; Doolittle 2: 201). Implicit in Cooper’s description is the notion of feminine charm – chastity, helplessness, and dependence – that was shared by men both in China and in Europe. It is fair to conclude that women’s role as subordinates of men was still strongly held in male Europeans’ mind when Cooper was writing, at least before the late nineteenth century when few female foreigners visited China.

It is clear that Western travellers to China in the nineteenth century inherited certain positive attitudes towards characteristics of Chinese culture such as footbinding. However, a sea change took place in the nineteenth century, in both China and the West. The Chinese empire was declining rapidly from the late years of Qianlong’s reign throughout the whole nineteenth century, while the West, especially Britain, had been rising since the Industrial Revolution from the eighteenth century
and expanding its imperial world simultaneously. Meanwhile, the relationship between China and the West, especially with Britain, entered a more confrontational phase. Fuelled by European colonial expansion, and with Europeans’ increasing investment in the Far East, the West was eager to seek trading privileges in the world’s biggest market, China. However, China’s unwillingness to be involved in direct trade with the West, and the Chinese emperor’s perceived impoliteness to Western ambassadors sent to China – such as Lord George Macartney (1737 – 1806) in the late eighteenth century – led to hostilities between China and the West, and contributed to negative perceptions of China. China’s defeat by Britain in the first Opium War (1839-1842) greatly enhanced the confidence of the West. Increasingly, Western merchants, missionaries, politicians and travellers all viewed China and Chinese culture very differently, with images of China shifting away from the positive and towards the negative (Mackerras 39). The admirable Chinese Other gradually disappeared. Instead, the Chinese Other became “the degenerate Empire” that had been dying of old age and senile decay swung to a standstill, to a state of arrested existence and degradation (Scidmore 1). The image of the Chinese Other changed, and concomitantly, Western perceptions of elements of Chinese culture, such as footbinding, began to alter, even though these changes did not take place overnight.

1.3. The Ugly Other: Footbinding as Backwardness

Actual encounters in the nineteenth century, especially after the first Opium War, shattered as well as affirmed some of the previous images of China. Travellers such as Robert Fortune (1812-1880), who went to China following the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, found that the accounts of China written by the previous Western authors were in many cases “grossly exaggerated”: 
Shut out from the country, and having no means of getting information on which we could depend, it is not to be wondered at if the works in our language were more remarkable for the exhibition of the imaginative power of their authors, than for facts concerning China and the Chinese. We were in the position of little children who gaze with admiration and wonder at a penny peep-show in a fair or market-place at home. We looked with magnifying eyes on everything Chinese; and fancied, for the time at least, that what we saw was certainly real. (ix)

Here Fortune explains that the positive image of China in previous centuries was partly owing to Westerners’ difficulty in accessing to China. It was hard for readers back at home to discern whether the information on China, whether it was in pictures or words, was based on authors’ imaginations or reality. The inaccessibility of China and the invisibility of some Chinese cultural practices situated Western travellers in a child’s position, from which they admired and fancied everything Chinese. That again might have contributed to the rosy image of footbinding in Western writings of earlier centuries. Therefore, Fortune reached the conclusion that the colouring of Western writers on China and the Chinese “gave them too much [credit] than they really deserved.”

However, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, especially after the agreements of the Treaty of Tientsin (Tianjin) in 1858 and later the 1860 Convention of Peking (Beijing), which opened eleven more treaty ports and sanctioned missionaries to travel throughout China’s interior, “the curtain which had been drawn around the celestial country for ages” (Fortune x) was rent apart. A more accessible and exposed China, under Western eyes that were magnified during this period, was

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no longer “an enchanted fairy-land,” but was “just like other countries” (Fortune x). Gradually, Westerners who came to China in the footsteps of colonial expansion, just as Fortune did, broke the image of China and the Chinese that had been defined by their ancestors, and reshaped it with their own observations. As these travellers extended their trips across China, they found that the meanings of footbinding were inconsistent with what had been described in previous Westerners’ accounts of the custom.

Milne pointed out the error of believing that footbinding was universal in China, since there was a large minority of females – such as the Manchu women in the north, the Hakka in the south, and the labouring women in Canton (Guangdong) – with undistorted feet (9). He stated that footbinding, no longer a privilege exclusively belonging to the upper class, had spread down to the lower class, and it was so prevalent that

[t]he streets and houses, in every town accessible to foreigners, abundantly testify how this fashion is mimicked by all classes. … In gangs of female beggars which have passed me in the streets of some of their cities, I have seen those whose bodies were covered with rags and vermin, but whose feet were bound as tightly and squeezed to as minute dimensions as you might witness in any wealthy family. (10)

Describing female beggars with small feet whom he saw in the streets, Milne tried to reverse the established idea of viewing footbinding as a privilege only affordable to people of the wealthier class, which he believed was a “mistake” in what he had seen in print. He also pointed out that it was “an error to say that the cramped foot is universal in China,” since “there is a large and respectable minority of females in China with undistorted feet” (10). Therefore, Milne broke the image of footbinding
which he inherited from earlier travellers, and reshaped it with his own observations.

Like Milne, John MacGowan of the London Mission Society also described the prevalence of footbinding by the time he reached China in the 1860s. Using poetic language, MacGowan personified the spread of footbinding all over the country, which

stole its silent way through the city gates of the capital towards the north, and invaded the homes of the wider and more uncultivated of the outlying populations there, and stopped not until the Great Wall frowned down upon it and stayed its onward progress.

Towards the south, it “overleaped great rivers and climbed the loftiest mountains and descended upon the plains and valleys beyond”. It even penetrated into “the wild and uncivilized tribes that lay beyond the frontiers of the Empire” (HESC 19-20). There is some exaggeration in MacGowan’s narration of the spread of footbinding, since this practice had never been adopted by all Chinese, but his observations at least provided us with a vivid image of the ubiquity of footbinding by the time he arrived China.

Adele M. Fielde (1839-1916) was the first female missionary to write about footbinding in detail. She devoted a whole chapter to footbinding in Pagoda Shadows (1887). Based on her own experiences in China, she corrected the prevalent idea of footbinding in the West as markers of Chinese gentility and wealth:

Foot-binding is not so much a matter of class as of locality. Near the coast, even in the farmsteads and among the most indigent, every woman has bound feet. It is not a voucher for respectability, for the vilest are often bound-footed. Neither is it a sign of wealth, for in those places where the custom prevails, the poorest follow it, inferior wives, unless they come as bond-maids into the household, are usually bound-footed women. Taking all China together,
probably nine-tenths of the women have bound feet. (31)

Echoing Milne’s argument of footbinding as not a privilege of the rich, Fielde affirmed that footbinding as a cult had extended to the poor. Like Milne, Fielde also corrected the long-established Western perception of footbinding as a universal practice in China. Instead of generalising its spread in China, she narrowed it down to specific places she visited, and contended that footbinding was a matter more of “locality.” Once again, Fielde’s observations, be they confirming or breaking the established image of footbinding, reverted back to the accessibility of China and its culture as a result of its forced opening to the outside since the mid-nineteenth century.

Apart from the above changes, the meaning of footbinding also underwent a shift from the relatively positive one in previous centuries. As a symbol of beauty, marker of gentility, and an ingenious creation, the uniqueness of footbinding as an embodiment of the exotic Other gradually vanished. Instead, as the perpetual Other in Western eyes, it became a sign of savagery and barbarism, but in a completely negative way. The practice was “unquestionably most barbarous, absurd, and injurious to the development of the physical strength” (Huc 2: 405); it was one of the “greatest curses in China” (Little, *IC* 143), and was “utterly opposed to the natural instincts of mankind” (Smith 261). Fielde was typically condemnatory as she assaulted footbinding as an “evil,” not only because of the great damage it was believed to have done to women’s bodies, but also because it was the source of various social problems. The multitudes, as she thought, already poverty-stricken, were rendered more miserable as nearly half the population was crippled by footbinding. She also believed that it confined women, physically and mentally: “It incapacitates woman for travelling, and keeps her and her thoughts in the narrowest of spheres.” The physical injury, moreover, handicapped women in playing their roles in the family, since
footbinding “disables women from supporting themselves and from caring for their children ... renders women too weak to keep their houses clean, and makes their homes filthy and cheerless,” and it was even regarded as “one of the causes of the great prevalence of infanticide” (31).

Writers such as Fielde, who stressed the negative aspects of footbinding, sound ethnocentric as they employ Western values and perspectives in an attempt to explain and interpret this Chinese custom. The existence of footbinding for over a thousand of years provided Westerners with proof that Chinese society was stagnant, which was a popular image of China in the West, where the optimism about change as an implication of progress was characteristic of nineteenth-century Europe (Mackerras 40). The overwhelming success of Western powers in military battles with China from the first Opium War onwards also added to many Western travellers’ sense of confidence and superiority. For instance, the interpretation of a British military man, Captain Henry Knollys, on the second Opium War, which he declared might be “the most successful and the best carried out of England’s little wars,” displayed such confidence, arrogance, and superiority. He was very proud of the accomplishments of the war, believing it “struck a salutary blow at the pride of China,” and successfully convinced China that she was “no match for the peoples of Europe” (MacNair 325).

Sustained by the military triumph, some travellers displayed a sense of cultural superiority. For example, a merchant’s wife Alicia Bewicke, known as Mrs Archibald Little, thought and felt the Chinese were at least five centuries behind the West (RMPG 39), and Mary Gaunt, the Australian traveller who arrived in China in 1913, placed China beyond the Middle Ages all the way back to the ancient world (383).

Indicative of the attitude of Western travellers toward China was what they made of footbinding. As the quintessential symbol of China itself, in the eyes of these
Western writers, hobbling Chinese women with bound feet, signified the situation of the female’s bandage and suppression in an unchangeable patriarchal society. This was unacceptable to Westerners who upheld the Christian doctrine of equality between the two sexes, and was especially despised by those women travellers who were so proud of the freedom they enjoyed travelling around. Chinese women were demeaned and were not seen from an equal position to those in the West, but were visualised hierarchically. Believing in the superiority of their own culture, some Western travellers involuntarily placed themselves at a higher position on the scale of civilisation and achievement, and considered Chinese woman as pitiable. The accounts of M. Huc (1855) on the status of women in China were relatively typical and representative of other Western travellers at that time:

The condition of the Chinese woman was most pitiable; suffering, privation, contempt, all kinds of misery and degradation, seize on her in the cradle, and accompany her pitilessly to the tomb. Her very birth is commonly regarded as a humiliation and a disgrace to the family ... If she be not immediately suffocated ... she is regarded and treated as a creature radically despicable, and scarcely belonging to the human race. (2: 248)

Huc reveals a certain degree of truth in terms of a different treatment from men that women received at birth, since most families valued sons over daughters. He describes the condition of Chinese women as lamentable, but this sympathy also delivers condescension and prejudice, since the situation of women in the West was not necessarily better at that time. Likewise, Fortune attacked China for its treatment of its women: “The females here, like those of most half civilized or barbarous nations are kept in the background, and are not considered as equality with their husbands” (319). Similarly, Mary Porter Gamewell told a conference of women
missionaries in 1899: “The Christian world recognizes woman as a responsible personality, as a power in the intellectual, moral and spiritual worlds … The Chinese idea of women is the negative of all this” (132-133). Here, Gamewell articulated the role of woman as an able, strong, and upright figure that was not only domesticated, but also shared responsibility for society, which was the ideals of womanhood in late Victorian Britain. Like Gamewell, many Western travellers, especially missionaries, found the Chinese woman’s situation unacceptable and crowned their efforts to elevate their status by becoming actively engaged on their behalf, assuming that women with bound feet were what Gayatri Spivak called “the subaltern,” who were so seriously victimised and suppressed that they “cannot speak” for themselves.\footnote{For a detailed discussion on this topic, see her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in The post-colonial studies reader, ed. Bill Ashcroft, \textit{et al.} 2nd ed (Oxford: Routledge, 2006) 28-37.} The small zone of the body of Chinese women became an enabling and metaphorical space for female subjectivity of these Western women. Their interest in this foreign culture was in tandem with a series of feminist movements in Britain in the nineteenth century. There were several waves of feminist agitation from the 1840s to the late nineteenth century, when the question of women’s moral mission within the domestic sphere towards a political mission in the feminine public sphere began to be aired, and significant reforms followed (Midgley 40). By 1900, many British feminists articulated feminine identity beyond the traditional notion of domestic reproduction, extending to the missionary notion of soul making and savings in other parts of the Empire (Chrisman 45). This is going to be a topic for the next chapter.

As a symbol of inferiority, nothing could match the image that footbinding gave China as cruel and backward. Lacking understanding of the crucial role footbinding played in Chinese family and society, or rather, utterly unwilling to understand it, some Western writers displayed an air of superiority in their comments on footbinding.
Constance Gordon Cumming (1837-1924), for example, called the tradition “torture” and a “horrible distortion” (1: 168). This might be a result of her unawareness of the role a pair of bound feet had played for a long time in its history as a ticket to a good marriage for some families. The parents, especially the mother, felt obligated to bind the feet of their daughters when they were still toddlers. The daughter, in order to secure a good marriage for her future, or more likely daring not to disobey her parents, considering her age, was usually willing to suffer from the pain of binding. Thus, the binding conveyed many messages: the display of feminine ideals of beauty and virtue, parents’ responsibility for their daughters’ marriages, and the daughter’s filial piety. Cumming, like many other Western travellers, often failed to understand these connotations of footbinding. Following her claim that footbinding was a form of torture and distortion, she described an instance where a woman’s gangrenous feet, which had to be amputated, would soon be replaced by “American feet, which will be far more serviceable than the tottering ‘lily feet’” (1: 167), through the “skill and tenderness of European and American trained nurses and doctors” (1: 169). Here, the Western nurses and doctors were portrayed as magicians and technicians who skilfully replaced the diseased feet with healthy ones. At the same time, the body had lost all its connotations of goodness and beauty, or evilness and ugliness, serving merely a utilitarian function, a purely Western idea.

Not only were Westerners imagining their empire hierarchically by placing themselves at the top of the scale of civilisation and seeing their “oriental” colonies beneath them as inferior,\(^\text{16}\) but they also had constructed a nature-culture divide and cast themselves as the embodiment of the natural good. The cult of “nature” prevailed in Western society in the nineteenth century, and they began to condemn and fight

against what they considered unnatural. John Francis Davis compared people of different cultures who sought distinctions in deformity, which departed from the standard of nature. While the Chinese “crushes the feet of its children,” another race – the Mayan – “flattens their heads between two boards”; while “we,” Europeans, “admire the natural whiteness of the teeth”, people in Malaya “dye them black” (Davis 253). In Davis’s comparison of modes of different cultural forms, there was often the distinction between Self (we, us) and Others (they, them), and “we” were always the standard of nature. With the same standard, John MacGowan criticised footbinding as “more cruel and more relentless than any that ever afflicted womankind in any country or in any age of the world” (HESC 15). It was a “caste that bound the Empire of China, imperious, cruel, savage in its demands, and impervious to the deepest instincts of the human heart” (HESC 32). Gradually, the rhetoric of footbinding removed this practice from the realm of the mysterious and the exotic. Instead, the small feet of Chinese women, together with China, were placed and exposed under the magnifying eyes of Westerners. In maiming the natural body, footbinding became the perfect sign of barbarism and unveiled the inner truth of China’s cruelty and decay to their Western audiences back at home.

The image of footbinding as a cruel and barbaric torture to women’s bodies was also related to its visibility in the nineteenth century. With them, Westerners brought photographic technology and later the X-ray for medical purposes. For example, photographer John Thomson (1837-1921) paid a woman in Xiamen to unwrap the binders for a photograph,¹⁷ and some medical missionaries X-rayed the feet to cure certain diseases related to footbinding. The publication of these images in Europe and America exposed to the public the inner truth of the deformed feet that were

disgusting and horrible. At the same time, the images destroyed the myth that had been concealed under bandages for centuries. Therefore, footbinding, serving in the West an essential allegory of China, adjusted itself, becoming an indicator of the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of China, which was declining, backward, and barbaric.

It is noteworthy that not all nineteenth-century Western travellers harshly attacked footbinding, even though the general tone of the Western interpretation was negative. There were some individuals who took a neutral stance on this issue. Based on the common understanding of women’s willingness to sacrifice at the altar of beauty, they compared footbinding with waist binding, both of which they thought were dictated by fashion. For example, Huc thought footbinding decreed by fashion was irresistible to people who were under its dictates, and reminded readers that the Europeans “have no right to be so severe upon the Chinese” (405). Believing that fashion was unpredictable and changeable, Huc even allowed for the possibility that Chinese and European women imitated each other and adopted both fashions immediately. In his mind, for the sake of beauty, women would not be afraid to disfigure themselves. Similarly, Doolittle seemed empathetic, as he predicted that, while Chinese women were pitied by Westerners for being so devoted to the cruel and useless fashion of footbinding, Chinese women, at the same time, might be confused why their foreign sisters had their waists so tightly laced (203). The neutral stance of these writers could be understood as their strategy, through which they avoided moral judgment by translating “otherness” (a tradition that was foreign, i.e. footbinding) into “sameness” (something that was identifiable, and familiar to the self, i.e. waist-binding). ¹⁸ Surely, there was an idea that women should no longer sacrifice themselves in this way to

¹⁸ Julia Kuehn, “Encounters with Otherness: Female Travelers in China, 1990-1920,” A Century of Travelers in China: Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s, eds Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2007) 77.
minister to men’s comfort and pleasure, but to achieve personal liberty, to gain better education and employment opportunities, and eventually to vote, which was also the aim of the Victorian feminist (New Woman) movement in Britain.  

To summarise, as a symbol of China’s otherness, Western interpretations of footbinding fluctuated in accommodation with the power relations between China and the West during centuries of interactions between these two regions. Western approval of footbinding was correlated with approving of China itself. This was similar to what Foucault (1980) called “power/knowledge.” The truth, as Foucault defined it, is linked “in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (326). In other words, truth is held in the hands of those who had power. From the fourteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, when China was much stronger than the West – in terms of military power, economic prosperity, and cultural diversities – the truth about footbinding was held by China. Therefore, the Western image of China was rosy, positive, and admiring, and that of footbinding was positive and a sign of China’s uniqueness, gentility, and civility. However, from the nineteenth century onwards, the Chinese Empire was declining, while the West was “making great progress especially in material civilization” (Mason 255). The advancing West defeated China in a series of wars from the mid-nineteenth century forward, which greatly enhanced the confidence and superiority of the former. Thus, in the relationship between China and the West, “the balance of control, influence and dominance moved from being for several centuries China-centered, to being Western-centered” (Gregory viii). As a result, the West defined knowledge of footbinding. China was despised as a place of inferiority and half-civilisation, and footbinding also lost its uniqueness and was gradually regarded

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negatively, as a symbol of barbarism and backwardness.

The shifting Western interpretations of footbinding not only revealed the changing power relationships between China and the West, but also reflected other changes within Western cultures, such as industrialisation, science and technology, and feminism. Footbinding, with its invisibility, had been mystified and eroticised for a long time by many Western travellers, which produced the positive image of the practice. However, both the accessibility to China after the 1840s, and the visibility of images of bound feet powered by photographic technology, destroyed the mystery that was once concealed under the bandages. As a result, footbinding was gradually demonised in the West and became a target of objection by many Westerners who had lived in China. This is to be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER TWO

The Other to Be Changed: Western Participation in Anti-footbinding Movement

A Christian woman should have a Christian foot.

---Rev. Mr. Talmadge\textsuperscript{20}

Footbinding has slain its victims for centuries, and year in year out has continued torturing.

---Mrs Archibald Little\textsuperscript{21}

Since the mid-eighteenth century, when the British influence in particular waxed in direct proportion to the Industrial Revolution, mainstream Western interpretations of China and the Chinese tended to display a European bourgeois subjectivity and a cultural superiority. That subjectivity and superiority were based on a mentality that could be crudely summarised: what differed from the West was inferior, and should be changed until it became indistinguishable from the West. Such a mentality had underwritten many of the West’s pronouncements on China’s political system, religions, and customs. In discussing Western writings on footbinding, whereas the previous chapter deals more with Western visitors and travellers, this chapter largely deals with those who lived and worked in China approximately from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Having closer interaction with the local Chinese, these people wrote extensively about footbinding – not merely observations, but also about how the Chinese themselves felt about it, and they exerted great

\textsuperscript{20} Rev. Mr. Talmadge, \textit{Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10-24, 1877}.

\textsuperscript{21} Little, LBG 368.
influence on its abolition. Their apprehension of footbinding itself and their later participation in the anti-footbinding movement allow us a glimpse of how they projected the specific historical context they were in and the cultural or social background they were from. In return, they were shaping and changing the perspective of their readers both in China and back at home with a different understanding of footbinding as well as of China.

Here I concentrate on Western participation in the abolition movement through the voices of two groups of anti-footbinding activists – missionaries and feminists – who conferred over footbinding, albeit from different angles. I will show the complex process that lies behind the historical artefact that some missionaries would call “footbinding as against God” and that some feminists would call “footbinding as torture.” For many nineteenth-century Western encounters in China, the bound foot came to epitomise the sad plight of Chinese culture itself, and the foot-bound women as victims waiting to be liberated. Their apprehension of footbinding as a maiming practice was sharply contrary to the Western concept of the body as a natural ally, whether for the purpose of conversion or civilisation. The Western feminist idea of anti-footbinding as a form of female emancipation and female empowerment, both in terms of women taking control over their own bodies and the economic choices they could make, justified their cause in the abolition movement. Therefore, the impulse to “save” the Chinese Other from their own tradition motivated many missionary and non-missionary Westerners’ participation in the anti-footbinding movement.
2.1. Anti-footbinding under the Gospel of God

Nothing can lift this nation from its present condition but the Gospel.

---Mrs Tarleton Perry Crawford

In the eyes of many missionaries, the biggest and starkest difference between China and the West was China’s lack of God. Predictably enough, Mrs Crawford of Tungchow’s point achieved strong resonance among many missionaries of the nineteenth century, for whom China was a country of heathens “who lacked the light of God and must be rescued from eternal damnation.” One of the prevalent ideas about China in nineteenth-century Europe was that China was declining and degenerating, and overcoming all the negative elements of China’s devastating characteristics could be realised “permanently, completely, only by Christian civilization.” Indeed, for many missionaries, one of the ultimate goals for their travels in China was bringing the “Heathen” land into the Christian world. In other words, the dominant purpose of Western missionary work, as Albert Feuerwerker summarised, was not to enter the Chinese world, but to get the Chinese to enter theirs (48). It was therefore hardly surprising that the vast majority of missionaries were intolerant of the differences they discovered in the Chinese culture and unwilling to make meaningful adjustments to it. Instead, many of them simply imported their own values on China, upholding that “the true interests of the Chinese people could be

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served only by means of a fundamental re-ordering of Chinese culture.” Therefore, from the beginning, the popular missionary perception of China and its culture was not in respect of the Heathen land, but was based on the Western standard, which fell on the practice of footbinding as tangible proof of the need to transform the Chinese Other into the same as the West.

Some records from missionary writings about China in the post-Opium War era indicate that men saw footbinding as a form of sexual oppression of Chinese women for over a thousand years. The deformed feet were a symbol of Chinese women being victimised in Old China and a mark of China’s difference and heathenness. At the same time, just as small-footed Chinese women were objects of ridicule and outrage in the eyes of some missionaries with good intention and will, these women were objects in need of rescue and liberation. For instance, to the missionary Miss Porter, footbinding was “a distinctive mark of the heathendom of that land, cruel, degrading, and wicked. It was a desecration of the temple of the Holy Ghost, the defilement of which meant destruction.” However, missionaries of the post-Opium War era were divided on the stance the Church should take on this practice. To a certain extent, the decision of whether or not to intervene in footbinding as a non-religious social custom divided Catholics and Protestants. The great dividing line between them came down to their stance on ancestral worship. While early Jesuits were tolerant of the Chinese ritual of worshipping dead ancestors, the Papacy condemned it as idolatry in 1742, bringing an end to the great Rites Controversy. Eric Reinder (1997) argues that Protestants who were more aggressive than Catholics imported their distaste for “the holy mummeries of the Romish Church” to China (296-322), indicating that they

were more intrusive toward mysterious Chinese rituals such as footbinding. However, when many more Christians arrived in China after the first Opium War (1839-1842), Christianity as a whole – both the Protestant and the Catholic Church in China – was reluctant to deal with footbinding.

At the General Conference of the Protestant missionaries of China held at Shanghai in 1877, missionaries were still divided on footbinding. One group suggested that the church should abstain from this sensitive subject altogether, out of fear that it might alienate the country’s elite and enrage the populace. Others believed that footbinding was unnatural, being against God’s presumed views on the making of women, and that the Church should take a firm and clear-cut stand against it. John Kerr (1871) of the Canton Hospital bemoaned that the practice “violates the law of love, which our blessed Savior tells us is the fulfilling of the law,” and those who tolerated it should consider whether they were dishonouring the Gospel (22-23). Be that as it may, the majority of opinion on footbinding among missionaries tended to lie between these two opposing poles, agreeing to discourage the practice without making it a priority issue.

Differences among the missionaries were also indexed by sex. Male Christians were inclined to be more conservative and circumspect in protesting against footbinding for fear of enraging the Chinese literati and the affluent class. Alexander William’s attitude was quite representative: “We should be extremely careful about interfering with the customs of the country when no moral question is involved. We have plenty to do without exciting a new opposition among the literati and mercantile class” (23). Women missionaries, especially those who worked closely with Chinese women and children, were more likely to be determined in their conviction that footbinding be abolished. To take but one example, they pushed much harder than
their male counterparts to make unbinding a requirement for admission to mission schools. The gendered division of missionaries’ attitudes toward footbinding also reflected their dividing plans for conversion. While male missionaries held preaching for the soul to be their particular preserve, female missionaries set up girls’ schools, ran hospitals, and modelled the example of good Christian wives, preching to Chinese women because they shared fundamental concerns and attributes as women and mothers. Nevertheless, in the absence of a general agreement among the Christian missions, measures against footbinding remained haphazard and localised, depending on the inclination of individual missionaries and the consciousness of local Chinese women.

A shift in perceptions of footbinding among missionaries can be seen from the General Conference held at Shanghai in 1890. Instead of being viewed as a non-religious issue that the Church was reluctant to touch, there had been more attention paid to footbinding, as an issue of salvation of “whole men and women,” under the new “social gospel.” Although footbinding was not the biggest concern of presenters at the Conference, Rev. H. V. Noyes of the American Presbyterian Mission, Canton, and Rev. Franklin Ohlinger of the American Methodist Mission, Korea, brought up this issue in their discussions of the same topic, “How Far Should Christians Be Required to Abandon Native Customs.” The question of the abandonment of native customs like footbinding, as Noyes argued, should be determined by the principle: “if they are in conflict with the fairly interpreted teaching of God’s Word, the church ought to require their abandonment” (68). Calling footbinding “the inhuman custom,” she advocated that the Church abandon it. She proposed that the Church should insist

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that “members shall not bind their children’s feet,” believing that “triumphing over sin, in spite of all difficulties, strengthens the individual and strengthens the church” (619). As for the approach to abandon footbinding, Noyes thought that in most cases the mere conscience of members themselves would be insufficient; therefore, “clear instruction and earnest exhortation” of the Church would be necessary (618). Ohlinger held a similar opinion, condemning footbinding as “the refined cruelty,” of which female children, with rare exceptions, were victims. He asserted that to testify against this cruel custom was insufficient – the Gospel must be held as the chief weapon to abolish footbinding (607-608). However, a shared belief in the Gospel as the major weapon to end footbinding still divided missionaries of both genders into respective camps.

2.1.1. “Woman’s Work for Woman”: Christian Women and Mission Schools

By the term “woman’s work for woman,” Andrew P. Happer of the American Presbyterian Mission, Canton, meant “the work of making known the blessed Gospel of Salvation to the women in heathen lands” (139). He believed that the heathen women of China could only be reached through Christian women, who could breach Chinese family walls to preach the Gospel of salvation to their own sex in China. Before 1800, there were no female missionaries working in China (Standaert 1: 298), and access to women by male Christians was difficult because of the confinement of Chinese women to the home. There was such a separate sphere between women (nei, the inside) and men (wai, the outside) in Chinese society that male missionaries often had indirect access to women only through their husbands (Standaert 1: 395). The arrival of Christian women in the treaty ports in the nineteenth century was expected to serve as a link to the inaccessible and absent Chinese women (Zito 27). One of the
most feasible ways, as Happer observed and as many women missionaries used to
teach the Gospel, was to open mission schools for girls. After Henrietta Shuck, a
Baptist missionary, created the first girls’ school in Macao in 1836 (Graham 20), she
was soon followed by Miss Aldersey of the Church of England, who opened a girls’
school in Ningbo (Ningpo) in 1844. In 1847, the Presbysterian Mission opened
another girls’ school in Ningbo, and the movement soon spread to other cities such as
Shanghai and Fuzhou (Foochow).\(^{30}\) The number of girls’ schools established had
reached thirty-eight by 1877 (Lewis 18-19).

The establishment of so many mission schools was based on Christian ideology
which believed that the conversion of women, especially “heathen” mothers, was key
to Christianising the “heathen” China.\(^ {31}\) Despite the traditional female subservience,
missionaries recognised the enormous influence of Chinese mothers on their future
generations. For instance, Griffith John (1871) of the London Mission emphasised the
importance of winning over Chinese women: “Give us the mothers and daughters of
China, and China must soon become Christ’s; without them we shall never feel that an
impression has been made on the nation” (150). Be that as it may, an impression that
Chinese women were oppressed, and that their condition “presents the most pressing
and urgent calls to Christian women” (Happer 147), also made them more amenable
to conversion.

The inaccessibility of Chinese women stimulated Christian missions to set up
schools for young girls in the hope of reaching their mothers indirectly. Therefore,
from the very beginning, the missionary-run schools were designed not entirely – in
some cases, perhaps even not at all – for the Chinese girls’ intellectual development,

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\(^{30}\) Mrs Bridgeman opened a girls’ school in Shanghai under the American Board in 1849, Mrs Maclay in Fuzhou under the Methodist Mission in 1851. For the list of girls’ schools established during this period, see Ida Belle Lewis, *The Education of Girls in China* (New York: AMS P, 1972) 18-9.

or for the uplift of their social status. Martha Foster Crawford (1871), an American missionary who opened her girls’ school on 5 October 1852 in Shanghai, concurred with such a view: “Though secular education and many other blessings follow in its train, yet let it be ever present before our minds, that the chief want of this people is the Gospel … Let no side issues hide this from our view – no cultivating of the physical, social, or intellectual ever cause us to throw into the back ground the moral and religious” (151-152). Crawford’s outlook articulated the belief of many missionaries that the priority of a mission school was to evangelise rather than serve as an educational agency. Be that as it may, mission schools later became spaces where the earliest missionaries’ confrontations concerning footbinding took place, eventually developing into a crucial forum for missionaries to combat the custom. The debate of mission schools’ stance toward footbinding – whether they should turn a blind eye to it or fight against it – continued until some schools made it a principle that no girl be admitted until she had unbound her feet.

The first mission school to insist upon natural feet was the Peking boarding school of the American Methodist Episcopal Church in 1872 (Latourette 462). It was opened by two women missionaries, Gamewell and Maria Brown, who insisted that only those girls be admitted whose parents consented to unbinding. Gamewell stated the principle as follows: “It is a sin to crush and deform the feet that God gives to his children. We missionary teachers will not make ourselvesarty to this sin by appropriating missionary funds for the support of children with bound feet whose parents will not forsake this particular sin” (Tuttle 67). At that time, it was courageous for them to tie school admission to unbinding. Recruiting girls to mission schools was

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already a difficult task. Although education had always been highly valued in Chinese
culture, it was almost exclusively for male children. The bulk of women’s readings
such as Women’s Disciplines, The Records of Illustrious Women of Ancient Times,
Female Filial Piety Classics, Women’s Instructions, and The Classics for Women, and
others, aimed to teach women not personal development, but perfect submission to
their fathers, husbands, and sons. The few Chinese women who had received more
substantial education were taught at home. A major reason for this was Confucian
rituals, which confined women to being subordinate to men. To parents, sending their
daughters to public schools was equal to launching a rebellion against settled tradition.
After all, footbinding was considered a settled tradition “that the Chinese inherited
from the past, that was handed down from generation to generation, and there was no
one in all this wide empire that could bring the deliverance” (HESC 26). Again,
footbinding consolidated the physical confinement of women within the home
environment, making it more difficult to recruit girls to public schools. Therefore, it
was a rebellion twice over against traditional values to have girls’ feet unbound and
for girls to be sent to public schools.

The ubiquity of girls with bound feet, and the stubbornness of parents who dared
not disobey the settled tradition, made it difficult to recruit students without bound
feet. Some mission schools had to compromise as a result. For example, Helen Nevius,
who found “nearly all respectable females have compressed feet,” decided it was best
for her school not to make unbinding “a case of conscience, or of discipline” (114).
However, Gamewell and Brown still enforced such a daring school principle as only
admitting students with natural feet. As Gamewell recalled, “nowhere else in China
were the feet of girls in mission schools being unbound,” and they were warned that
by doing so, they would never be able to establish a school for girls in China (Tuttle
Indeed, some of their female students were taken away because they had unbound their feet. Nevertheless, she firmly believed the principle emphasised Christian teaching that “the body is the temple of the true God and must not be profaned” (Tuttle 61-62). Gradually, the difficulty was overcome, and their school, with its big-footed girls, grew steadily to be the largest in China (Tuttle 64). The success of this strategy and the growth of the school encouraged Christian schools throughout the country to adopt and enforce the same rule. By the 1890s, more establishments made unbinding a strict requirement for admission. As the Chinese themselves began to establish schools for girls in the 1890s, some of their schools also made unbound feet a condition for entrance. In 1905, this very requirement was legalised when a formal prohibition was issued on the admission of bound-footed girls to state-run schools.

The missionary strategy to set up mission schools as the platform to combat footbinding was both courageous and ingenious. The aptness of connecting anti-footbinding with education also lay in its introduction and popularisation of new notions of ideal womanhood. School education for girls helped change the traditional Chinese concept of an ideal woman, which equated illiteracy with feminine virtue, and defined women’s chastity as being confined to and dependent on men. These kinds of ideas were despised by missionaries. Gamewell (1899) told a conference of women missionaries: “The Christian world recognizes woman as a responsible personality, as a power in the intellectual, moral, and spiritual worlds…The Chinese idea of women is the negative of all this” (132-133). Chinese footbinding, which

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34 For example, Julia Bonafield of the Methodist Episcopal Mission in Fuzhou reported zero foot-bound students admitted to their Fuzhou and Xinhua boarding schools. Some mission schools also extended the principle to refuse employing women with bound feet as teachers. See Kwok Pui-lan, *Chinese Women and Christianity 1860-1970* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars P, 1992) 114.
“disables women from supporting themselves and from caring for their children… and incapacitates women from travelling, and keeps her and her thoughts in the narrowest of spheres” (Fielde 46), perfectly matched all negative images of the Chinese idea of womanhood that Gamewell had deplored. It placed footbinding in “a broader context challenging the desirability of traditional female subservience” (Drucker 184). Thus, in finding footbinding unacceptable, Christian missionaries imparted to China the Christian ideal of womanhood, hoping to transform the Chinese Other to be more like the West. By drawing girls out of the home, mission schools also served as channels to transmit new ideas of female liberation.

It is not my intention, however, that the above be taken as a negative judgment of these missionaries’ goal of changing otherness into sameness, as it is almost universal. It is understandable that observers from another culture tend to believe firmly in the superiority of their own. It is also natural that people with a sense of cultural superiority, usually self-consciously and often in the name of salvation, impose their own values on those whom they think are inferior. Because of the unwillingness to accept difference, missionaries who were educated in their home countries despised the illiterate condition of Chinese women. Similarly, missionaries with natural feet found it difficult to accept bound feet. Therefore, in the name of God, missionaries combined anti-footbinding with education, intending to erase these differences to bring the small-footed and uneducated Chinese women into line with those in the West.

As such, it is understandable that the Christian ideal of womanhood that missionaries brought to China was similar to their own Victorian values. For instance, the exported Western feminine identity was their “cult of domesticity.” They advocated women’s “refined and womanly qualities” to keep their homes clean and
comfortable. Instead of staying illiterate as part of ideal womanhood, they encouraged Chinese women to be educated wives, who would win respect from their husbands through their intelligence and learning. Educated mothers, who could enlighten their children and treat them “conscientiously, judiciously, and with self-control” were also advocated.36 Essentially, this notion of womanhood was compatible with traditional Chinese values. Christian education for women was to cultivate educated but still domesticated mothers and housewives for Chinese families.37 Education, for many girls, was still a means to find decent husbands. By the early twentieth century, many Chinese families viewed a woman’s education as a prerequisite for a good marriage, which served the same function as bound feet had.

In this sense, educated women, like those with bound feet, were still “bound” by subordination in the patriarchal society. In other words, the effect of missionaries’ efforts on abolishing footbinding through education was still superficial, since they failed to uproot the traditional values of women upheld in footbinding. Christian women’s education was aligned with traditional Chinese values, and inherited Victorian values of womanliness. The female missionaries’ battle against footbinding within the school environment was a limited accomplishment, since it stressed more the benefits of education to women as individuals than the influence women’s education would exert on the nation as a whole. It was not until the first decade of the twentieth century – when Chinese nationalism called for the participation of healthy and educated women in the nationalist movement – that footbinding received a deathblow and disappeared in a single generation.

2.1.2. “A Divine Force Needed”: John MacGowan and the Heavenly Foot Society

We became more and more convinced that mere human argument had no power to solve it [footbinding]. What was needed was a Divine force to master and control it, and that force was the Lord Jesus Christ. With Him alone lay the great secret of the solution of a problem that neither sage nor saint had ever been able to unravel.

---Rev. John MacGowan

MacGowan’s belief in the God almighty as a Divine force to eradicate footbinding was relatively representative, at least among missionaries. To many missionaries, footbinding signified the enduring sick condition of China’s otherness and weakness, a country whose illness could only be overcome through the Christian gospels. In 1874, a ground-breaking event took place in the southern treaty port of Xiamen (Amoy). Under the auspices of MacGowan and his wife, some sixty Christian Chinese women gathered in a church, discussing the organisation of the first anti-footbinding society in China (Drucker 187-188). MacGowan proposed the “Heavenly Foot Society” as the society’s name. He believed that Chinese footbinding interfered with the Divine Nature, seeing “the human body as being one of God’s ideals, which could never be improved upon” or “be allowed to usurp the place of the Divine one” (HESC 79-80). The doctrine of the Heavenly Foot Society was thus based on the construction of a God-given natural body, giving MacGowan the right to decry footbinding. As he commented, footbinding “had completely destroyed the grace and symmetry with

38 MacGowan, HESC 39.
which Nature had endowed the women,” and deprived women of the charm that they
“by a divine right seem naturally to possess” (*HESC* 21). Therefore, the missionary
battle against footbinding came to stand for restoring the grace and charm of women
that God had granted. The establishment of his anti-footbinding society was, in
MacGowan’s mind, a long-awaited reaction from Christianity. He notes:

The time has come at last when we have to look at this question from a
Christian standpoint. Footbinding is not only a great wrong done to the women
of this land, it is also a sin against God, and we as followers of Christ must
declare war against it. Everything that hurts man is an offence against Him,
and so whatever may be the cost we are bound by our allegiance to Him to
abandon everything that we know interferes with His purpose of making
men’s lives happy and joyous. (*HESC* 57)

MacGowan’s words justified Christians’ protest against footbinding as a crusade
under the name of God. He summoned up members of his society as “followers of
Christ” and urged them to wage war on footbinding with a holy purpose of erasing the
sin that it constituted against God, eliminating the moral offence it caused, rescuing
those who suffered from it, and bringing back the happy and joyous lives that God
had bestowed on them. In short, the purpose of the society was “to drive out from
every Chinese home the cruel custom of footbinding, and to restore to women the
Divine conception that God at first conceived for her in his Creation of her” (*HESC*
65).

The Heavenly Foot Society stipulated that members who joined “must not bind
their young daughter’s feet and …could not let their sons marry girls with bound feet”
(Macgowan, *MMMC, 25). The society sought to connect anti-footbinding with church
membership, and tried to disconnect footbinding from bride-seeking. The same
principle was imitated by other anti-footbinding societies established later.\textsuperscript{40} The strategy of disconnecting footbinding from marriage was ingenious. It helped change the shared commitments of a community where bound feet were a prerequisite of good marriage by creating both unbound women and men who would marry them. As MacGowan well grasped, footbinding had traditionally served as a marker of marriageability. Fear of not being able to find a good husband for their daughters was the most important concern of parents who considered rejecting footbinding. He described an instance when his wife tried to persuade their neighbour to give up binding their daughter’s feet. MacGowan spends two pages quoting the mother’s angry defence, in which she shows intense sympathy for her daughter, but still insists on binding. She explains that if her daughter’s feet were not bound

[her life would become intolerable to her, and she would be laughed at and despised and treated as a slave-girl. When she appeared on the street she would not be allowed to do up her hair in the beautiful artistic fashion that is permitted to the women with bound feet. Neither would she be allowed to wear the embroidered skirts nor the beautiful dresses that the women love in China. She would have to submit to the rules laid down by society for the conduct of slave-women. Any attempt to evade these would arouse the anger of the people on the street, who would certainly mob her and tear her finery from her back. (HESC 26)]

From the mother’s account, it could be seen that parents considered footbinding to be so prestigious that a girl could not get a good husband without it. In other words, bound feet became a ticket to a successful future on the daughter’s part, and an obligation on the part of the parents who cared about their daughter’s marriage.

\textsuperscript{40} For example, the most influential Chinese-run society, \textit{Bu chanzu hui} (Quit-footbinding Society), established in Guangdong (Canton) in 1895 by Kang Youwei and his brother, encouraged its male members not to bind their daughters’ feet, and not allow their sons to marry foot-bound girls.
Therefore, it was the awful consequences of ruining the daughter’s future life that the mother did not dare to face. To avoid a greater calamity, the mother had no other choice but to keep torturing her daughter.

At the end of the Society’s first meeting, nine women signed a pledge to eradicate footbinding in their homes, and eventually other women, mostly from the working classes, joined up. MacGowan seemed so excited that he could not help depicting the change in the environment after he stepped out of the Church where “the great meeting” or “epochmaking gathering” had just taken place:

Heaven and earth seemed to have changed since an hour or two ago with doubting hearts we had entered it. We stepped out into the unswept, garbage-littered street, but we saw nothing of the heaps of rubbish that lay along its sides, neither did the ancient smells, that had lingered long there as though in an ancestral home of their own, disturb the happy thoughts that were filling our hearts with a music such as had never vibrated through them since we had come to this Celestial land.

Everything seemed to us full of beauty just then. The great sun was in his most joyous mood, and in the unclouded blue sky was pouring down his rays upon everything around. Evidently it was a great festal day, he thought, and all the wealth that he had in his heart must be lavished upon the church where the great meeting had just taken place, and upon the street near by; for he would have them both be glorified for the moment in memory of this epochmaking gathering that was going to change the destinies of all the future women of China. (HESC 67)

The above paragraphs were written by MacGowan in 1913, fifty years after he first

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41 MacGowan noted down the speeches made by two of the audience attended the meeting, which could be found in HESC 58-63.
went to China. The tone and style convey a sense of nostalgia and, therefore, a touch of exaggeration. One can imagine what a big step the Church and its female members had made by joining together and pleading to end such an enduring practice as footbinding. It took more than just passion and courage for these Chinese women to step out of the domestic sphere and gather together, listening to the call of the Lord. For those nine women who signed the pledge to eradicate footbinding, the crooked lines they drew as signatures proved their commitment and determination to changing this devastating custom. Obviously, Heaven and Earth were – in reality – unchanged after the meeting, and the street was as dirty and smelly as it was before. What had changed was MacGowan’s mood and that of his members, which beautified and glorified everything at that moment. “The great sun” metaphorically represented the great God that “was pouring down his rays upon everything around.” Both the Church and the street nearby were lavished and blessed in celebration of the great meeting.

The Heavenly Foot Society, working as the prototype of the progressive movement, set the basic tone as well as the operating strategy for campaigns against the practice in other places. Within a few years of its establishment, many more missionaries began to harden their views on footbinding, working collectively in condemning the practice. In 1878, for instance, a Presbyterian synod meeting at Hangzhou (Hangchow) acted officially against this custom (Latourette 462). In 1885, at the American Methodist Episcopal Church’s general annual conference, a denominational women’s conference in Fuzhou submitted a plea for a formal declaration of protest against footbinding. 42 These latter campaigns combined teachings of the evilness of footbinding with missionary programmes, and spurred prominent non-missionary Westerners and non-Christian Chinese to oppose the practice. However, the influence

42 Frances J. Barker, The Story of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1869-1895, rev. ed. (Cincinnati: Cranston & Curts, 1898) 312.
of the Heavenly Foot Society and others remained localised, mainly in Xiamen and other Southern areas, and it made slow progress. As admitted by MacGowan himself, for fifteen years after he and his wife arrived in Xiamen just after the Second Opium War in 1860, they made strenuous efforts “to get the people to see the iniquity of footbinding and to induce them to abandon the custom, but without any apparent result” (*HESC* 56). That “the destinies of all the future women of China” would be changed by “this epochmaking gathering” in 1874 did not happen as MacGowan had expected. It was not until the establishment of anti-footbinding societies in the 1890s by Mrs Archibald Little, Kang Youwei, and other Chinese,\(^{43}\) that the anti-footbinding movement reached a nation-wide scope.

MacGowan’s anti-footbinding movement did not succeed, mainly owing to the following two factors. First, ambitious as MacGowan and his comrades were, the association of anti-footbinding with Christianity in an overwhelmingly Confucian society was a handicap. The very terminology of “The Heavenly Foot Society” was problematic and, as a result, did not enjoy much popular support, as Chinese culture did not view God/Heaven in the same way that Christians did. Second, MacGowan’s operational strategy was also targeted. It was targeted mainly at the Chinese Christian community that never constituted more than one per cent of the Chinese population (Drucker 183), thus limiting its influence to sway public opinion. Besides, the society depended solely on the leadership of its Church and the personal efforts of its members, seeking little help from those outside, such as local officials. For a custom such as footbinding, which had become so entwined with national life, the meeting of

\(^{43}\) Kang Youwei proposed to establish an anti-footbinding society called “Bu chanzu hui” (Unbound Foot Society) in 1883, although it was not until several years later that it was finally formed. Kang and his brother found such societies in 1894 in Guangdong province and 1895 in Shanghai. For a discussion of anti-footbinding societies established by the Chinese during the late nineteenth century, see Paul J. Bailey, *Gender and Education in China: Gender Discourses and Women’s Schooling in the Early Twentieth Century* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007) 14-15.
a number of obscure women who were joined by a solemn covenant to resist footbinding for themselves and for their daughters could not do much to reach their fellow countrywomen as a whole. Almost two decades later, Little, another anti-footbinding activist, made up for these two flaws in establishing and running her anti-footbinding society, and took the anti-footbinding movement to a new level.

2.2. Secularising Anti-footbinding: Mrs Archibald Little and T’ien Tsu Hui

Yet if the women of the future be thereby saved good will have been done, for the women are not only in themselves half the nation, but the mothers of the men.

--- Mrs Archibald Little

Alicia Little came to China in 1887 as the wife of Archibald John Little, a successful merchant who arrived in China in the 1850s. Before marriage, she had already had a successful career as a novelist under her maiden name Alicia Bewicke. After marriage, together with her husband, she spent the following twenty years exploring the country. During their voyage, she had seen much, noted it down, and drawn her conclusions about China and the Chinese, which were compiled in many of her travelogues, such as *Intimate China: The China as I Have Seen* (1899), *The Land of the Blue Gown* (1902), and *Round about My Peking Garden* (1905). The focus of Little’s concern was Chinese women, among whom footbinding was, to her mind, one of the graver abuses. From the 1890s until her return to England in the early 1900s, she had worked zealously to alter this custom. In 1895, inspired and encouraged by

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44 Little, *LBG* 370.
what MacGowan’s Heavenly Foot Society had accomplished in Xiamen, Little gathered ten other Western wives in Shanghai and formed *T’ien tsu hui* (The Natural Feet Society). Before then, non-missionary foreign women did not involve themselves in opposition to anti-footbinding. From the moment when Little’s Natural Feet Society was formed as a non-missionary force, however, as MacGowan commented, “the anti-footbinding movement took a new and a most momentous departure” (*HESC* 89).

In comparison to MacGowan’s translation of his anti-footbinding society’s name into “Heavenly Foot Society,” Little’s version of *T’ien tsu hui* into “The Natural Feet Society” indicated her different focus. As a Christian woman herself, she might also conceive of the body as God’s secret workings. However, she secularised her anti-footbinding cause by avoiding the use of any religious word, but still emphasising the feet as a natural ally (a shared belief of missionaries and non-missionaries). In this way, she broke the limit of the Society by targeting only Christian women, but extending it to the service of all Chinese people, Christian and non-Christian. Nevertheless, even though the Natural Feet Society was non-missionary in name, it was formed under the aegis of the Shanghai Mission (*IC* 102). The society was set-up to end women’s suffering and to “lift” the Chinese onto the same level as Christian nations. As the spokesperson for the Society announced in April 1895, the aim of the Society was “obviously a Christian one,” and at the same time, they invited “the help and sympathy of those who are moved by considerations ethical, economic or simply by pity for millions of little girls.”

Admittedly, however, many Westerners such as Little saw no contradiction between Christianising China and helping Chinese women.

Although it was a non-denominational effort for Little to secularise anti-

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footbinding, as Zito (2007) has pointed out, Little stood within a tradition of feminine public service that originated in the church (12). Little’s anti-footbinding discourse displayed the motivation of her crusade against footbinding as a humanitarian and feminist:

That expression of helpless rage and agony and hate in the poor little wizened child’s face is more than I can ever hope to forget, and would alone spur me on to redoubled efforts to do away with a custom, that has been more than so many children can endure, and that must have saturated so many childish souls with bitterness, before they passed away from a world made impossible for them. (*LBG* 289)

Like many missionaries, the idea of “saving” and “lifting” the Chinese souls also motivated Little to abolish footbinding. In Little’s case, to help children out of the pain that they could not endure had spurred her to fight against footbinding. Here, wasting no time haranguing readers about the fact that footbinding was brutal and barbaric, Little described the pain it caused through the portrayal of the little child’s face with “helpless rage and agony and hate.” At another point, Little directed the issue of pain to the victimisation of children:

During these three years the girlhood of China presents a most melancholy spectacle. Instead of a hop, skip, and a jump, with rosy cheeks like the little girls of England, the poor little things are leaning heavily on a stick somewhat taller than themselves, or carried on a man’s back, or sitting sadly crying. They have great black lines under their eyes, and a special curious paleness that I have never seen except in connection with footbinding. (*IC* 139)

In both paragraphs, Little uses the adjective “poor,” a word of condescending pity that she often attached to the little girl suffering from footbinding. Her description of these
pale little girls displays Little’s sympathy towards them, and between the lines lay her condemnation of footbinding for depriving these children of a healthy, lively, and happy childhood. Meanwhile, the eloquent rhetoric produced for Little an empowering subject position. As Little herself confesses:

Sometimes indeed I have thought, that God has denied me the joys of personal motherhood in order that all possible tenderness for childhood may be expended on the tortured children of China without the diminution from it of one iota, reserved for some sheltered, guarded child by my own fireside. *(LBG 352)*

In one sense, footbinding did empower Little by providing suffering children to save. In crusading against footbinding, she could displace her own motherhood and self-referential feminism onto a Chinese cause. By this means, she was empowered as a guardian who could speak on the children’s behalf. The Chinese, in Little’s mind, seemed to be children in general, whose weakness and helplessness represented by these little girls with bound feet made them appear to be the inferior and the subaltern who could not speak for themselves, but were bound to be spoken for and represented by others who were more powerful and superior.

However, when it came to the damage footbinding had caused, Little seemed to be profoundly patriarchal, by importing the voices of male medical doctors into her text. She briskly showed how footbinding destroyed the good health of little girls. She wrote in a reportorial style by making her points through the words of others. For example, she quoted from Dr Reifsnyder of the Margaret Williamson Hospital at Shanghai that “toes often drop off under binding, and not uncommonly half the foot does likewise” *(IC 141)*. She mentioned a case of Dr Macklin of Nanjing (Nanking), who attended to a little girl of six or seven years old with an ulcer caused by
footbinding that had begun at the heel. The girl died after a year and a half of dire suffering (IC 142). Dr McCartney of Chungking claimed that it was the Chinese people’s ignorance of the physiology and anatomy of the human body that had caused so much suffering to the women and children of the country (IC 142-143). Through doctors’ testimonies, Little imbued a quality of scientific “objectivity” into her presentation of the physiological damage caused by footbinding. Her observation based itself on a world of technologies and scientific understandings of the human body. It had a great deal to do with the transition of the traditional feminine social service back home in England that by the end of the nineteenth century had transformed from religious into scientific and medical solutions to social problems.46

Compared with MacGowan, Little was also more skilful in advancing her anti-footbinding ideas and objectives. On a grass-roots level, the society summoned crowds to listen to addresses by anti-footbinders, and she also made full use of available connections to reach upwards to high officials in China. Soon after the establishment of the Natural Feet Society, Little and her committee drew up a memorial to the Empress Dowager to ban footbinding. The memorial got support from the Western community, to which “nearly all foreign ladies in the Far East added their names.”47 Under mounting social pressure from the foreign community, or rather in order to curry favour with the foreign women in the capital, the Empress Dowager issued an anti-footbinding edict in 1902. This edict was the first and also the last proclamation the Manchu government made on the issue. The Society published an assortment of literature, edicts, proclamations, placards, poems, and folders of photographs against footbinding, and distributed them to the populace at large to

47 Samuel Couling, The Encyclopaedia Sinica (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, Ltd., 1917) 30.
encourage the formation of leagues and to influence native opinion. They also held meetings against footbinding in many big cities. Little recalled one meeting at Hankou (Hankow) when she invited the Chairman of the Municipal Council and many other officials to her address. At that meeting, over two thousand leaflets and tracts were distributed, and some high officials asked for more when they went away (LGB 306). Little even successfully converted two famous Chinese officials to her cause: Zhang Zhidong, Viceroy of Hunan and Hubei, and Li Hung Chang, then Viceroy of Canton. Zhang published an essay against footbinding, which was later used by Little as one of the most powerful weapons in the movement. Li wrote an inscription on Little’s fan in recognition of the movement, which was shown at every subsequent anti-footbinding meeting (LGB 318). Branches were organised quickly in many cities such as Hankou, Wuchang, Hong Kong, and Macao. The Society was handed over to a committee of Chinese women in 1908 after Little returned to England. Subsequently, societies of Chinese origin took their place. The movement on a national scale lost its momentum in the 1910s when Sun Yat-sen outlawed footbinding after the formation of the new Republic, but individual efforts were continued by Chinese men and women.

Little was undeniably a woman of great determination. It took considerable perseverance and self-assurance for her to crusade against such a deeply rooted custom. In order to rally up opposition to the practice and get more people to pledge against it, she embarked on an anti-footbinding tour over vast areas of China, such as [spelled as one word above Han kou, Wu chang], Han yang, Guangdong, and Hong Kong. In addition to her personal charisma, courage and perseverance, however, she was to a large degree helped by her merchant husband. In Little’s editorial note of her

husband’s book, *Gleanings from Fifty Years in China* (1898), she acknowledged her husband’s help in the anti-footbinding movement:

The general anti-footbinding movement of China owed its inception to him.

He had grieved over the agonies of footbinding, years before I ever saw China.

He inspired and stimulated all my hesitating efforts; he first suggested my interviewing Chinese Viceroy s on the subject, then facilitated the interviews and always readily spared me for any work the movement entailed. (xiii)

Indeed, her husband financially and socially facilitated her anti-footbinding campaigns. With his connections, she was able to secure free passage on the ships of the China Merchants’ Company up and down the coasts of the country and along the Yangtze, distributing pamphlets and promoting the goodness of the Natural Foot. If not for her husband’s connections, she would not have had the chance to interview high-ranking officials such as Li Hung Chang, regarded as one of the great men of nineteenth-century China.\(^5^0\) The interview itself was of historical importance, since it was almost impossible that a Chinese Viceroy would ever be interviewed by a foreign woman, let alone about such a “risque” and “improper” subject as footbinding (150).

In addition to her social skills and personal connections, the essence and secret of Little’s success in leading the anti-footbinding movement to a national scale, more importantly, lay in her mastering of the essence of what China needed at that time. The society was formed in 1895, after China’s defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). The war was a wake-up call for native Chinese, especially for the elites who began to recognise the urgency of the need to strengthen China in order to defend the country from being colonised. Little grasped that well. She incorporated the “Suifu Appeal,” put forward by a male scholar to her anti-footbinding campaign.

He articulated:

The present is no time of peace. Foreign women have natural feet; they are daring, and can defend themselves; whilst Chinese women have bound feet, and are too weak even to bear the weight of their own clothes. They think it looks nice, but in reality it does not look nice, and weakens their bodies, often causing their death. … The women in England, France, Germany, America, etc. are free from the pains of footbinding. Only the Chinese voluntarily incur suffering and injury. (IC 160-162)

The discourse on anti-footbinding thus shifted its focus from merely a gendered discourse on women’s pain to a nationalist discourse on the weakness of the Chinese nation as a whole. Following this shift, therefore, in her anti-footbinding campaign, Little persuaded the Chinese to believe that the body was that upon which national strength relied. As the quotation from Little at the beginning of this section shows, her emphasis was not merely on the wellness of women themselves, but was also related to that of men; and, more importantly, the strength of the offspring and the nation. Again, Little imported an expert voice from the medical missionary to make this point. As she quoted from Dr McCartney of Chungking, not only did footbinding cause pain and serious disease, but it could also damage the internal organs, and in many cases affected the women’s offspring (IC 143-144). Little concluded that footbinding was the source of Chinese men’s weakness. As she claimed:

If the women be mutilated, ignorant, unhealthy, so will be the sons they bear and rear, and it is at least a noteworthy fact that, since footbinding came into fashion, no man whom the Chinese themselves regard as worthy of the nation’s reverence has been born to the Chinese Empire. (LBG 370)
In this sense, Little’s articulation against footbinding implied the strengthening of Chinese women in the service of the country, which placed her anti-footbinding society and campaign in the vanguard of China’s self-strengthening movement. Therefore, Little and her Natural Feet Society did not single-handedly end footbinding, but they popularised a cause whose time had come. Chinese reformist and revolutionary elites, provoked by national crisis, began to look for ways to overcome the humiliating image of China as the “Sick Man of Asia”. They received the Western message of the body and the nation, and regarded footbinding as the source of China’s weakness, which allowed them to incorporate anti-footbinding into the nationalist movement. From the 1890s, the native Chinese, especially reformers and revolutionaries, joined the anti-footbinding movement, and became the core of the movement until footbinding was officially outlawed by the New Republic after 1911. Therefore, it was not just the Westerners themselves so much as the local Chinese affecting change in their own communities, which the next chapter will reveal.
CHAPTER THREE

The Changed Other: Chinese Participation in the Anti-footbinding Movement

[T]he women of China give me the idea that, if once set upon their feet, they will become a great power in the land.

--- Mrs Archibald Little

Little’s above impression of the Chinese women was echoed by Li Hongzhang (1823-1901), a highly influential Chinese official in the nineteenth century. In the 1890s, Li once replied to Little’s plea to abolish footbinding as follows: if Chinese women’s feet were not bound, they would be very strong, and with the combined strength of men and women, they would overturn the dynasty (IC, 319). Li’s reply has two levels of meanings. On the one hand, Li indicates that footbinding, which created physically weak women and narrowed their scope of knowledge, helped men gain masculinity and social power over their female counterparts, and hence secured the male’s dominant position in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, he suggests that once the bound feet of the women are set free, they would regain their strength, and by cooperating with men, they would become so powerful that they would threaten the Manchu government. Meanwhile, Li’s comment on footbinding succinctly explicates the reasons why the practice had lasted for so long. At a personal level, for men, footbinding served as a means of gaining superiority and hence helped functionalise and consolidate the status of women as subordinates within the male-dominant family and social system. At the national level, it was still tolerated, despite the fact that it had been banned on and off by rulers who were either in favour of or

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51 Little, IC 183.
acquiesced to it for the safety of their empire. If footbinding, which had existed for hundreds of years, had not threatened the dominance of men or the safety of their governance, it might have lasted well into the following decades or even centuries.

However, this kind of dominance and safety were threatened and destroyed by the penetration of Western powers with the outbreak of the first Opium War (1839-1842), which marked the beginning of the end of China’s “isolation and aloofness” (Mackerras vii). Along with the penetration, a new Western image of China was gradually formed, in which China had become an Empire in decay, and a “stagnant and backward society having nothing of value to offer a dynamic and progressive West beyond some trade and perhaps some souls to be saved” (Gregory 116). China’s military incompetence and the negative image of China to the outside insulted the Chinese, especially the elites. By the 1860s, they were roused to the awareness of the nation’s crisis of being colonised and began to seek solutions for self-strengthening.

Influenced by the Western circulation of footbinding as a brutal, barbaric, and backward practice, the Chinese elites, including reformers, revolutionaries, and feminists, felt ashamed of bound feet. Accepting the Western idea of linking the body to the nation, these elites attributed China’s weakness to the crippled feet of its women. Thus, the Chinese took up the cause of anti-footbinding, and integrated it into the feminist movement and other nationalist movements of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism.
3. 1. Anti-footbinding as Nationalism

There is nothing which makes us objects of ridicule so much as footbinding.

--- Kang Youwei\(^52\)

For a long period in the history of China and of the world, women were coerced and treated as physically and intellectually inferior to men. Collectively, women had never head a voice in important matters. A woman’s opinion on footbinding, a practice imposed upon her body since childhood and carried on throughout the rest of her life, was seldom heard, for better or for worse. Like the possible origin and development of footbinding, which was invented by men and widely disseminated as an unusual criterion of feminine beauty for men’s pleasure, it was men who became the first public voice for women in abolishing footbinding. Earlier detractors of footbinding such as Yuan Mei (1716 – 1797), poet of mid-Qing dynasty, Li Ruzhen (1762 – 1830), author of the fiction *Flowers in the Mirror*, and scholar Yu Zhengxie (1775 – 1840) were all men. Their followers such as Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864), Zheng Guanying (1842-1923), Kang Youwei (1858-1927), Liang Qichao (1873-1929), and Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), and others were all male representatives of their female counterparts’ voices. It was not until the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that women’s voices about footbinding were heard.

3.1.1. Holding the Flag of Western Ideas

One of the Western ideas that was adopted by the Chinese male elite was the belief in the equality of men and women. It was first used as a doctrine for the Taiping rebels led by Hong Xiuquan during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Rebellion (1850-1864), which was an uprising openly against the feudal empire. Inspired by imported Protestant ethics, they believed that men and women, as children of God, should be equal. Footbinding was banned, and those who disobeyed the order received punishments as severe as the death penalty. However, anti-footbinding was an ideological plank used by the rebels to set up the so-called “Kingdom of Heavenly Peace,” a utopia that the rebels propagandised, in which men and women would live in egalitarian harmony. For the establishment of such a harmonious kingdom, they needed healthy and strong women to fight together with men against patriarchal and feudal power. Women with bound feet apparently could not satisfy this military purpose. Although the Christian idea of the equality of men and women played a positive part in liberating some women, the Taiping rebels’ commitment to anti-footbinding was nominal (Thurin 102) and was used only to justify the rebels’ political actions. Nevertheless, although the rebellion was finally defeated by the Manchu government, the idea of anti-footbinding as a fight for women’s equal rights with men continued, and it marked the beginning of an era when women’s issues and the role of women for the country came to public attention (Fan 30).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, more than ever before, as the Western concept of treating women as equals spread throughout China, women with bound feet received more compassion from their male counterparts. Zheng Guanying

a Westernised comprador reformer who was in favour of emancipation, condemned the damage that footbinding caused the bodies of Chinese women. In his essay “On Footbinding,” he advanced:

The custom of footbinding is unknown throughout the vast universe, with the exception of China … . A person is unfortunate in being a woman, but still more unfortunate if born a Chinese woman. Her own body is injuriously maltreated in this way, with injurious effects on health, while her flesh and bones are so tightly restrained that the blood flows unceasingly. It is as if she has incurred a most heavy penalty, contracted a most serious illness, or encountered a major calamity. As a young child, she suffers from having her feet virtually dismembered and her skin despoiled. If she is delicate, her health is damaged (1:163-164).

Footbinding was unique to China, even though not all Chinese women practised it, and yet Zheng was not proud of its ingeniousness. Instead, he felt compassion for the suffering of the “unfortunate” Chinese women who had to endure unimaginable pain as if they had committed a serious crime, suffered from a severe illness, or underwent a big calamity. Zheng’s compassion was fuelled by Liang Qichao, an influential reformer of the early twentieth century, who had determinedly fought against footbinding. In one of his essays published in Shiwu Bao (Current Affairs Daily), Liang argued against footbinding with the adoption of the Western viewpoint of the equality between men and women. He wrote, “Men and women share equally. Heaven gives them life and parents give them love, treating them equally” (1897: 2394). In a patriarchal society, where for thousands of years women had always been viewed and treated as inferiors and subordinates, it was radical to preach equality of the sexes. Liang continued to point out that footbinding was an evil thing that had spread its
“poisons everywhere and for countless ages!” Women suffered a great deal from this evil practice, especially little girls. He wrote compassionately:

The child is punished this way when she has still not lost her first set of teeth.

Her bones are broken and her flesh deteriorates, with bloody pus scattered about and injury widespread. Parents ignore its sighs, do not pity her weeping, are cold to her entreaties, and deaf to her screams. The child cannot get up for several months, even with the aid of a cane; a year later, she can only get about by being carried in a sedan chair.\textsuperscript{54}

The description of innocent and helpless children who suffered from the torture of footbinding and indifferent parents who ignored their children’s pain set the basic tone of anti-footbinding discourse, which was both sympathetic and condemnatory.

Around the same time as the publication of Liang’s critics, Lin Shu (1852-1924) wrote three poems under the title of “Tiny-Foot Lady,” attacking footbinding as a cruel and inhuman practice. In the first poem, Lin depicted what those ladies had been through in order to get a pair of “golden lilies.” Convinced that small feet would earn them a social reputation, they devoted themselves to the binding with the price of suffering as “her flesh and bones are so distressed that she loses her appetite for food,” and with the price of “her fragrant youth spent weeping by the fallen flowers.” In the third poem, Lin compared women with bound feet to those with natural feet, and advocated abolishing footbinding by depicting the disadvantages of those tiny-footed ladies in facing emergencies such as fire and war, as for them, “the only choice is death.”\textsuperscript{55}

A similar opinion also emerges in Huang Husheng’s essay “On Footbinding’s Influence on China’s Self-strengthening.” According to him, women with bound feet were never free from pain and were unable to enjoy freedom of

\textsuperscript{54} Levy 81. The original essay “On Quit-binding Society” was published in Shiwubao 3 January 1897: 1037-39.

movement. Indeed, they were so disabled that in the case of fires or grave danger, it was unlikely they would be able to escape (2393-2396). These compassionate essays that condemned the brutality of footbinding, and characterised its physical and psychological torment, laid an indispensable framework for the abolition of footbinding. They helped to rouse public concern on the evilness of footbinding and to gain emotional support from the public for the eradication of footbinding.

3.1.2. National Honour and National Strength

Generally, male Chinese elites expressed their compassion for women’s suffering and condemned footbinding for its damage to women’s health and as an embodiment of women’s suppression under the feudal patriarchal system. However, their campaigns to abolish footbinding as an important project for the emancipation of Chinese women were integrated into an even larger project; that is, to revitalise China and save her from Western colonisation.

In 1898, Kang Youwei wrote a memorandum to the Imperial Palace, decrying footbinding as an outmoded practice that stood in the way of China’s competition with the West, and implored the emperor to end footbinding outright. Kang started and ended the memorandum with emphasis on the “national shame” (guochi) that footbinding had brought to the nation. 56 He stated that “[f]or some time now, foreigners have taken photographs to circulate among themselves and laugh at our barbaric ways. However, the most appalling and the most humiliating is the binding of our women’s feet. For that your servant feels deeply ashamed.” He continued to argue that China was losing face in the international arena because of footbinding. He says:

all countries have international relations, so that if one commits the slightest error the others ridicule and look down on it. Ours is definitely not a time of seclusion. Now China is narrow and crowded, has opium addicts and streets lined with beggars. Foreigners laugh at us for these things and criticize us for being barbarians. There is nothing which makes us objects of ridicule so much as footbinding. (715)

Kang’s argument on footbinding as a national shame was relatively representative of the attitudes of radical reformers, especially after the Sino-Japanese war in 1894. Reformers self-consciously examined China’s performance within a global arena, and cared how foreigners looked at China much more so than in any previous century. The ridicule of foreigners in the narrow and crowded China, the opium-addicted China, and the China with foot-bound women made the Chinese male dishonoured and shameful. They allegorised foot-bound women, together with opium addicts and beggars, as the weak China under Western invasion. Kang’s student, Liang Qichao, another leading Chinese reformer of the early twentieth century, expressed a similar opinion of footbinding, stating that this practice had “flourished generation after generation against imperial prohibition and become the laughingstock of foreigners.”57 Thus, footbinding, viewed by both Kang and Liang as a synecdoche of the nation itself, marked the indelible boundary between China and other nations. Therefore, the Chinese elites’ abolition of footbinding became nationalistic, aiming at saving China’s national honour in the international arena.

Reformers like Kang and Liang were motivated by outside perceptions of footbinding and the nation itself and called upon nationalistic pride to end footbinding as means of promoting a more positive image to Western critics. Nevertheless, the

shame they experienced and the motive to save and maintain the nation’s honour were rooted in the semi-colonial conditions that China had faced since the first Opium War. Although China escaped being fully colonised, the penetration of Western powers eroded its cultural superiority and discursive power. Humiliated by external military defeats, but more importantly, threatened by the internal Taiping rebellion, some Westernized, enlightened Chinese officials began to learn from the West with the essential purpose of the restoration of Manchu governance. In 1861, they launched an economical and military reform known as the “Self-strengthening Movement”. Under the doctrine of “Chinese learning as the fundamental structure, Western learning for practical use,” Chinese reformers tried to adopt Western technology to leap halfway into modern times. However, China’s Westernisation efforts came to a halt when China was defeated by Japan in 1895. This monumental defeat, by a nation which the Chinese had always regarded as smaller and less developed, broke China’s dream of gaining strength through application of Western technologies, and left the country shocked and dismayed. This blow aroused a sense of national crisis among the Chinese who feared that they would perish as “slaves of a lost country.” Male intellectuals began to review the achievements Japan had made through its Westernised Meiji Restoration carried out at roughly the same time as China’s Self-strengthening Movement.

In 1898, to avoid the perils of extinction, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong (1865-1898), Yan Fu (1853-1921) and others persuaded the Guang Xu Emperor to launch the movement known as the Hundred Days’ Reforms (or the Constitutional

Reform Movement), attempting to bring the Western democratic ideals and political system to China through educational, political, and cultural reform. Although the issue of footbinding did not come up during the reform, the idea was that anything that stood in the way of the country’s advancement was a target for reform. Therefore, a pair of bound feet, from every aspect, was the visual antithesis of a modern nation. It was a symbol of “Old China,” where women were oppressed, confined and victimised with a pair of bound feet. Such a barbaric image of China projected through footbinding consolidated Western laughter at China, and was a sheer opposite image to that which a modern China wanted to cast. Quite reasonably, footbinding as a national allegory was not part of the progress and, therefore, was targeted for eradication.

Reacting to the Western interpretation of footbinding as a barbaric practice and a symptom of China’s backwardness, the Chinese leadership attacked it from a nationalist point of view, claiming that footbinding led to the feebleness of the offspring, even though there was no scientific evidence for this assertion. Kang Youwei, for example, held such an opinion:

The bound feet of women will transmit weakness to the children, weakening the bodies of healthy generations…When the weakness becomes inherited, where shall we recruit soldiers? Today look at Europeans and Americans, so strong and vigorous because their mothers do not bind their feet, and therefore, have strong offspring. Now that we must compete with other nations, to produce weak offspring is perilous.62

62 Kang 715. Zhang Zhidong had the same opinion that the crippling of women made their offspring weak, which could be found in W. A. P. Martin, The Awaking of China (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907) 236.
Kang’s opinion was far from a lone voice. His contemporary, Huang Zunxian (1898), a poet, writer, and diplomat, criticised footbinding as a practice that led to seven sins: to disobey justice; to damage ethical relationship; to deprive women of their natural right as human beings; to disturb domestic affairs; to maim women; to corrupt public morals; and to degrade the continuity of the Chinese race (466). The idea that footbinding, which damaged women’s health, would bring about the deterioration of the Chinese race, was resonant with Kang’s idea. Both Huang’s and Kang’s opinions on footbinding were as much a response to Social Darwinism as an exploration of the ideas of survival of the fittest as applied to the struggles between national or racial groups.63 This was a Western idea introduced by Yan Fu (1854-1921), who translated Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* (1893) into Chinese. Based on this evolutionary theory, the need to strengthen people’s bodies became a matter of urgency and importance, as only the nation with a strong population could survive in competition with other nations. Although the Constitutional Reform Movement was crushed by the Empress-dowager Cixi – who thought that Western influence had grown too powerful and was a threat to her power – nationwide anti-footbinding campaigns were not stopped. Later, in 1902, under pressure from both the Chinese literati and the foreign community, the Empress Dowager signed a promulgation banning footbinding. The 1911 revolution that finally overthrew the Manchu governance also essentially brought an end to footbinding. After the foundation of the Republic, Sun Yat-sen outlawed footbinding on 11 March 1912. The order to the interior ministry stated:

The strength of a nation relies on the physical strength of its people.

Footbinding which has maimed bodies and stopped blood flowing not only

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imputes agony on women, but even worse, passes weakness down to their offspring. The evils of footbinding have been proved in medical science. How can it be denied? Besides, women with bound feet were crippled and confined, which make them inaccessible to education and indifferent to national affairs. How can they make a living by themselves, let alone serve the country? …At the time of social reform, such an evil practice as footbinding should be eradicated as early as possible so as to consolidate the fundamental principles of the country. Therefore, all provinces are ordered to ban footbinding.

Anyone who disobeys this order will have his family penalized.

The order put more emphasis on footbinding’s damage to national strength than to women’s health and freedom. Footbinding, believed to be the mark of the evil of the past, collided with the image of the new nation which symbolised democracy, freedom, and modernisation. Therefore, anti-footbinding was a claim that the New Republic used to draw a demarcation line with the dead Manchu monarchy. As such, the anti-footbinding movement, from the Chinese male elites’ point of view, was not primarily aimed at liberating women’s feet, or granting freedom to Chinese women who had suffered from within and without. The zeal of the Chinese men, both reformers and radicals, to eradicate footbinding exposed their real motives: first, they were concerned that footbinding promoted an image to Western observers of a backward and barbaric nation; second, it was a reaction to the social conditions that China was facing during the period of 1840-1911, when China was involved in the West’s global expansion and was at risk of being colonised. The suffering of Chinese women or, rather, the gaze from the West at the ridiculous practice of footbinding, made the Chinese men lose face, and contributed to a fear, among Chinese men, that China lacked the strength to compete with Western technology and power. They were
propelled by a sense of embarrassment and shame by the gaze from the advanced nations, and related the humiliation that China suffered in battles with the West to the bound feet of Chinese women. Thus, footbinding translated into “national shame” and a source of weakness, and its eradication became a matter of urgency and an integral part of the nationalist movement, aiming at protecting the Chinese nation from being colonised and preventing the Chinese race from extinction. On the one hand, the Chinese male’s way of reacting to the West’s perspective of footbinding, with the fixation on the relation it had with the national crisis, caused Chinese women to be viewed as political agents. On the other hand, the nationalist arguments articulated by Chinese men against footbinding were themselves rhetorical, attempting to convince reluctant Chinese men that ending footbinding was not merely in the interests of women, but in their own interests as well.  

64 I thank one of the anonymous reviewers, who inspired me to consider the possibility of the rhetoric of the Chinese male’s arguments in convincing other Chinese men of the advantages of ending footbinding for themselves.
3. 2. Anti-footbinding as Feminism

With the minds of her daughters cramped by ignorance, and their feet
crippled by the tyranny of an absurd fashion, China suffers an immense
loss, social and economic.

--- W. A. P. Martin

Chinese women with bound feet had long been viewed, both in China and outside, as
victims needing salvation. They were the group of Others that had been silent and
represented. It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when
some Chinese feminists began to be actively involved in anti-footbinding movements
that the voice of the silent Other was heard. However, like their male Chinese
reformers who integrated anti-footbinding with women’s liberation into their grander
project of saving the nation, Chinese feminists, born in the era of semi-feudalism and
semi-colonialism, voluntarily shouldered the historical burden of anti-colonialism and
the nation’s self-strengthening while emancipating their country-women. Some
feminists, like Qiu Jin (1875-1907), radicalised by their overseas study experience,
combined the anti-footbinding movement with other national revolutions and
forwarded the liberation of Chinese women into the flow of Chinese revolution and
modernisation. These feminists, who received their education either from mission
schools, or from abroad, began to make their own voice heard by establishing journals
and newspapers. They became spokeswomen for the rest of their country-women, and
reversed women’s traditional role as merely objects needing to be saved to becoming

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65 W. A. P. Martin 217.
66 Carol C. Chin, “Translating the New Woman: Chinese Feminists View the West, 1905-15,”
Translating Feminisms in China: A Special Issue of Gender and History, ed. Dorothy Ko and Wang
subjects of the women’s liberation and the nationalist movement.

Based on their educational background, these early feminists epitomised Western feminists, such as Little. Their participation in the anti-footbinding movement was a reaction to the call of the Western sisters. Chinese feminists justified the abolition of footbinding by adopting the Western idea of equality between men and women as a natural right. In a paper published in Zhongguo Xinnujie (New Chinese Women), a woman wrote, “At bottom, men and women are both citizens; all have their proper duties, and should thus receive equal rights. … Ultimately, society is formed by men and women together.”

Therefore, binding the feet of women rather than those of men was considered a deprivation of women’s natural right. In addition, feminists emphasised the great importance of women in a country by holding that the degree of a country's civilisation was indicated by the civilisation of its women. Yan Bin, the editor of the Journal of the New Women of China pointed out, that

[i]t is universal that in any country on earth, no matter how big or small its size and population, half of its people are women. If women live in dark but men are enlightened, the country is at most called a semi-civilized one. As a matter of fact, if women are backward, men cannot be advanced.

Thus, women were equal with men in terms of their importance to the civilisation of the country, so the liberation of Chinese women was as crucial as the liberation of men, and, further, was part and parcel of the liberation of the whole nation.

The advocacy of equality between the two sexes was also extended by the feminists to the demand of women’s participation in politics. Immediately after the outbreak of the 1911 Revolution, there was a feminist movement led by Lin Zongsu

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67 In Zhongguo xin nujie zazhi (Journal of the New Women of China), April 1907: 174.
(1877-1944), striving for women’s rights to participate in politics. They formed a league with over two hundred members. On 26 February 1912, they submitted a memorial to the Republic’s Senate, demanding that the equality between men and women be a Constitutional Right, and that women be granted the same enfranchisement as men. They argued that, “the equal rights enjoyed by two sexes are the foundation of an equal society. In order to achieve this, women must be granted the rights to participate in politics.”\(^69\) Thus, feminists who fought against footbinding were motivated to address the benefits that their countrywomen with bound feet would accrue by explaining the freedom they would enjoy by having natural feet. Du Qingzhi, for example, a female writer in *Women’s World*, testified to the harms of footbinding and listed four advantages natural-foot women enjoyed: they walked faster, had better health, retained their rights and expanded their knowledge. She encouraged women to strive for freedom by opposing this practice.\(^70\) In this sense, anti-footbinding became a prerequisite, which was feminist in nature, that would empower women to enjoy more rights. Even though the demise of footbinding did not guarantee the freedom of Chinese women from a patriarchal society, it was a significant step forward in helping free the bodies of the younger generation to participate in the politics opening up in the New Republic. However, as followers of their liberal male reformers and revolutionaries, Chinese feminists proposed anti-footbinding in the nationalist rhetoric, integrating their emancipation into the project of the nation’s revitalisation and modernisation. The double features of these Chinese women’s participation as both feminism and nationalism can be seen in the image of the New Woman that they advocated.

\(^{69}\) “Nujie daibiao Zhang Qunying deng shangshu canyiyuan shu,” (Feminist Representative Zhang Qunying Submitted a Memorial to the Senate) *Shenbao* 26 Feb. 1912.

3.2.1. A New Womanhood

Chinese feminists received a modern education either in mission schools, in government or private schools for girls, or a small number went abroad to places such as Japan, Europe, and the United States. They returned to China to “plant the seed” of progress and brought back new ideas and new images of womanhood (Kwok 102). The image of “new women” was portrayed in Shanghai magazines and newspapers on an unprecedented scale, establishing them as embodiments of the modern society. In the context of China’s peril of being colonised, these educated Chinese feminists shouldered the dual missions of women’s liberation and the nation’s modernisation, and they envisioned for all Chinese women an image of a new womanhood: independent, educated, and responsible for both the family and the nation.

On the one hand, fighting to remove the bandages that had bound their feet for a millennium, they encouraged women to exchange their dependence for independence and strive for equal rights with men. On the other hand, they called on women to take equal responsibility with men for protecting and strengthening the nation. However, the core of the new womanhood was the nation. For example, the anti-footbinding activist and revolutionary heroine Qiu Jin was an ardent feminist and nationalist. In an address to two hundred million countrywomen, which was published in the second issue of the Journal of Baihua (a journal she established in Japan in 1904), Qiu Jin asked women to be independent and self-reliant, for the country was in danger of extinction. She said:

Dear sisters, you must know that you’ll get nothing if you rely upon others.

You must go out and get things for yourselves….You must know that when a country is near destruction, women cannot rely on the men any more because

they aren’t even able to protect themselves. If we don’t take heart now and shape up, it will be too late when China is destroyed.\textsuperscript{72}

Four years later, she published a song in the second issue of \textit{Chinese Woman} in 1907, “A Fighting Song for Women’s Rights,” persuading women to be independent and knowledgeable and thereby to contribute to the good of the nation:

We women love freedom. Let us toast for the sake of freedom. Men and women are born equal. How can we be willing to be subordinates? Hopefully, we can strive and start a new life, cleaning the dust of old shame. China’s revitalization needs our hands.

Old customs are embarrassing and shameful, as women were treated as inferior as animals. At this time of change and reform, women’s self-dependence and reliance come first. Hopefully, we can get rid of the shackles of slaves and arm ourselves with intelligence and knowledge. Shoulder our responsibility for the country, and live up to the name of the new womanhood.

Here, Qiu Jin preached the equality of both sexes and envisioned a future of a new China where women could dispense with the old, embarrassing, and shameful situation of being treated like animals and slaves, and could enjoy freedom just as men did. In order to achieve these goals, women should strive and start a new life by being independent, intelligent, and knowledgeable as a new woman. However, the core of such a new future and new womanhood was the nation, as “China’s revitalization needs our hands” and “our responsibility.” The independence Qiu Jin promotes here was, first of all, an economic one. She condemned footbinding for confining women and precluding them from education. However, according to Qiu Jin, although footbinding embodied women’s suppression in a male-dominant society, it

served as an excuse for women’s dependence on men, at least economically. Nevertheless, the sorry state of dependent women as half the population, as Qiu Jin believed, would accelerate the decline of the nation.\(^{73}\) This opinion was an echo of her male counterpart Liang Qichao’s emphasis on the positive influence of women’s economic independence on the nation’s power. In an essay he wrote around 1896-1897, “On Women’s Education,” he pointed out the root of China’s weakness was owing, in part, to the fact that “[a]ll two hundred million of our women are consumers, but not a single one has produced anything of profit. They are not able to make a living by themselves but only waiting to be fed.”\(^{74}\) Though women’s economic dependence on men was a reality at that time, it was not fair to blame women alone for China’s weakness. Liang’s assertion that “not a single” woman had produced anything of profit was exaggerated. It was much more a form of propaganda that he used to advocate anti-footbinding – or rather, national reform – than a truth. Therefore, women’s independence, physically and economically, was crucial to upgrading their status from being treated as animals and slaves, and more importantly, it would contribute to the growth of the nation’s power. Again, in the minds of feminists such as Qiu Jin, the feminine campaigns for women’s freedom and independence, or for the eradication of old customs such as footbinding, which had caused embarrassment and shame, were fought as a monolithic nationwide movement more for defending against exterior invasions and strengthening the nation than for their own emancipation.

Another key requirement for a new womanhood was education. In China, education had always been highly valued, but only for men. Women’s ignorance was equated with feminine virtues. Beginning in the nineteenth century, with the


\(^{74}\) Quoted in Dorothy Ko 2006: 221. It is a section of Liang Qichao’s longer essay “Bianfa tongyi” Yinbingshi heji, 12 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994) 1: 38.
establishment of missionary-run girls’ schools, the concept that women possessed certain physical and spiritual rights equal to men spread and infiltrated Chinese society. Chinese literati regarded this as the real significance of missionaries in China (Beahan 1976: 48). Early Chinese feminists, who had received a Western education, began to alter the traditional Chinese equation between women’s ignorance and feminine virtues, and to explore how physical bondage was inseparably linked to other forms of bondage affecting their lives (Kwok 115). Footbinding was thought to have confined women and their thoughts to the narrowest spheres, making them unable to access education, a natural right that should be enjoyed by all new women, and further, as a solution to China’s modernisation movement. Therefore, feminists combined the anti-footbinding campaign with the promotion of women’s education. Qiu Jin called on her countrywomen to encourage and support their husbands to invest in education, and to send their sons and daughters to school:

Let us all put aside our former selves and be resurrected as complete human beings. Those of you who are old, do not call yourselves old and useless. If your husband wants to open schools, don’t stop them; if your good sons want to study abroad, don’t hold them back. Those among us who are middle-aged, don’t hold back your husband lest they lose their ambition and spirit and fail in their work. After your sons are born, send them to schools. You must do the same or your daughters, and, whatever you do, don’t bind their feet. As for you young girls among us, go to school if you can. If not, read and study at home.75

However, behind the promotion of women’s education, there was a social context—that the nation could not rely solely on men, and therefore, women were expected to be

75 Ebrey 249.
strong enough to resist colonisation. Qiu Jin’s advocacy of women’s awareness of education was affected by the ideas of Liang Qichao, who othered women as “those with round heads but pointy feet.” He referred to Mencius’s saying that “those who dwell in leisure without an education are close to beasts” and concluded that unschooled women were no better than beasts. Liang attributed the state of women being uneducated more to their ignorance than the educational system, as women, in Liang’s opinion, did not feel even slight shame about themselves. Liang opined that “no wonder men keep them as dogs and horses and slaves.”76 Thus, Chinese feminists valued education as a means for women to alter their status. Liang also emphasised that women’s education was the precondition for raising competent offspring, believing that the educated mother, as the first teacher of her children, was better able to cultivate good children, who could to contribute to the nation.77 The Chinese official who published the Girls’ Reader articulated a similar idea. In his preface, he explained the importance of educated women to the nation’s continuity:

A good girl makes a good wife, a good wife makes a good mother; a good mother makes a good son. If the mothers have not been trained from childhood where are we to find the strong men of our nation. If then we say as China has said for so long: Let the men be educated, let the women remain in ignorance, half at least of the nation cannot be as useful as it should. It is as if one half of a man’s body were paralysed; these members not only being helpless but proving a weight, a hindrance to those not affected.78

Therefore, although the anti-footbinding movement highlighted women’s right to education, there was to be no change in women’s role as mothers, or in their

76 Ko 2006: 221. It is a section of Liang Qichao’s longer essay “Bianfa tongyi,” (On Reform) Yinbingshi heji, 12 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994) 1: 38.
responsibility for the nation. Just as independence was the characteristic of a new womanhood to serve the national purpose, women’s education was also highlighted as a key way to preserve the race and save the nation from being colonised. This conclusion stemmed from a comparison with the education that Western countries provided for their women, which was believed to be a source of those nations’ prosperity and superiority. Chinese feminists perceived it as a role model:

The strong countries of Europe and America know this well…their women receive the same level of education as men. The ideals of love of country and the duties of citizens are poured into their brains, so daily their female citizens diligently consider national affairs their responsibility…no wonder their national strength has advanced, and no one dares insult them!  

Once again, women’s equality with men was linked to nationalist rhetoric. Education was not an inherent right for women, but women’s potential contribution to China’s strength and modernity justified it.

Therefore, women’s feet emerged, in the late Qing period, as part of nascent concerns about women as an embodiment of the nation. In other words, anti-footbinding served as an allegory for nation-building in China. The liberation of women’s feet was connected with the liberation of women and the revitalisation of the nation. Male Chinese reformers, revolutionaries, and early feminists in the period 1840-1911, each with their own perspective and respective motives, took an active part in the anti-footbinding movement initiated by Westerners. Chinese men’s motivation for eradicating footbinding arose from the shame of a nation brought by women with bound feet and the weakness it passed down to generations to come.

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80 Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng argued that the female body in the late Qing period was served as an abstraction, if not a fantasy, as a mother of national subjects (guoming zhi mu). See Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng, eds, *Translating Feminisms in China* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub. Ltd., 2007) 10.
Chinese feminists were motivated by a desire to secure for women the same rights enjoyed by men, rights that footbinding denied them, such as the opportunity to receive an education. However, they all justified their actions by presenting to the masses a China that would be strengthened, revitalised, and free from colonisation, in part as a result of the eradication of footbinding. Their focus on, or rather, their commitment to abolishing footbinding was unanimous; that is, it was central to the demands of the reforms and revolutions at the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, which were aimed at two levels: the exterior, defending against imperialist invasion and colonisation, and the interior, revitalising the nation and establishing a modern China. These two goals inevitably involved Chinese women and required them to be independent, educated, and physically healthy and strong. Thus, women’s bodies and their health became closely and inextricably linked with the nation’s survival and the nation’s international image. Therefore, they placed significant emphasis on the evilness of footbinding in affecting and hindering both the physical and mental health of the offspring, through binding the mother’s feet and denying the children’s access to education. The ideals of womanhood – being strong and educated – as promoted by male reformers and feminists alike still stressed women’s traditional function, i.e. procreation, which was tied to the future of the race. As “[m]odern Chinese national consciousness originated from the gaze from the outside in,”\textsuperscript{81} the Chinese anti-footbinding discourse was created as a response to the Western gaze, and the movement conducted by Chinese nationalists and feminists to construct China’s modern image was put in service to Chinese nationalism.\textsuperscript{82} Therefore, footbinding, as an element of China’s otherness that the West sought to

\textsuperscript{81} Dorothy Ko, Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005) 31.

\textsuperscript{82} Leo Ou-fan Lee, Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP) 309.
change, was adapted according to a combination of Western and Chinese influences. However, it became not merely a matter of the wellbeing of women as individuals, but also something that would benefit the nation as a whole.

**Conclusion**

[China] is sadly wanting in cheerful colours, and what seems most needed are a few paint brushes to give it a more modern look, and a very large number of stiff brooms to sweep away the dust and grime which have slowly fallen upon them during the past centuries and dyed everything grey.

--- John MacGowan

The above was what MacGowan saw when he arrived in Xiamen after the Second Opium War. As a response to MacGowan’s suggestions to give the grey China more cheerful colours, Chinese elites at the turn of the twentieth century used anti-footbinding as the broom to sweep away the dust of the declining empire, and as a paintbrush to give China a new modern look. Therefore, my conclusion of the thesis begins with the end of footbinding.

The study of the participation of the Chinese elites, male and female, in the anti-footbinding movement from the 1890s to 1911, indicates their anxiety about the country’s destiny under the threat of Western invasion, and their desire to secure women as individuals. Essentially a feminist emancipation project, Chinese elites fought for anti-footbinding in the name of the nation, emphasising the tie between women’s bodies and the nation’s power and international image. Even the idea of new

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83 Beside the Bamboo (London: London Missionary Society, 1914) 42.
womanhood itself mixed concepts of women’s personal freedom with their responsibility for the nation’s survival and honour. Therefore, for Chinese elites of both genders, the eradication of footbinding was a vehicle for social change. It functioned as an empowerment that justified their revolutionary action against the incompetent Manchu government; it also provided an incentive to liberate and modernise women in the context of benefitting the nation as a whole. In a nutshell, women’s bodies became the space in which national modernity was imagined and was henceforth a medium that was indissolubly integrated in, yet subordinated to, the interests of the nation. In this sense, it is indeed as Kwame Appiah argues (2010): the power from within of “honor,” to use his word (but I would argue for the consciousness of national crisis), not a force from the outside that drove the Chinese anti-footbinding movement (55-100).

However, the unrelenting influence that Westerners, both missionaries and non-missionaries, had during the nineteenth century on the popularisation of anti-footbinding ideas among local Chinese, especially the elites, cannot be denied. Even though anti-footbinding was not a new phenomenon in its long history, since some Chinese male scholars had denounced it since its inception, it was foreign missionaries living in China who initiated the anti-footbinding movement. Despite differences in attitudes, missionaries of both genders shared the same battle against footbinding. Christian interpretations of footbinding and their promotion of the anti-footbinding movement not only inform us about the vision Western missionaries had of Chinese women, but also about the beliefs that foreigners exported to China. Although missionary participation in the movement was largely motivated by the overarching goal of converting China – whether through education in mission schools, or by preaching Gospel in anti-footbinding societies – their contribution in the early
and formative years of the abolition movement was quite real. Ironically, the results of the indirect benefit to the nationalist movement and the expelling of missionaries were hardly what they hoped for.

In a sense, however, footbinding does function as a form of empowerment for many nineteenth-century Westerners, both personally and publicly. Most Western discourse about Chinese women focused on their status as victims or objects to be theorised and rescued by people in the West. Footbinding, by creating crippled women, provided Westerners with a Chinese Other: helpless, speechless, and waiting to be saved. Therefore, the maimed body of the Chinese woman was available as an enabling and metaphorical space for Western subjectivity. In crusading against footbinding, these Westerners, especially Christian women, could graft the anxiety of the problems surrounding their own status at home onto a Chinese cause. Their representation of Chinese women with bound feet as the subaltern empowered Westerners – as agents of imperialist progress and enlightenment – to speak on behalf of Chinese women, and to save them from their own male-dominated society.

The meaning Westerners ascribed to Chinese woman’s bound feet varied from period to period. This study of shifting Western interpretations of footbinding has indicated that the meaning of footbinding was bound up in the changing nature of its intercultural exchange with China. Realignments between China and the West changed the place of China, as well as the meaning of the bound foot, in Western imagination. Western praise for footbinding as beautiful and admirable in periods before the nineteenth century was in keeping with its relatively benign relationship with China, when China was viewed as “Cathay” (as coined by Marco Polo) or the “Great and Mightie of China” (in Mendoza’s words). Western criticisms of footbinding from the nineteenth century onwards, as a sign of a backward and inferior
Other, were largely determined by “the spirit of the times,” overlapping with the Victorian Age as a period of “self-satisfaction, prejudices, and limitations” (Mason 252). They were also in line with the changed power relationships between China and the West, which had shifted from China-centred to Western-dominated.

Spanning a long period of time that encompasses Imperial and Republican rule, and covering a large amount of material printed in English and in Chinese, this thesis has had the ambitious goal of explaining footbinding’s place both within Chinese culture and in Western perceptions of China. Further, in an attempt to survey different responses of such separate groups as men and women, educated and non-educated, Christians and non-Christians, feminists and social reformists, the thesis has explored the nuances of these various groups of people in anti-footbinding campaigns and the different implications of such campaigns for developing ideas of Christianity, Western superiority, nationalism, feminism and republican governance. However, it is also noteworthy to add, as a gesture toward future research, that further differentiation between the attitudes and performances of different sects of missionaries active in China during the late nineteenth century is needed, as well as further explanation of the historical causes for these differences. Moreover, differentiating and analysing the kinds of print sources in which discourses of footbinding were produced would enrich both our interpretation of footbinding and our understanding of why Western observers and commentators wanted to write about, as well as to intervene in, this Chinese cultural practice.
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