

## **The *Tian Zu Hui* (Natural Foot Society): Christian Women in China and the Fight against Footbinding**

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In this scholarly note, Brent Whitefield suggests that the Christian missionary-led campaign against footbinding in late nineteenth-century China missed the opportunity to create a connection between the Gospel and the ethics of abolition: women were emancipated, but Christianity was not widely spread as a result.

### **The Eradication of Footbinding in China: Emancipation without Proselytization**

One of the greatest success stories for missionary-led reforms in late Imperial China was the campaign to abolish the binding of women's feet. Less than two decades of concentrated effort against the custom transformed an atmosphere of near-universal acceptance into one of widespread rejection, all with minimal assistance from a sympathetic government and without recourse to legal remedies. It would be difficult to adduce many examples of missionaries anywhere successfully defeating a firmly entrenched tradition in such a hostile atmosphere, in so little time, and without use of force. Furthermore, it is nearly universally acknowledged, even within China, that the initiative for the anti-footbinding campaign came from the foreign, mostly missionary, community.

Yet while missionaries are credited with raising Chinese consciousness to the cruelty and waste of the custom, they were far less successful at achieving their stated goal of a Christian China. Even less ambitiously, they were not successful in convincing the Chinese that the movement against footbinding was, in any meaningful way, Christian. Why were missionaries unable to build on the success of the anti-footbinding movement to gain converts to the faith they propagated? This is a question to which scholars of the missionary movement in China may wish to turn some attention. Here I will but tentatively suggest that the rhetoric of the anti-footbinding

movement did not offer distinctly Christian objections to the practice and thus constituted a missed opportunity, at least for Protestant missionaries in China, to posit a connection between the Gospel and the ethics of abolition. By emphasizing and even inventing Confucian objections to the practice, missionaries allowed the Chinese falsely to conclude that the rationale for unbinding came from within the Chinese tradition. Christianity would not get the credit it deserved for creating both a movement and an atmosphere that brought liberation to hundreds of millions of women.

### **An Introduction to the Practice of Footbinding in China: The *Sine Qua Non* of Nubility & Nobility**

Women in Imperial China faced many burdens as a consequence of their sex. They were expected to demonstrate obedience to the most important man in their lives, be it father, husband, or son. They were not granted full admission to their husband's family and yet they bore the burden of producing a male heir, were made to revere the ancestors of the husband's family, and were pressured to remain widows after their husband's death in honor of his memory and in support of his parents. They could obtain divorces in only the most extreme and notorious circumstances, but they could be abandoned for such "offenses" as childlessness. This was the plight of most Chinese women from at least the beginning of China's written history; this plight was reinforced by the Confucian orthodoxy that developed by the second century B.C.E.

However, the greatest indignity suffered by Chinese women was the mutilation they suffered at the hands of their own mothers and grandmothers when their young feet were bound to produce "three-inch lilies." Though the term *footbinding* is conventionally applied to this practice, simply wrapping a foot will not sufficiently stunt its growth. *Footbreaking* might be a more accurate description of the procedure. The initial breaking in of the foot was sufficiently brutal that, at least in rare cases, some girls died of gangrene or other complications. Moreover, enduring consequences surpassed the excruciating pain this procedure inflicted. As one recent scholar (Hong 1997, 289) puts it: "the intense physical sufferings brought about by the process of breaking and binding the feet in early childhood produced a passivity, stoicism and fatalism that effectively 'bound' not only the feet but also the mind and the emotions." It is precisely this control over the mind and emotions that supporters of the practice sought.

Whatever the emotional effects of the first binding, the physiological consequences were life long. Women were condemned to hobble with an altered gait and to bear wounded appendages with restricted circulation that resulted in dead and rotting flesh. The binding procedure prevented the wounds from healing, resulting in a foot that resembled a bovine hoof.

Though small feet were deemed attractive, they could never be exposed; women found the sight and smell of their own feet nauseating.

Many theories about the origins of footbinding exist, none more persuasive than the others. What is certain is that it was virtually unknown in the Tang 唐 dynasty (early tenth century) and had come into general use by the end of the Song 宋 dynasty (thirteenth century). The likeliest theory suggests that it started in the imperial courts and became a fashion among upper-class elites. From thence developed a vicious circle: once it became fashionable, it greatly enhanced the marital prospects of small-footed women; and once it became sufficiently popular, it greatly diminished the chances of marrying off a daughter with natural feet.

The possible reasons for the fashionability of the practice have also excited considerable debate since Westerners first took note of the curious and exotic custom. Whether it was the result or cause of footbinding, it seems that a male sexual fetish related to the foot developed at some point in Chinese history. Indeed, everything associated with the bound foot, including the sight of “three-inch lilies,” the shoes (since the crippled feet were rarely seen *au naturel*), and the limp that resulted from the maiming were reported to excite the passion of Chinese men. Whatever the reason, footbinding eventually became a *sine qua non* of nubility and nobility.

Footbinding was never mandated by law but was enjoined by custom. The penalty for noncompliance was drastically diminished marital prospects and social opprobrium. Throughout history, some groups in China did not observe the practice. Most notable among these were the Hakka 客家 people of southern China and any number of ethnic minority peoples throughout the empire. The Manchus, who came to rule China as the Qing 清 dynasty from 1644 until the end of the Imperial era in 1912, never adopted the practice. In fact, though opponents of the practice emerged as early as the Song dynasty, it was the Qing emperor Kangxi 康熙 (1654–1722, r. 1661–1722) who first enacted a ban on footbinding, though this ban was largely ignored and subsequently dropped.

Just as the origins of footbinding are disputed, so is its ultimate demise. Practically the only fact on which scholars agree is that footbinding is no longer practiced in China. Evidence suggests that the practice began to decline after 1890 and dropped off rapidly after 1900, disappearing almost entirely in some areas by 1920 and confined thereafter to the hinterlands (Gamble 1943, 183). However, at least one Western observer reported as late as 1929 that fines equivalent to \$20 had not induced many of the women in parts of Shandong province (not the remotest of outposts) to unbind their feet, and that renewed campaigns and increased penalties were in order (Webber 1927, 1929). The Communists, upon their rise to leadership in 1949, seem to have succeeded in eradicating the custom once and for all.

The last shoe factory producing three-inch shoes for women halted production in 1998.<sup>1</sup>

### Organizing the Movement against Footbinding

The role of Westerners in anti-footbinding movements in the last quarter of the nineteenth century is a well-studied phenomenon. The result of this scholarly attention has been a strong consensus about the decisive nature of missionary involvement in the abolition movement.<sup>2</sup> The first-known Western anti-footbinding society, *Jie Chan Zu Hui* 截纏足會, was organized in 1874 in the city of Amoy (present-day Xiamen) (*Chinese Recorder* October 1895, 497). This society spawned similar, though less formal, efforts in many large Chinese cities. Anti-footbinding meetings offered rare opportunities for the foreign community and the Chinese population to mix and discuss issues. Sympathetic Chinese took notice and created their own organizations. The famous literatus and writer Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) started an anti-footbinding society in Canton (present-day Guangzhou) as early as 1883 (Hong 1997, 65).

The movement to banish footbinding was bolstered in April 1895 when a group of women, mostly missionary wives, formed the *Tian Zu Hui* 天足會 (Natural Foot Society) (*Chinese Recorder* May 1895, 237). The *Tian Zu Hui* was not specifically a missionary entity, as many of its members and leadership were not in the missionary community. It is hard to imagine that the distinction meant much to the Chinese, or indeed to the Westerners, but the unaffiliated nature of the society was meant to widen its prospects for cooperation across ethnic, social, and religious lines.

The society was founded and directed by the charismatic Alicia Little (1845–1926), wife of a prominent British merchant and writer, Archibald Little (1838–1908). She arrived in China in 1887 and made an effort, unusual among expatriates, to learn the language and culture of the Chinese. She shared her husband's interest in writing and produced at least ten volumes (some of which are still consulted by scholars of the period) during her two decades of residence in China. Mrs. Little was neither a missionary nor the wife of a missionary. It is difficult to say with certainty the degree to which she sympathized with or supported the missionary enterprise. Some of her fictional work, which includes stories of apostate missionaries, suggests that she did not endorse many aspects of missionary work. As she would befriend and find common cause with many missionary women, it is doubtful that she ever fully expressed her reservations about Protestant efforts to Christianize China.

The *Tian Zu Hui*, in fact, was closely associated with the Christian Literature Society for China (CLS) and relied on it for translation, publication, and dissemination of its written materials (Little 1899, 149).<sup>3</sup> The CLS pro-

vided a flurry of articles in its Chinese language monthly, *Wanguo gongbao* 萬國公報 (The globe magazine), on the question of footbinding in the years after 1895 (see *Wanguo gongbao* 1895, 1896, 1897, 1898).<sup>4</sup> The CLS became identified with the leadership of the movement and helped attract the attention of leading Chinese officials.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most successful efforts in this vein was the preparation of a memorial on footbinding by the women of the *Tian Zu Hui* for presentation to the Empress Dowager in October 1896. Because of the complicated protocol for the transmission of such a missive, it seems clear that the memorial never reached the Empress's desk. Nevertheless, it caught the attention of officials at the Zongli Yamen 總理衙門 (Bureau of Foreign Affairs), who responded to the substance of the memorial as follows:

In reply we beg to state that the memorial of the [*Tian Zu Hui*] evidences the fact that the object in view is to do good. But the usages and customs prevailing in China are different from those of Western countries. The binding of feet is a practice that has been in vogue for a very long time. Those who oppose the binding of their children's feet are not compelled to do so, while on the other hand, those who wish to carry out the practice cannot be prevented from doing so. Custom has made the practice. Those in high authority cannot but allow the people to do as they are inclined in the matter . . . they cannot be restrained by law. (*Chinese Recorder* 1896, 617)

The response reveals both the pusillanimity and complacency of the Qing officialdom, heralding its impending collapse.

Contact with important government officials was frequently facilitated by *Tian Zu Hui* campaign tours to many of China's major cities. These tours were very successful for the society's recruiting efforts, enlisting new members and spinning off local organizations, and they often attracted crowds in the hundreds. The organized events featured not only speakers but also used the latest Western technologies to advantage. Attendees were sometimes treated to photographs and primitive X-rays comparing bound and unbound feet (*Chinese Recorder* 1900, 260). One such tour in February 1900 managed to secure for Mrs. Little an audience with the Viceroy Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), a high-ranking Qing scholar-official. Li gave little concrete support to the movement and even expressed some concern about the effects of millions of emancipated women on the survival of the dynasty (*Chinese Recorder* 1900, 261). However, the mere earning of an audience with so august a figure was a feather in the society's cap.

The name of the organization was also an advertisement for its strongest argument against footbinding. *Tian Zu Hui* literally means "Heavenly Foot Society." The adjective "heavenly" in this case is used to denote that which is natural or in conformity to the way of nature.<sup>6</sup> Within both of China's major native philosophical traditions, appeals to nature are taken seriously. The Confucian seeks to discern what is in accord with *tianming* 天命 (the will of

heaven). The Taoist is encouraged to seek to conform as much as possible to the way of nature. Though the *Tian Zu Hui* was not the only organization dedicated to its cause, the idea of the “natural foot” became a synecdoche for the anti-footbinding movement. The society was the focal point for the forging of arguments against the practice—arguments which, more often than not, appealed to Chinese notions of the Way of Heaven.

Though it is hard to imagine that footbinding would have survived China’s modernization, it seems clear that missionary opposition helped to hasten its extinction. Efforts on the part of the Qing officialdom to discourage and even ban the practice had failed; and there is even evidence to suggest that, in the late Qing era, the custom was as ubiquitously and strictly followed as at any time in the previous millennium (Gamble 1943, 182). Stimulus for change from the Chinese literati, the only conceivable direction from which opposition might be expected, was minimal. Most scholars, Western and Chinese alike, concede that the Western and Christian role was vital in raising an issue that even sympathetic scholars were hesitant to address. However, the adjectives “Western” and “Christian” are interchangeably applied when describing the spirit behind the anti-footbinding movement. This fact raises at least two questions which have received less attention: What, if anything, was distinctively Christian about the anti-footbinding movement? And were there specifically Christian arguments marshaled against the custom?

### **Missionary Arguments against Footbinding**

At least as early as 1870, missionaries were putting their objections to footbinding in print in the Chinese language and receiving mostly favorable responses. Missionary editorializing on the subject accelerated in the 1890s, with the support of the *Tian Zu Hui* and others. One representative issue published in the *Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* in December 1895 featured a cover article entitled “Foot-binding: Two Sides of the Question,” which offered, in part one, refutations of reasons normally offered in support of the practice and, in part two, reasons why footbinding is a “bad custom.” The article was translated into Chinese and was primarily meant for distribution among the general populous. The anonymous opinion writer, compiling the thoughts of many Western and Chinese thinkers on the subject, refuted common support for the practice that included the fact that it is an old custom, that it looks nice, that it is fashionable among the higher classes, that it preserves female chastity, and that to discontinue the practice would invite community odium or derision.

More remarkable was the second section which offered seven reasons to resist footbinding (bracketed glosses are my own):

1. Because it is contrary to nature.
2. Because the wives of all the sages and the old ancestors did not bind their feet.
3. Because it hinders the free movements of the body. [*It is responsible for sterility (!) and other gynecological problems.*]
4. [Because] It sometimes causes death, for instance, by fire or in floods. [*It prevents expeditious escape.*]
5. [Because] It is in the way of women earning money. [*Foreigners hesitate to employ footbound women, as do factories that require women to stand at machines for protracted periods.*]
6. Because it has very bad consequences in the social relations. [*It prevents women from carrying out their household duties as daughters, mothers, and wives.*]
7. [Because] It is a cruel custom, making the hearts of mothers hard even to their own children. [*Mothers generally do the crippling.*]

(Chinese Recorder December 1895, 552–53)

The line of reasoning featured in that article is typical. Objections to footbinding usually fell into the above categories: concerns for women's health; harm to economic and educational opportunities; and appeals to natural, Confucian, or even Taoist principles.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. John Dudgeon wrote from the perspective of a physician in a May 1870 issue of *Chiao-hui hsìn-pao* 教會新報 (Church news), offering some details about the physiological damage done to bound feet and rather creatively asserting that women with bound feet would likely produce fewer children, owing to their compromised circulatory systems. He blamed Chinese parents in whose hands lay the ability to desist from this practice (Bennett 1983, 143). His appeal was calculated to arouse Confucian indignation at a practice that may prevent some women from fulfilling their most important duty to their parents: the production of a grandson heir.

Confucian arguments against the practice were difficult to sustain. The hard truth was that no custom did a better job of enforcing and reinforcing the Confucian duties of a woman than footbinding. Laying aside the specious assertion that it caused sterility, footbinding made it more rather than less likely that a woman would attend to her obligations to the men in her life. It physically bound her to the home, made her economically dependent, rendered her useless for labor outside the home, and made her more the object of her husband's sexual desire. All of these factors made the woman more likely to succeed in fulfilling the cardinal duty of a Confucian woman: the production of a male heir for her husband's family line. Nothing kept women in line quite as effectively as footbinding.

### A Missed Opportunity for Christian Missionaries

At some point, Christian opinion among the Chinese turned decisively against the practice. Yet, beyond pronouncements about the sinfulness of the practice, distinctly Christian reasoning was absent. The failure to seize

on the issue as a Christian cause is particularly surprising, as footbinding was fated to eventual extinction. It was clear that it could not survive China's modernization, it was not favored by the ruling dynasty, and there did not exist a coherent pro-footbinding line of reasoning for any educated person to advance. The only defenses of the practice, rarely passionate, were from scholars who believed that to oppose footbinding was to attack Chinese traditional culture (see Bennett 1983, 144)—and the related and tautologous argument that unbinding women's feet would make them undesirable marriage candidates.

This lack of theological reflection and imagination represented a missed opportunity for Christian missionaries to associate the work of anti-footbinding with the Gospel, especially since it turns out to have been a successful movement. Some missionaries understood and regretted the failure of this connection. One wrote: "I wish the truth, as it is in Jesus, was taking hold of the upper classes as anti-footbinding seems to be doing" (*Chinese Recorder* 1898, 203). As much as the missionaries opposed practices such as ancestor veneration, an ancient and enduring aspect of Chinese culture, they could have put forward religious grounds for opposing footbinding, which proved not to be an enduring or essential feature of Chinese culture.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the tide had clearly turned, and most of the leading thinkers had been converted to the anti-footbinding persuasion. Many women, with the support of their fathers and husbands, were unbinding their feet; and many were making oaths never to bind the feet of their daughters or to marry women who had been thus crippled. Though there were other important factors involved in the development of public opinion against footbinding, the role of Western and native Christians can hardly be overstated. In 1902, a year when the CLS published and distributed 12,090 tracts on behalf of the *Tian Zu Hui*, sufficient pressure was brought to bear on the government to elicit an edict abolishing the practice (Christian Literature Society for China 1902, 29). The Empress issued a ruling against footbinding, which, though stopping short of an outright prohibition, represented strong repudiation of the practice.<sup>8</sup> The edict did not put a stop to footbinding, but the tide had already turned against it.

The founding leadership of the *Tian Zu Hui*, convinced that its work had been accomplished, turned the organization over to Chinese women to manage in 1906. In relinquishing the reins, Mrs. Little summarized the beliefs of the Western women involved: "The work . . . has been done, public opinion has been changed and the setting free of all the little girls of China from the bondage of a most cruel custom is merely a question of time" (*Chinese Recorder* 1907, 34).<sup>9</sup> Time was not on the side of the Western missionary enterprise in China, however, which ended, without considerable additional growth, in 1951. After 1907, Protestant missionaries became more firmly divided between those with a traditional understanding of mis-

sionary work as the winning of converts to the faith and those for whom the national salvation of China consisted of such achievements as the defeat of this “most cruel custom” of footbinding.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.sfmuseum.org/chin/foot.html>. This date lends credence to the view that footbinding had become rare by the 1920s. The factory still accepts custom orders from centenarian footbound customers.

<sup>2</sup>See for example, Chau (1966); Drucker (1991); Hong (1997); Tao (1994). A recent article in a government-controlled newspaper in Shanghai even asserted that the *Tian Zu Hui* was the first society to decry footbinding in China (*Shanghai Star* 2000).

<sup>3</sup>Christian Literature Society director and British Baptist missionary Timothy Richard (1845–1919) asserted that the rapid growth of concern for this issue dates from the publication of these tracts (1907, 2: 97).

<sup>4</sup>One prominent publication of the CLS, Allen (1902), included discussion of the footbinding problem in vol. 4 of its third edition.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Duke Kung Hui-chang, a descendant of Confucius, wrote a letter to the CLS condemning footbinding (*North China Herald* 1897, 791).

<sup>6</sup>Some Western scholars have made much of the rhetorical value of the “heavenly foot” ideal. See, for example, Ko (2007, ch. 1). Certainly the term “heaven” is ambiguous enough to appeal to both Christian and Chinese religious sentiment. It is not clear in the use of the name, however, that the organizers meant anything beyond the use of heaven as a metaphor for nature.

<sup>7</sup>Many other possible objections exist. Ebrey (1999, 11) offers a list of “the six most dominant ways of framing footbinding: fashion, seclusion, perversity, deformity, child abuse, and cultural immobility.”

<sup>8</sup>The decision not to issue a proscription was apparently an acknowledgment of the difficulties of enforcement and the potential for heavy-handedness on the part of local officials. It was seen by some Western observers as emblematic of the weakness of the Qing central control (*North China Herald* 1902, 214).

<sup>9</sup>The next year the Littles returned to Britain, and Mr. Little died shortly thereafter. Mrs. Little lived until 1926, active as a traveler and writer until her final months.

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