

# “The Very Poetry of Motion:” Missionaries and Footbinding in Late Qing China

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## ABSTRACT

Believed to have begun with Han noble families, and eventually spreading to most classes of Chinese society, footbinding refers to the practice of restricting the foot's growth to maintain a small form and specific shape, and was practiced on Chinese girls from a young age until the twentieth century. When British missionaries began activity in China, they became concerned with footbinding and sought to eradicate the ancient traditional practice. Examining the work of both orthodox and revisionist historians alongside primary texts written by missionaries in the nineteenth century, this paper studies why missionaries objected to footbinding and how the anti-footbinding movement gained traction in China. Ultimately, British missionaries misinterpreted the cultural meaning of footbinding, and their methods of eradicating the practice reflected this misunderstanding. Missionaries saw footbinding as patriarchal, regressive, and sexually perverse; in reality, footbinding's meaning was connected to nationalism and ethnic identity. Therefore, when Chinese activists began to perpetuate anti-footbinding propaganda, they nationalized anti-footbinding discourse, seeking to remove British influence from the movement. The paper is concerned with how missionary condemnation of footbinding constituted cultural imperialism, and why this process was successful in missionary activity in the late Qing period (the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century).

## Introduction

In the nineteenth century, as globally, Christian missionaries were particularly concerned with the morality which governed female bodies. Such morality, even in discussions which were not explicitly focused on chastity or marriage, was usually centered on female sexuality. Condemning eroticism and praising purity and chastity,

missionaries positioned women as the civilizing forces of society. Missionaries believed it was a woman's responsibility to maintain the sexual morality of those men who might be tempted by their bodies. Christianity, consequently, was not merely a matter of baptism and creed, but a matter of personal and cultural behaviors. Many missionaries

claimed that women should adhere to Christian and Western standards of sexual purity and bodily decorum. The creed of Christian virtue became the foundation for missionary cultural imperialism. In China, footbinding became the locus of Christian discourse on sexuality. The practice involved the wrapping of a young woman or child's foot tightly with cloth to prevent excessive growth and create a certain shape in the foot. However, the tradition was vastly misunderstood, yet prioritized by Christian missionaries in China. Because "there is something like a masonic secrecy about this small foot," footbinding was difficult for missionaries (especially male missionaries) to understand (Tradescant 31). Regardless, this did not stop them from forming opinions on its origins, meanings, morality, and eradication. Perceived by missionaries as a bodily and sexual perversion, footbinding was offensive to Euro-Christian sensibilities. For the Chinese, however, footbinding was not a simple sexual matter. Rather, it was at once an art form and an indicator of class and nationality that could empower some women.

This essay will examine missionary attitudes towards footbinding, which culminated in the anti-footbinding movement of the late Qing period, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although anti-footbinding began as a missionary, even imperialist, movement against Chinese "cultural perversion," missionary attitudes towards footbinding were not adopted by most Chinese people verbatim. While missionaries were concerned about the morality of footbinding—a worry expressed in fears about physical deformation, sexual perversion, and child abuse, to name a few—Chinese commentators and scholars positioned footbinding as a nationalist concern which would damage China's reputation abroad. Scholarship on footbinding is extensive and varied. I consider orthodox Western historians, who interpret footbinding like missionaries did, as well as revisionist historians like Dorothy Ko, who studies footbinding as an art form, fashion phenomenon, and nationalist project. Recent studies like Ko's illuminate Chinese views on the

practice which complicate these often overly-simplistic views. Missionary discourses failed to consider the real significance of footbinding to Chinese culture and used the language of Christian morality to condemn the practice as a sign of Eastern, heathen bodily perversion. For the Chinese, conversely, footbinding was at once an artistic expression, a nationalist signifier, and a class identifier. When anti-footbinding became prominent in China, the Chinese changed their discourse about footbinding to emphasize its nationalist elements, rather than the religious doctrine or natural laws that supposedly ruled it. The abolition of footbinding in China occurred not only because of missionary disapproval and Christian evangelism, but also because Chinese people nationalized anti-footbinding discourse to "modernize" their own. Such changes stemmed from a desire to gain both global prestige and Western approval.

## The Heavenly Foot: Cultural Imperialism<sup>1</sup>

While it is tempting to overemphasize the ways in which missionaries apparently unequivocally condemned footbinding, in truth, among earlier missionaries, there was much discrepancy about how to address the issue. The practice proved challenging to Western minds because, unlike Chinese women, European men could not observe footbinding up close. It thus remained shrouded in mystery. Early Europeans in China viewed footbinding with "adoration that borders on longing" for the concealed body, a sign of Chinese women's chastity (Ko, "Bondage" 209). The Chinese body in the sixteenth century was imagined and described as white and beautiful, a more distant and exotic version of the European body (206). Initial accounts of footbinding presented it as merely another indicator of Chinese Otherness (208). But in the nineteenth century, images of the Chinese body shifted towards yellowness and ugliness, and footbinding became a deformity and a crime (214). Such shifts reflected changing dynamics between

Europe and China, as European presence went from exploration in the sixteenth century to attempts at economic and political control in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the nineteenth century saw the peak of Britain's global empire and the continued development of white supremacist discourse in Britain. This race discourse demonized all non-white bodies, including those of East Asians. "Europe needed the Chinese Other to complete the image of its modern self," and thus footbinding became the antithesis of everything European and Christian, an expression of the dirtiness and perversion of both male and female Chinese bodies (Ko, "Bondage" 221). Yet, even once discourses changed towards political control of colonized regions, not all missionaries supported the eradication of footbinding. Most missionaries had spent decades in China and were no longer merely foreign actors (Lau 202). More significantly, missionaries were informed by European governments' tense relationships with the Qing officials (198). These tensions had developed over many decades of Chinese isolationist policies, which were contrary to British economic trade interests and created conflicts surrounding the import of opium. Consequently, many Europeans feared angering the Chinese literati by attacking such a widespread custom, as they wished to continue their economic presence in China. Furthermore, while most medical missionaries agreed on the physical detriments to health caused by footbinding, they could not agree on what course of action to take (Kwok 110). While the missionary J. Dudgeon warned against making unbound feet mandatory for admission to Christian schools, others, like John Kerr, saw footbinding as "a sin against God and a sin against man" (111). For some, footbinding was not within the purview of the gospel. For others, cultural conversion, indicated by shifts in bodily practices, was just as important as spiritual conversion and baptism. Attitudes began to solidify as the nineteenth century progressed. But at a missionary conference in 1877, footbinding was not made a missionary priority despite being unanimously condemned as sinful. Women missionaries' increased contact with

young Chinese girls in both school and home settings accelerated the ongoing debate about footbinding (Ristivojevic 146). Eventually, anti-footbinding became the dominant missionary attitude; colonial scrutiny perceived the practice as a sign of native sexual savagery (Ko, "Footbinding" 427). The earliest anti-footbinding movement was begun by Reverend John Macgowan and his wife in Xiamen in 1874 (Ristivojevic 147). At this point, "Measures against footbinding remained a localized effort, depending on the inclination of specific missionaries and the consciousness of specific women" (Kwok 111). Some believed that women with bound feet were an obstacle to Christian evangelization, because "cloistered" bound women were hard to reach and convert due to their social isolation (Spitzer Frost 332-333). At the turn of the century, the anti-footbinding movement became particularly successful as missionaries encouraged girls to unbind and parents to avoid binding. By 1896, Bridgman Academy called footbinding "a thing of the past," equating cultural imperialism with modernization (Kwok 113). By the early twentieth century, even non-Christian Chinese people spoke up against the practice. The eradication of footbinding was important in narratives of both individual and national salvation to both spiritual and cultural conversions. For Protestants, outward indications were important for determining the authenticity of conversion (Reinders 159). Footbinding was one such way to demonstrate commitment to Christianity.

The practice was condemned as sinful because it incited lust in men; footbinding corrupted women's bodies, but also men's desires (Kwok 112). According to Reverend John Macgowan, "Women everywhere were under the grip of this intolerable tyranny" (16). Missionary publications, like *The Chinese Recorder*, exaggerated the mistreatment of Chinese women at the hands of Chinese men. An 1897 issue recorded a Chinese man supposedly saying, "the business of a woman is to administer the inside affairs, just as it is the business of a man to administer the outside affairs" (Headland 16). Yet, despite the disapproval of both Chinese women's bound feet

and Chinese men's responses to them, footbinding was exotic and alluring to Europeans, who sent postcards with images of Chinese women with bound feet back home and purchased Chinese shoes as souvenirs (Ko, "Footbinding" 430).

These images invoked pity and disgust in Europeans and were therefore key to developing the European imagination surrounding footbinding. Yet, as foreigners went from purchasing Chinese shoes to removing bound feet from corpses as tokens of their travels (Ko, "Footbinding" 431), Europeans fetishized the bound foot as an object of sin, lust, and tragedy, "themselves trophies were ranked in a hierarchy of values according to their proximity to the Chinese woman's body." Europeans were as repulsed by footbinding as they were by the Otherness of the Chinese body. But at the same time, the exoticism and mystery of the Chinese body, especially the female body, was alluring. In many ways, the European fascination with footbinding drove the desire to end it. Significantly, Europeans claimed foreign intervention was necessary to "save" China from footbinding: Macgowan wrote that the Chinese had no hope that anyone in their country could uproot the practice before missionary intervention (15). For him, of all missionary victories "there is none so glorious as the deliverance of the women of China" (Macgowan 101). Footbinding was a "tragedy" the Chinese had to be saved from themselves. Ultimately, colonial scrutiny conceived of footbinding as a sexualized form of native savagery.

## "Unfortunate Women:" the Sexual Sin of Footbinding

"A Chinese is licentious in the general turn of his ideas, and makes a public display of those forbidden pleasures," wrote George Tradescant in 1841 (23). The sin of footbinding was fundamentally a sexual perversion which supposedly kept women

under the "intolerable tyranny" of perverted Chinese men, according to European missionaries. Yet, the sexual sin of footbinding was not exclusive to men; Reverend Ye, a Chinese convert and clergyman, criticized mothers for the "backward" practice of footbinding, and saw daughters with bound feet as licentious seductresses (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 17). Tradescant, like most, exaggerated the realities of footbinding, claiming "a foot two inches in length is the idol of the Chinaman," when, in reality, the smallest of bound feet were usually no less than three to four inches (31). Missionaries misinterpreted footbinding because foreigners (like, in fact, Chinese men) were unable to observe the bound foot in proximity. Because, as Dorothy Ko argues, the allure of footbinding was concealment of the foot itself within elaborate shoes and loose clothing, "the rationale and rituals of the practice seemed opaque" (Ko, "Bondage" 200). Consequently, Europeans were fascinated with this bodily sign of Chinese Otherness and speculated about footbinding in their writings, warping conceptualization in European imaginations.

Reverend John Macgowan called the practice the worst system of mutilation to be found among "savages" (19). Drawing on Christian discourses of sexual perversion and bodily purity, Macgowan and others disdained footbinding for its destruction of the natural foot. Indeed, an unbound foot was called *tianzu*, literally "heavenly foot," referring to a primordial state of not binding (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 14). The invocation of heaven dually referenced Christian theology and Chinese Confucian traditions in an attempt to appeal to both converts and non-converts. Macgowan's society was called the Heavenly Foot Society. Eventually, these societies spread beyond Xiamen throughout China "wherever missionaries lived" (Macgowan 95). "Within the feet lies grace and poise... the very poetry of motion," wrote Macgowan, believing that footbinding destroyed the natural beauty of the God-given foot (21). Locating feminine beauty in the foot, Macgowan emphasized the perversion of footbinding. Nineteenth-century British writer,

Alicia Little, declared that unbound women were “bound to be apostles in their turn,” and unbinding (or never being bound) became a prerequisite to Christian devotion in China (321). Christianity and footbinding, to missionaries in the nineteenth century, were fundamentally at odds. True spiritual conversion must be accompanied by cultural conversion.

Criticisms of Chinese sexual perversion were upheld by discourses about the Chinese patriarchy and “child abuse.” In missionary literature, footbinding indicated Chinese women were inferior to Chinese men. For example, Macgowan argued that women were disadvantaged because footbinding would render them unable to flee in case of war (20). Still, others suggested footbinding was a means for a husband to control his wife, as footbinding “lamed” her, preventing her from running away (Spitzer Frost 332). Although the process of footbinding was painful, limited evidence exists to suggest that its purpose was to “abuse” children or “lame” women. The Chinese certainly did not perceive footbinding this way; many rural Chinese women labored with feet bound to some extent, and many women mourned the loss of the practice which had come to be meaningful to their feminine self-expression. European concern over the social status of Chinese women suggests a faux-humanitarian imperial impulse. Women were far from equal to men in Europe, yet Europeans voiced concern over gender inequality in China in an attempt to undermine Chinese culture.

Images of Chinese women in missionary publications were characterized by dirtiness and unkempt bodies, presenting the Chinese woman as neglected, disadvantaged, and even repulsive (Ristivojevic 150). Consequently, missionary publications represented Chinese women as eager to embrace Christianity as a form of social liberation. As Tradescant wrote, footbinding was “unable to bear the light” of Christianity (32). Missionaries regularly emphasized the painful physical process of footbinding, especially as it

was practiced on children. Tradescant was most fascinated by “the practice of destroying the foot... at five, a rich man’s daughter has her foot so firmly bound that the thing is killed” (29). The “abuse” of children through footbinding supposedly damaged the mother-daughter bond. Health detriments of footbinding also proved rhetorically useful for missionaries. Tradescant noted that bound feet stunted calf development (Tradescant 30). Dr. Lockhart, a nineteenth-century medical missionary, published detailed descriptions of bound feet for European readership, exposing the “harms” of deforming the “natural foot” (Ko, “Bondage” 200-201) Although some missionaries described footbinding as breaking the feet bones, Ko notes that this was rare; rather, footbinding led to bone atrophy and weakened tendons (Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters* 192). Missionaries, regardless of scientific accuracy, leveraged European medical knowledge and authority to denounce footbinding.

Medical discourse was key to how missionaries attempted to end footbinding in China. Dissemination of images was central to this process; revealing the concealed foot both removed the allure and mystery of footbinding while exposing its harms (Ko, “Bondage” 201). The bound foot, once revealed, looked very different from the lily or lotus it was meant to resemble (219). This removed the metaphorical appeal of the bound foot’s shape and replaced it with medicalized repulsion. Missionaries were known to publish informational tracts on the harms of footbinding intended initially for Chinese Christian women (Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters* 41). Lower-class women who needed the money were occasionally willing to unbind for missionaries who offered handsome sums in exchange for photographs of the bound foot, despite the taboo of revealing feet to men (Ko, “Bondage” 218). These photographs were posted publicly as posters and distributed among Chinese women. They were meant to illicit disgust and shame at the image of the revealed foot. X-Rays were also posted publicly, offering the most intimate portrayal of the bound, destroyed foot, stripping away skin and muscle to

reveal warped bone (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 42). In an 1897 issue of *The Chinese Recorder*, Alicia Little described a lecture given by a Dr. McCartney to Chinese men regarding the medical detriments of footbinding (320). The talk was evidence of an expansion of anti-footbinding efforts, from convincing Chinese Christian women to unbind to converting the whole nation. Missionaries believed that revealing the "ugly" bound foot would evoke "compassion" (Tradescant 31). Macgowan emphasized the need to reach the entire nation with the anti-footbinding message, and so placards detailing its horrors were spread (94).

Although anti-footbinding efforts began with encouraging Christian Chinese women in Heavenly Foot Societies to unbind and including an "unbinding clause" in the Society's pledge (Macgowan 86), public rallies were later organized to reach non-Christian women (Lau 211). For example, schooling played a role in discouraging women from binding their children's feet. In Fuzhou, school primers included a chapter on footbinding's harms (Kwok 111). Schools provided close contact between Chinese women and European women; European women presented themselves as "saving" Chinese women from the oppression of footbinding. Missionaries believed bound feet were "incompatible with educated womanhood;" several schools refused to admit pupils with bound feet or to hire women with bound feet as teachers (Spitzer Frost 339). Additionally, they offered to offset educational costs to reassure parents who worried about their daughter's marriage prospects if their feet were unbound (Kwok 114). The Chinese girls educated in Christian schools would become wives for Chinese male converts, who supposedly would not care about bound feet (Spitzer Frost 339). Although this assumption was, in many cases, faulty, as footbinding's actual meanings in China were more cultural than religious (Kwok 111). Christian women were mobilized to persuade Chinese mothers to "stand firm" in their promise not to bind feet (Macgowan 76).

## "Products of a Woman's Hands:" the Art of Binding

Revisionist histories of footbinding provide important insight that refocuses scholarship from missionary discourses to Chinese attitudes, experiences, and opinions. While, as previously noted, some Chinese did oppose footbinding prior to missionary arrival, it was also widely practiced and lauded. Dorothy Ko discusses footbinding apparatus, particularly shoes, as forms of art. Shoes were narrow to accommodate and highlight the reshaping of the foot, usually in one of two main shapes: canoe or kayak (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 189). The shoes often featured elaborate floral embroidery and a variety of bright colours, usually using several fabrics and patterns. Made from satin and ink, most shoes for bound feet were delicate and intricate. Based on the importance of shoes to the binding ritual, Ko analyzes footbinding in relation to fashion theory. Footbinding was a bodily fashion practice that united the body and its clothing and evolved in its aesthetics and meanings over time (Ko, "Bondage" 204). In fact, shoes were so important to the art of footbinding that Alicia Little, in an effort to discourage binding and promote the beauty of unbound feet, hosted a contest for shoemakers designing the "best shoe of the future," prohibiting any entries fewer than 5 ½ inches in length (321). She sought to display shoes mimicking the shape of the "mutilated foot," as shoes gave bound feet their allure and beauty (Ibid 322). "Shoes were products of a woman's hands," notes Ko, highlighting footbinding as a distinctly feminine knowledge practice (Ko, "Footbinding" 433). Not only did women create shoes for bound feet, they were also responsible for the binding process; men usually knew little about binding and rarely saw a bare, unbound foot. Women were even buried with binding cloths on their feet, and the bound foot thus remained a concealed mystery even in death (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 188). This counteracts the common interpretation of footbinding as a form of female objectification and sexualization. Such historical realities undermine

the missionary conception of footbinding as female oppression that catered to male perversions and fetishes. In fact, footbinding—its practices and paraphernalia—allowed women to work with their hands and to participate in China’s cultural production, creating both independent income and lasting art. When women continued to bind their feet after the Chinese government forbade the practice, footbinding became a feminist protest against the government’s attempt to dictate how women could shape their bodies (Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters* 11). This turned the dialogue of patriarchal oppression on its head. While missionaries often portrayed anti-footbinding as a humanitarian effort, not all Chinese women were in favour of unbinding. Older women, especially, were often embarrassed by the anti-footbinding movement, as missionaries recharacterized what had been a symbol of class and beauty as an ugly deformation (Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters* 68).

Analyzing the histories of binding as a physical, bodily practice further contradicts missionary discourses about footbinding. Missionaries interpreted bound women both as “saints” hidden away in “sanctuaries” and victims of cruel patriarchal confinement to the indoors (Ko, “Bondage” 209), believing that the “unfortunate women” rarely ventured outside (Tradescant 24). But, in reality, bound women were “far from cloistered beings leading wasted lives” (Ko, “Footbinding” 433). Particularly among the lower classes, bound women ventured outdoors to work (434). Furthermore, missionaries misinterpreted the act of binding itself. For missionaries, unbound women were described as “bright, healthy-looking,” whereas binding was an unhealthy warping of the physical form, associated with darkness, illness, and dirtiness (Little 321). Although footbinding was certainly painful, missionaries underplayed the equal or greater pain of unbinding. Even when the pain of the process was discussed, as in Macgowan’s *How England Saved China*, unbinding was still portrayed as a success (78). Both missionary and Chinese

doctors agreed that unbinding would not restore the foot to its former state, but Macgowan and other missionaries believed that Nature would restore the natural foot nonetheless (79). Men addressed the unbound foot as a recovered object of purity (Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters* 46). For women doing the unbinding, however, the feet were part of a body that was continually cared for—bound or unbound.

Missionaries believed footbinding disregarded the health of women who practiced it, but Chinese doctors and women were actually well-informed about binding and its implications for health. Studying the impacts of binding on women’s feet, Chinese doctors warned against the potential harms of reckless, improper binding and published guidelines for proper binding (Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters* 196). Meanwhile, knowledge of how to properly bind was passed down amongst women in a family (90). While missionaries emphasized the tininess of the foot, this marker of footbinding only gained traction in the practice’s later years and was not essential (193). Rather, shape was most important to footbinding: the binding process reduced the spread of toes to help them conform with shaped shoes and shaped heels to emphasize the foot’s arch (192). Shape could identify the region from which a woman hailed, as different shapes were popular in the north and south (112). While certainly individually important, footbinding was also nationally important. Under the Qing dynasty, footbinding differentiated between the Han, who bound, and the Manchu, who had natural feet (Ko, “The Body” 12). It thus became a symbol of civilization and culture, as well as a means for any class of Chinese women to associate themselves with the elite, where the practice was believed to have originated (Kwok 110). Fundamentally, both missionary discussions about the process of binding, and their approaches to the processes of unbinding, were a vast simplification of an ancient and complex practice which held varied meanings depending on the woman who bound.

## “A Matter of Life or Death for the Nation:” Chinese Anti-Footbinding

The anti-footbinding movement successfully gained traction in China because indigenous Chinese people appropriated and nationalized missionary anti-footbinding discourse. Most early Chinese aggregators against footbinding came from a background of Western education (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 38). Beginning with Chinese Christians, the Chinese initially echoed and supported missionary arguments against the practice. While most scholarship focuses on the roles of Chinese men and Western women in the end of footbinding, Pui-lan Kwok centers her analysis on Chinese women who chose to unbind (115). Educated Chinese Christian women wrote articles for missionary publications like *Wanguo Gongbao* and used missionary language. This suggests an internalization of missionary discourse among Chinese women. Certain Chinese women even criticized missionaries and the church for doing too little to stop footbinding (Kwok 110). Chinese Christian women became more involved in the anti-footbinding movement begun by missionaries. For example, they sang the “Joy of Letting Feet Out Song,” which had lyrics focused on the practicality of unbinding (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 45). Yet, these women continued to use “foreign oil”—Vaseline—to treat their unbound feet (49). However, Chinese Christian women did not completely nationalize anti-footbinding.

In the early twentieth century, the secularization of anti-footbinding discourse in China fundamentally altered both the methods and meanings of anti-footbinding. Arguably, the process of secularizing anti-footbinding culminated in 1902 when, under pressure from both the foreign community and the literati, the Empress Dowager banned the practice. Whereas footbinding had previously been a nationalistic practice, a means to differentiate between civilized Chinese and barbaric foreigners, now, as China developed a more global national identity, many male activists argued that letting

feet out was “a matter of life or death for the nation” (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 40). Tensions grew between modernizing (westernizing) and maintaining traditional customs and culture. While the Chinese adopted rhetoric from missionary discourse, their appropriation of anti-footbinding refocused the conversation from foreign salvation of a savage nation to a nation's self-conscious choice to modernize, a project of self-improvement. Like missionaries, Chinese people focused their discourse on women, and “the status of women became the yardstick for the civilization of an entire country” (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 18). Parity between China and the West thus depended upon gender equity, as women in Western countries were supposedly more equal to men than those in China. Others appropriated missionary opinions of footbinding as child abuse, arguing that the practice “detracted from parental love” (39). But, while these arguments may have mimicked missionary rhetoric, they were employed to a different end. In 1898, prior to the Empress Dowager's 1902 edict, Kang Youwei published a memorial arguing that footbinding put China at a disadvantage (42). While such discourse was dependent upon comparing China to the West, it did away with the notion that China “could not save herself” and saw nationalists advocating for internal reform rather than foreign intervention. Indeed, China disparaged the idea that the West was more advanced by drawing comparisons between footbinding and waistbinding (corsets). They emphasized similarities between the regions and undermined claims that the progressive West could save Chinese women from oppression.

Importantly, even as this secularization took place, discourses around footbinding were not homogenous among Chinese people. Despite the activism of Kang Youwei and others, thinkers like Xue Shaohui refused to support the ban on footbinding. Xue herself believed footbinding had ancient precedent in China, and, while she did not actively admire the practice, she believed that families (and women) should be able to choose whether to bind or not (Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters* 40). With a goal to



introduce “a subjective viewpoint from inside the woman’s body,” Xue described the benefits of footbinding, which included marital pleasure (Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters* 39). Nationalists feared that women would be unable to contribute to the nation while footbinding limited their mobility. Conversely, Xue believed that the hands were more important for making contributions to the family and the country and that women’s self-improvement should be focused on education rather than the physical body (Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters* 39). Xue’s views were, in the end, less popular and gained less traction than those promoted by Kang and reinforced legally by the Empress Dowager. But, they are important in understanding that the adoption of anti-footbinding in China was neither instant nor complete.

China consciously attempted to nationalize anti-footbinding discourse in the early twentieth century, and used the abolition of footbinding as a means for China to modernize socially with the West. Ko suggests that the Chinese adopted an “offshore vantage point,” looking at China from the perspective of the Westerner who disdained them (Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters* 31). Kang Youwei, particularly, was humiliated by Western disapproval of footbinding (42). Thus, while the Chinese anti-footbinding movement deviated from the missionary anti-footbinding movement, it was not fully isolated from the Western gaze. But Ko’s suggestion that “China has its own agenda, just as it has its own ways of seeing” still applies (Ko, “Bondage” 222). To suggest that China’s concern with Western perceptions undermined the nationalist bent of its anti-footbinding movement disregards the increasing globalization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ultimately, in this period, all nations were beginning to adopt “offshore vantage points” of themselves. As empires further connected geographically distant regions and news media increased communications and information circulation about previously distant lands, it was inevitable that China should be concerned about

how the nation appeared to the outside world.

## Conclusion

While missionaries boasted that “England Saved China” from footbinding, they were only successful in disseminating anti-footbinding as a dominant philosophy because their views were adopted by China’s educated elites and finally by the Qing dynasty itself (Lau 198). Nevertheless, the history of anti-footbinding in China, begun by foreign missionaries, can be interpreted as successful cultural imperialism. Elements of cultural imperialism are evident in the process of anti-footbinding. This can be seen in the Chinese prioritization of Western opinions and appropriation of Western attitudes about binding. But, to disregard China’s own role in ending footbinding is historically reductive and adopts the missionary belief that China could not deliver itself from footbinding. As Dorothy Ko argues, “the meaning of footbinding is always constructed and thus always held in the values of the beholder” (Ko, “Bondage” 222). So, the end of footbinding, fueled by Chinese activists, evidences not merely the influence that Western missionaries had on China but a Chinese reworking of footbinding’s national meanings. As China sought the modernity which was associated with Western Europe, footbinding became an anachronism. Perhaps as importantly, reading missionary beliefs about footbinding reveals how foreign missionaries exoticized the Chinese body in a way that was fundamentally antithetical to Christianity. In doing so, they helped position Christianity and modernity as inherently Western. To draw on Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism*, China became, in Western eyes, always existing in the past, an ahistorical and mysterious Other. This exoticism, which was at once alluring and reprehensible to the Western missionary, was located both in discourse and practice in the female body. Christianity and Christian missionaries, therefore, sought to reform the woman in order to reform the nation. While an

analysis of the meanings of footbinding in Chinese society both before and after missionary contact reveals that missionaries vastly oversimplified this cultural practice, their lasting impact is undeniable. Despite Chinese nationalization, even indigenization, of anti-footbinding, the end of binding remains a legacy of missionary intervention and Christian evangelicalism in China.

## Notes

1. "Cultural imperialism" refers to the efforts by a colonizing or imperial nation to change the cultural practice of the colonized peoples or territories subject to imperial expansion. Examples can be found in the outlawing of potlach in the modern state of Canada, or in the attempt to eradicate Indigenous languages in North America. Cultural imperialism involves the assimilationist aspects of empire beyond mere political and economic control of the imperial territory. Although China was not occupied or colonized by the British during this time period, evidence of cultural imperialism remains because Britain sought to change Chinese cultural practice, as well as to exert political and economic control over China.

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