

The Anti-Footbinding Movement in 19th and 20th Century China

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[0 : 00] Well, hello this morning. As you said, my name is Mike, and last time I was with you, I spoke about the Reichskonkordat, which was signed between the Vatican and Nazi Germany.

And I don't think this could really be further from that, what we're going to talk about today. We're going to talk about China, obviously, 18th, 19th century. Now, there's been a lot written about the anti-footbinding movement, as it's called, but there's still a lot of debate about the effectiveness of that movement.

This morning, I'm going to argue that Christian missionaries and the organizations they founded played a central role in bringing awareness to the evils of footbinding and rallying popular support behind the movement to end the practice. I'm also going to frame their work within the international perceptions of China at the time and the wider economic and sociopolitical forces that led to the eventual emancipation of women's feet. However, before we begin looking at the work of anti-footbinding, activists, and the social and economic conditions, I think it'd be helpful to first look at the practice itself and how it became so deeply entrenched in the culture. This will help us to understand one of the most interesting features of the literature on this topic, which is that people seem widely split in the literature on some marveling at the speed with which it's eradicated, and also others marveling at how difficult it was to eradicate it. And you get this kind of split in the literature. So this one historian, Dorothy Ko, a prominent historian in the area, has written an article called *The Body as a Tire*. And in this article, she alludes to the difficulties the abolitionists faced in bringing about an end to the custom around the turn of the century.

And another historian named Hill Gates, in her article *Footloose in Fujian*, marvels at its propensity to eradication within a few generations. After a history of about a thousand years, it's gone within 50 years. So it goes out quickly. But the abolitionists also faced a great deal of difficulty in doing that. And I don't think these things are totally separate. I think we can hold them together, seeing it as difficult to eradicate, but also very, very quick. So the practice itself.

The practice likely originated in the Tang dynasty, which is 6th to 9th centuries, or the Song dynasty, which is 9th and 13th centuries. No one's exactly sure when it began.

[2 : 20] No one's exactly sure how it began or why it began. But there's lots of theories that are postulated about why. And they're usually tied up with men's sexual desires. Esther Lee Yao, one historian, states that initially the purpose of foot binding was to please men who like to see women walking and dancing in a frail manner. I mean, this stuff is kind of disturbing, even thinking about this, why this would begin. Since Chinese women were economically and socially dependent upon their husbands, they were forced to comply with these wishes. That's the thought, to have this kind of unsteady gait of having these tiny, tiny feet to be walking on. And there's one legend of a dancer in the 9th century dancing on a box with her feet covered in a scarf. And the men were so intrigued by this that there became, I don't know, some kind of buildup around this notion of these tiny little feet in this unsteady gait. But Yao, this historian, asserts that foot binding became, through foot binding, it became overwhelmingly clear that women were only sex objects and that they could be desirable only within the narrow confines of beauty established by men. Now, while it's clear that foot binding was obviously a product and a means of satisfying men's fetishes, it would be a grave error to see it only in these terms, I think. The sexuality of foot binding was a major reason for its existence, but it's totally inadequate in explaining why it became so firmly entrenched in the Chinese culture, and consequently so resistant to mounting criticism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Dorothy Ko, who I've mentioned already, argues that foot binding has suffered from a bad case of publicity for about two centuries at the hands of missionaries and feminists. And what she means by that is those who've written about foot binding have seen its link with gender solely through the lens of sexuality and oppression. And this is certainly an aspect of it.

We have to also understand the practice in terms of Confucian culture, I think. A careful consideration of the notion of gender within China has to take into account, and inevitably fit within, a broader understanding of Chinese culture. Chinese culture is inseparable with Confucianism, especially at this time, for the teachings of the Confucian classics permeated every aspect of Chinese life. Fred Blake, another historian, offers an excellent treatment of foot binding within a Confucian framework, and he provides a lot of insight as to how these two notions are related, foot binding and Confucianism. He states that Neo-Confucian thought demanded that females become virtuous and industrious while simultaneously bending to the will of the male authority. Nonetheless, it did not provide any direction as to exactly how they were supposed to work this out. So they're expected to be virtuous and industrious and to bend to the will of male authority, but they don't really, Confucius doesn't say how this is to be done. So given the cultural pressures upon women to conform to male authority and to present her body accordingly, it's not surprising that a girl's way of signifying her womanhood should be conceptualized in terms of bending and contorting the organs that controlled, this is a quote from Fred Blake, space, spatial extension and motion. Blake asserts that the girl's self-realization of her body, sorry, Blake asserts that the girl's self-realization required her not only to become her body but also to overcome her body by limiting the space it filled. It was in sharing this sense of embodied space with all other women, especially their mothers, that they came to understand femininity over and against the male otherness of the world.

As a result of this, footbinding took on a whole load of meanings related to understandings of femininity, viewing it as a sign of perseverance through suffering and as a rite of passage. So although we're seeing the origins of this kind of tied up with men's sexual desires, it becomes linked with understandings of femininity as perseverance through suffering and a rite of passage for all girls and women to go through. Now there's no debate about the pain involved in footbinding.

Transforming a foot that would become on average 10 or 11 inches long if left to its own devices into one that was only three inches long was a feat involving an indescribable amount of physical suffering. Although the practice began in the upper classes, over the centuries it spread to the lower classes as well. Upper class women who spent most of their time and their days in the seclusion of the inner courts would have their feet bound more tightly and would begin earlier in life. Lower class women would only start binding around the age of 13, unlike girls born into upper class families who would have their feet bound by the age of five. The two-year binding process began early in life while the bones were still malleable and the ideal foot was known as the golden lotus. That's how it was nicknamed and it was three inches long or less. So I mean we're not talking about a very big foot.

First time I heard that it's how do you even process how that's done? In order to achieve this the toes with the exception of the big toe are broken under the foot and then later the arch itself of the foot is broken. So I'm going to show you a picture in a second. If you're a little squeamish maybe don't look at them. Okay here we go some pictures. So this you can see is this kind of unsteady gait of a Chinese woman. These photos are from the 1990s. So women although it stopped the practice stopped I think the last factory making foot bound shoes only stopped in the 80s or 90s.

[8 : 06] So there's still women. This is in a little village in southern China. So that's the the final foot there.

Let's see how small that foot is. How small that shoe is in her hand. Okay now it's going to get better. I mean worse. Yeah. Oh. So you can you can see this is her big toe and the rest of the foot has been kind of bent underneath the rest of the toes and you end up with this kind of pointed tiny foot.

So these are the toes here and this is where the arch is up. So there's actually a section of the foot that never touches the shoe and the bindings are about five feet long that are used for this.

And usually I mean traditionally the foot was only washed every couple of weeks. So it's just kind of disgusting. Yeah. You can see another foot. I mean it seems like fantasy doesn't it?

Like really? I don't I don't even know how to comprehend that. So this is a much older photograph around the turn of the century. You can see. Okay. That's. Shall I leave that up? Maybe I'll leave up a less horrible picture to have to look at. There we go. We'll leave it that way. Okay. Yeah.

[9 : 31] Now I don't intend to go into all the gory details of exactly how this was accomplished. But I think what's really important about this is this is the lies in our understanding of what the resulting pain came to symbolize for Chinese women. So it's not about the practice itself. It's what it came to symbolize in the life of these Chinese women. One historian asserts that bound feet were a sign of perseverance through suffering as I've already said because they involved a lifetime of almost constant pain. The testimonies of bound footed women who attempted to find words to describe the enormous pain experienced in binding are rather disturbing. According to these women, the process involved burning, throbbing feet, swallowing the body in fire from severe traumas that created months, even years of oozing sores, bandages stiff with dried pus and blood and sloughed off gobs of flesh.

These accounts also tell of girls running away, hiding, attempting to loosen their bandages, losing appetites and sleep and enduring harsh beatings. And the contradictory nature of the mother's care, consciously causing her daughter pain yet also caring for her, historians sum this up in a single word, tang. And I'm going to just butcher this because obviously I don't speak Chinese. But it was used in a proverb, and this is a transliteration of it, tang er bu tang zu, tang gnu bu tang jiao.

And it means, if you care for your son, care not if he suffers in his studies. If you care for your daughter, care not if she suffers in her feet. And both, this word *tang* refers to both hurting or caring or even a conflation of the two. So by separating a mother's care for her daughter from the vessel, her body, her worldly existence, the mother and daughter, this is what a lot of historians are arguing. The mother and daughter shifted their care to a new order of consciousness. This new self-consciousness was based outwardly on a sense of dependency and attachment to a male dominant world, and inwardly on the ability to exercise some control over her own body and her own destiny, and those of the persons to whom she was attached. This new consciousness came with the understanding that a girl carried her family's reputation in the bind of her feet, and that her family's reputation, whether that of her own family or that of the family into which she married, well, it belonged to the male heads. So that's foot binding as a means of suffering in a long time suffering, but foot binding as a rite of passage. Women across generations faced many of the same trials and tribulations associated with foot binding at roughly the same times in their lives, and therefore the practice can easily be described as a rite of passage. While it didn't signal the beginning of adulthood as rites of passages do in most cultures, it was a means of preparing young girls for womanhood and motherhood. According to Blake, foot binding helped the young woman to overcome her body in two major ways. First, in mastering her embodiment of space, the young woman with bound feet became keenly aware of the significance of exercising control over her reproductive functions, both a threat to and highly valued by the male-dominant world.

Second, foot binding prepared women for the protracted pain and aggravation of menstruation, sexual consummation, pregnancy, and childbirth. Married life was not pleasant for Chinese women, as they had to please both their husbands and their in-laws. Therefore, foot binding provided mothers with an effective means of instructing their daughters in how to handle all kinds of bodily insult.

Through foot binding, young women were informed of their fate in a patriarchal society. The body was thus armed with an effective discipline in order to maintain the strict rule of chastity, as well as to deal with the difficulties associated with becoming a wife, a daughter-in-law, and a mother.

[13 : 32] Now, foot binding was, as I've said, it was a rite of passage, it was a means of perseverance through suffering, but it was also entrenched in understandings of civility, especially Confucian civility. The body, in an article called *The Body as a Tire*, co-focuses on elite men's perceptions of foot binding in the 17th century. Her first two points are the most relevant here, in that she attempts to prove that men regarded bound feet as both a marker of *wen* civility, that's the word *wen*, and a marker of ethnic boundaries, separating Han from Manchu and many other ethnicities within China. Foot binding was a means of setting oneself apart, and whether that meant from the lower ranks of Han society or from other ethnicities who are outside of China, it was an act of segregation, in a sense. And in order to fully comprehend foot binding as a marker of civility, it has to be framed, like gender, as we already did, in an understanding of Confucian culture. The equation of foot binding with the superiority of the Han civilization has to be understood in the context of the immense cultural, political, and moral significance that the Confucian tradition placed on adequately covered bodies. A first century commentator on the five classics pronounced that

Confucius devised the institution of clothes to conceal the body, to promote virtue, and guide people to goodness, as well as to distinguish the high from the lowly. For properly covered bodies marked the civility of the Han Chinese. Uncovered bodies and uncovered feet stood testament to the barbarism of the peoples on the peripheries. Foot binding was therefore representative of the high cultural prestige that the Confucian value of *Wen* placed on clothing and its role in concealing the body.

Correct attire was crucial to the expression of civility, culture, and humanity, and these are all facets of Wen. It played a crucial role in both the external and internal definitions of Han identity because it differentiated the Chinese from their neighbors while at the same time marking social distinctions within society. Foot binding was thus simultaneously a cultural act, one that distinguished humans from others, and a political act. This is a quote. Now it's interesting to note that one of the first priorities of non-Chinese conquerors was issuing edicts addressing appropriate attire. So whenever China gets conquered, one of the first things they do is pass an edict determining what they can and cannot wear.

So in 1636, before the Manchus had even conquered the Han, King Taizong issued an edict in which he stated that all Han people, regardless of status and gender, had to conform to Manchu styles of dress.

He stated that males were no longer allowed to fashion wide collars and sleeves, and that females were no longer allowed to comb up their hair or bind their feet. Two years later, he reiterated his previous edict, but instead asserted that any Manchus who imitated the Han in clothing, because this was happening, whether hair bundling, headgear, or foot binding, were to be severely punished.

[16 : 49] Nevertheless, within a year, that edict was rescinded, and Manchu women began to wear shoes that mimicked the gait of Han women. Even Empress Dowager Sisi around the turn of the 20th century was seen to wear this type of shoe. So it's a little shoe on top of a platform that when it sticks out below the clothing makes it look like it's a tiny little foot. I mean, this is happening even in the 20th century. Now, although the Manchus were hostile to the idea of foot binding throughout the Qing dynasties, they were not the only ethnicity to ban Han foot binding. The Haka people who initiated the Taiping rebellion also never accepted the idea of foot binding. The rebellion had considerable influence in the central and southern provinces, especially in Hunan, Jiangxi, and Guangdong. Among the many large-scale peasant rebellions occurring at the time, it was the most successful in challenging the Qing government. Now, despite during their control of these regions, which lasted from 1850 to 1864, they prohibited foot binding and initiated punishments for women who refused to unbind their feet. I mean, that incurs an enormous amount of pain to unbind the foot.

The Qing dynasty and the Taiping rebellion both allude to the conflation of bound feet and Han ethnicity. It was generally not a problem to have bound feet during the Qing dynasty, evidenced by the fact that Manchu women attempted to mimic the bound-footed gait. However, during the Taiping rebellion, women with bound feet had a physical reminder of their Han ethnicity and were thus in danger of being severely punished. They also could not flee very well from invaders because they can't walk, really, at least any distance. One little girl tells a story of liking when she was a little kid that her mom had bound feet because she could be bad and run away and her mom could never catch her.

Little did she know her own fate, I suppose. Now, the other facet of the Confucian understanding of Wen was that it marked a social distinction within China. So we've talked about the civility as a notion of separating Han Chinese from Manchu or Haka or whoever it was, but also as a means of separating social ranks within China. Unbound feet were associated with the less virtuous lower ranks of society and thus binding a daughter's feet, no matter what the family's socioeconomic position, enhanced her status automatically.

In binding, a clear line was drawn between a girl with bound feet and women who were sold into servitude or employed in harsh degrading forms of labor.

It's not difficult to understand why foot binding was associated with the upper class. As several scholars have noted, Harold Cota explains that the upper class women, largely deprived of her freedom of mobility by the deformation of her feet, became a pure symbol of her husband's or lover's pecuniary responsibility. Her feet represented wealth not for their lucrative potential, but for their utter and explicit uselessness and costly maintenance. Patricia Ebery also emphasizes foot binding's association with the upper class in terms of its uselessness. This seems to be a very big thing in the literature. Hill Gates, another historian, asserts that mothers commonly use the phrase, the phrase bound foot women become brides, the non-bound become bond servants. And they use this to justify subjecting their daughters to the torture of binding. Not only does this phrase compare the eventual social positions of women with bound feet with those with unbound feet, but it also alludes to the incredible value placed on marriage in this culture. Foot binding was seen as a way of attaining a better marriage for one's daughter. And when families thought there was a possibility of marrying their daughters up the social scale, they bound the feet more tightly and started earlier, get a better husband.

[20 : 50] So, to kind of wrap up this section talking about the process of foot binding and its enculturation in China, all of these factors I think demonstrate really well why those who were trying to get rid of this custom were fighting an uphill battle. Foot binding, it had nearly a thousand years to entrench itself deeply in the Confucian culture, and thus came to symbolize what it meant to be feminine, according to Confucian teachings. The custom represented perseverance through an incredible amount of suffering, and also as a rite of passage for Chinese women, in the sense that it prepared them for married life and childbirth and becoming a daughter-in-law. It gave them a form of discipline to help them maintain the strict rule of chastity. It taught them the incredible importance of regulating their powerful reproductive functions.

Foot binding also came to be synonymous with civility in China because of its relation to the Confucian teachings of Wen. A high value was placed on properly covering the body as a marker of both ethnic superiority and superiority within the civilized world of the Han. It was a means of separating Han from other ethnicities, and it even became linked with marriage customs. That's just kind of a summary of where we're at.

And these all speak to the strong staying power of the custom. But when you think of all these things, how this practice is so deeply embedded in the culture, how long it's been going on for, it's easy to see in the literature why people marvel at the speed with which it's abolished. How, after a thousand years, did this end, I mean, essentially overnight, within two generations, which is nothing in the space of a thousand, twelve hundred years, however long this had been going on. And, I mean, how do we explain this?

The first real vocalizations against foot binding were spoken by missionaries to China. There was a movement among certain sects of the missionary community to no longer allow what they regarded as this deeply perverted act. For example, in 1867, the church mission in Hangzhou opened a school for girls that fed, clothed, and cared for them, but under the strict conditions that they not be made to bind their feet or marry without their consent. The first mass collectivization of disapproval, however, came with the establishment of anti-foot binding associations in the late 19th century, and this marked the official beginning of the anti-foot binding movement. The Reverend John McGowan, a missionary with the LMS, the London Missionary Society, he founded the first of these societies in 1874. Setting the scene for the creation of the first society in his book, he depicts his wife's and his horror over the practice from their first days in China. He also recounts the indignation with which their pleas to mothers to cease binding their daughter's feet were met. No one wanted to hear any of this. No one wanted to unbind feet or not bind their daughter's feet. And as with other, or many other Protestant missionaries, he objected to foot binding as a perversion of nature and the destruction of the divine ideal of the woman's foot. For McGowan, foot binding was first and foremost a problem of Chinese culture, and it called into doubt for him the whole of Chinese civilization. He states in his book, and this is a great title, classic, *How England Saved China*, many... right? Oh man. Yeah. Many... this is a quote from him in that book.

Many a savage tribe has shown barbaric ingenuity in the methods they have devised to disfigure and maim the human body. But it has been reserved for the Chinese people, with their great intelligence and civilization, to carry out such a system of mutilation as the world has never known in the long history of the past. In his view, the Chinese were interfering with the divine nature, with God's ideals for the human body, which could never be improved upon. McGowan reports that in 10 years of trying to get this to stop, not a single convert was gained to our cause, he says. Although missionaries had managed to attract some Chinese converts to Christianity, McGowan notes that none of his converts could be persuaded to stop binding their feet, even though they'd been convinced that foot binding went against Christian ethics. In the midst of his despair over his unsuccessful efforts, a suggestion from God, he says, came to him to call a meeting of all Christian women in Amoy to discuss foot binding. He writes that 60 to 70 women came to the meeting, of whom a handful joined the first anti-foot binding society, which was called Tianzu Hui, or the Heavenly Feet Society, he called it.

[25 : 37] Now McGowan's efforts to stop this practice were bolstered by a visit from an English woman named Alicia Little, who lived in Sichuan with her husband, who was a shipping magnate. They were not missionaries.

After her first visit, she brought back the organization to Shanghai. Along with nine other women, Western women of different nationalities, she helped set up this organization in Shanghai, and she changed the name, and she called it the Natural Feet Society, not the Heavenly Feet Society.

And it was started on a national scale in 1895. So we're looking at, what, 21 years after McGowan started his society. Now, although she was not a missionary herself, she did have ties with various Western missionaries in China, and the society was founded under the aegis of the Shanghai Mission. Nevertheless, she attempted to keep the society from becoming overtly Christian.

She wanted to ensure that those who were not Christians would also be impacted by the society, so they didn't have any meetings in church buildings, nothing of that kind of thing. She didn't want anybody who might be hostile to foreign religions to reject the movement.

Now, she traveled around China, and she established local chapters of the Tianzu Hui by inviting Chinese women and foreign women to attend meetings through newspaper ads and poster announcements.

[26 : 58] Although the society was aimed at Chinese and foreign elites, it did reach out to non-elite Chinese women on occasion. The society focused its attention on preventing mothers from binding their daughter's feet, and in turn promoted education for those girls who had been saved from the deformations of foot binding. Now, foot binding was at the forefront of social reforms efforts. As missionaries tried to reach a broader audience than their converts, they printed posters and photographs, they published poems and tracts against the practice. Alicia Little asserts that the Natural Foot Society's most successful efforts were a set of letters addressed to the provincial governors and tracts distributed among scholars and officials. In her work, *Intimate China, the Chinese as I have seen them*, she recounts the story of an official examiner from Beijing who had been deeply affected by the society's tracts. On his way home, in mourning of his father's death, he had encountered some of the societies' tracts. When he arrived home and found his daughter of seven crying over her foot binding, he immediately had his daughter's feet unbound. Following this, he wrote what's commonly referred to as the Suifu Appeal, and also had five of his bureaucratic friends sign this testimony. They distributed this tract among the young men in the examination centers, and within a short period of time, the Natural

Feet Society, Alicia Little's Society, got a hold of this tract, and they published it widely. In addition to producing anti-foot binding literature, rallies were also held to reach out to lower class, non-Christian women, a group that would prove particularly resistant to their campaign. The arguments the missionaries used to criticize foot binding stressed that the practice was cruel to children and damaged the mother-daughter relationship. They also tried to demystify the aesthetic appeal of bound feet. See, traditionally, bound feet were never revealed, except perhaps in the privacy of a woman's quarters or in the bedroom. But missionaries made use of x-rays to show their audiences what binding did to the bones of the foot. They sometimes even nailed these images to the doors of temples in China.

They also stressed the effect of foot binding on women's health, and they used rubber tubing to show how the circulation was cut off in the midst of this process. And, I mean, there's...

I've got the... this is her book here from 1899 that she wrote, which would have been widely distributed in England. I mean, she's got entire chapters on kind of the medical effects of foot binding, what they were telling Chinese people, informing them of the practice, and how it was affecting their health.

Foot binding was still a deeply rooted cultural institution, institution, though, and it was supported by centuries-old understandings, as we've seen, of gender and civility, and it was maintained as a means of women's agency.

[29 : 57] It's not all that surprising, then, that missionaries found it incredibly difficult to win approval for this. Foot binding was a means of a family ensuring that their daughter would marry well, and until you can get over that hurdle, there's no way you're ever going to be able to stop this practice.

So many of the anti-foot binding societies had an effective strategy to overcome this barrier. The upper class members of the societies had to pledge to accept into his household only daughters-in-law with unbound feet.

Churches also tried to find ways to address the issue of marriage for the daughters of the lower classes. Alicia Little reports of a church where they promised to find young Christian men to marry the girls with unbound feet.

In many cases, the girls would partially unbind their feet in order to meet the requirements and attend the missionary-run schools, but then they would rebind them again when it became time for their betrothal.

Alicia Little noted that the anti-foot binding movement was very much entangled with matchmaking. For in order to convince some families to unbind, they had to find a suitable candidate for marriage for that family.

[31 : 05] It was only then that the family would consider not binding the girls' feet. Now, as this was promoted and propagated by Christians to begin with, it was slowly taken up by non-Christian Chinese as well.

In the late 1890s, we see the founding of the first Chinese-run anti-foot binding organizations. The Bu Chanzu Hui was perhaps the most successful of these societies.

Kang Yui, an imperial court advisor, established the society in Canton between 1896 and 1898. The society quickly gathered 10,000 supporters and then moved to Shanghai, where it further expanded by establishing sub-branches in other major cities.

At its height, the society had 21 branches across urban China, with 300,000 people alone in its Shanghai branch. All the members of the society were Chinese men, and they emphasized the need to rid China of foot binding, a practice that made them the laughingstock of the world.

The members of the Bu Chanzu Hui, like the members of the Chanzu Hui, the Natural Feet Society, they emphasized the importance of not binding young girls' feet and of educating them for the purpose of nation-building.

[32 : 20] Now, Christian missionaries were certainly effective in bringing attention to the issue of foot binding and rallying certain sectors of the population behind their cause. But we have to ask why elite men, those who had wholeheartedly endorsed this practice for a thousand years, are suddenly jumping on board.

It's been a millennium of this. They're the ones who got this started in the first place and keep it going, so why are they all of a sudden jumping on board? Alicia Little, the founder of the Natural Feet Society, argued that it was solely the society's efforts that caused men to see the abomination of the practice and stop binding the girls' feet.

But I think it's more likely that there were powerful confounding variables that preconditioned elite Chinese men to latch on to this negative view of the custom. It was a case of the right campaign at the right time, I think.

Now, what were some of these confounding variables that were at play? Why is it that Chinese men were all of a sudden latching on to this? One historian suggests that as early as the 18th century, China came to be looked on as an example of a less advanced form of civilization, best labeled as Oriental despotism.

Many Europeans took the treatment of women to be a major indicator of the condition of a society, and I think we still do that today. John Barrow, a member of the McCartney Embassy in the 1790s, stated, it may perhaps be laid down as an invariable maxim that the condition of the female part of society in any nation will furnish a tolerable, just criterion of the degree of civilization to which that nation has arrived.

[33 : 58] Every argues that in the travel literature, there's a curious correlation between the approval of women's appearance and the approval of Chinese culture and institutions. Those who largely had good things to say about Chinese culture and institutions, like Marco Polo and the Jesuits, tended to describe Chinese women in a favorable light.

Contrarily, those who thought that many features of Chinese cultural institutions could do with being reformed or were even repelled by China, tended to see Chinese women as far less attractive or even ugly.

So this is the travel literature, and there's tons of it being written in this period. So this is how international perceptions of China are changing. And I think, I mean, this is, this book is incredibly influential because this goes back to the rest of the world, to Britain, to America.

And this is where people are gaining perceptions of what China's like, what Chinese women are like, the practice of footbinding. And in turn, starting to affect, returning to China, these men who are understanding how the rest of the world is starting to view China because of these practices.

So many of these perceptions of China in the literature centered on footbinding. While there were some Western visitors to China who tolerated footbinding, especially missionaries, actually, they usually did so for utilitarian reasons.

[35 : 14] Helen Nebius claimed that without tolerating footbinding, missionaries would not be able to attract girls from respectable families to the missionary schools. Some Western visitors even thought that the practice of footbinding was brilliant for keeping women in the home and thought that other countries would be well advised to adopt the practice for this very reason.

Yeah, I mean, this is, this is being written. Oh, man. Nevertheless, most travelers to China found the limping and unsteady gait to be distressing and generally quite despicable.

Authors wrote that footbinding crippled women, made them lame or deformed their feet. And footbinding was called a form of imposed deformity with increasing frequency in the travel literature in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Furthermore, with the rise of medicine as a respectable science and changing European attitudes towards the unfortunate peoples of the world, what might be called a child abuse construction of footbinding gradually became more and more common over the course of the 19th century.

Western perceptions of China and the custom of footbinding started to affect China greatly in the late 19th century. Before this time, women's seclusion from public life and the binding of their feet had been regarded as symbols of femininity and civility.

[36 : 41] However, in the Republican era, these previously admired women became symbols of backwardness and the target of a massive push for modernization. Late 19th century reformers focused on footbinding as a symbol of national weakness.

And some even felt that foreign intrusion and dominion were justified because of the tradition of footbinding. As a result, anti-footbinding initiatives came from both Chinese and foreign elite, anxious to open China to international commerce and save China and its people from the fate that had befallen much of the undeveloped world.

The eradication of footbinding became part of the general code of modernization for China. Now this fundamental shift from seeing China through Western eyes is crucial in reconstructing the factors that contributed to elite men's substantive involvement in the movement.

Elite men were those most concerned with advancing China's global image beyond that of the sick man of East Asia. It's no surprise then that footbinding's demise followed a class hierarchy in its early phases, given the importance of foreign pressure and elite male concern for a modernized nation-state.

And I think this goes a long way in helping to explain why it is that Chinese elite men latched on so quickly to this practice. It's changing perceptions around the world of China and this desire to modernize, of which footbinding is seen as the antithesis that men are latching on to this movement.

[38 : 15] There's also economic factors at play in this. Sorry, I'm starting to lose my voice. I'm too much talking. Hill Gates wrote a really interesting article where she talks, it's called economic correlates of footbinding.

And she's among the first to examine how economic factors are directly affecting footbinding. Not inadvertently, but directly affecting footbinding. Now, although footbinding did prevent heavy labor activities, such as portage or collecting mountainside resources and working in wet rice paddies, it still allowed women to perform light labor tasks, like spinning and weaving fabrics, raising silkworms, reeling silk, scratching and gathering opium, making paper, and picking and processing tea.

These are light labor activities that women with bound feet can engage in. Gates explains that we can regard girls' light labor in a number of ways. In some instances, it was pure commodity production.

And sometimes, especially in the making of cotton cloth, the manufacture of a product that could be flexibly used at home or sold, given as the customary funeral gift or stored for later use or sale.

Now, while Gates expands upon lots of these light labor tasks in her article, it's the task of spinning and weaving that's most, I think, expandable. Since a weaver needed between six and 40 spinners to keep her busy full time, spinning, which was a typical girl's light labor task, which could be done with bound feet, it was a permanent bottleneck in the production of cloth.

[39 : 46] However, when fuel-driven spinning machines began to generate massive amounts of yarn, costing little more than the cost of the materials themselves, these homespun yarns had little value anymore.

And this, she argues, the increasing redundancy of little spinners precipitated a crisis in foot binding, and there was a substantial drop in the proportion of bound foot women in the 1920s.

Now, while weaving was not quite so easily destroyed, the 1930s brought with them a flood of machine-woven fabric, at which time even married women sought alternative sources of income.

Many families depended on everyone to share in the financial responsibilities of the household. And when there was no longer a market for traditional women's light labor occupations, mothers and daughters were forced into heavy labor.

However, these occupations required far more mobility than was possible with bound feet. And therefore, in the 1930s, very few girls were having their feet bound. For a daughter's better future was balanced against a family's immediate need for resources.

[40 : 53] And in most cases, the families simply couldn't afford to maintain the practice. So as these light labor tasks get pushed out, and there's a general push for heavy labor tasks, women simply can't have bound feet anymore.

It doesn't add up. It doesn't work. So, as you're probably well aware by now, the complexities of the anti-footbinding movement aren't easy to unravel. Footbinding was able to survive many centuries, and it resisted the initial efforts against it because it was one of the major sources of women's agency in a male-dominated society.

Women understood, women's understanding of footbinding as a potent symbol of femininity was not merely, as many have written, I can't speak anymore, it's done, as many have written in the past 200 years, it, let's try that whole sentence again, how about we?

So, women's understanding of footbinding as a symbol of femininity was not simply about sexuality. Femininity as it related to footbinding came to symbolize perseverance through suffering, as well as a rite of passage.

In China's Confucian culture, footbinding meant endowing one's daughter with the discipline to overcome her body, deal with the stresses and trials of becoming a wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and although footbinding did not shelter her from the realities of a patriarchal society, it gave her agency through the preparation of her body, her physical, her mental, and her emotional being.

[42 : 23] Footbinding also gave women agency by setting her apart from other ethnicities, as well as by raising her from her lowly status, attributed to women with unbound feet. It was associated with civility, separating the lower from the upper classes.

Having a daughter with bound feet meant she would marry well. It gave her the best chance of advancing her own, as well as her family's social standing. So, it's within this complex web of meanings that missionaries and anti-footbinding advocates attempted to uproot the custom.

And it's no wonder they encountered such resistance. However, the missionaries brilliantly leveraged their understanding of Western medicine and their position of authority within the community to begin to turn popular opinion against the practice.

The decision to target non-Christian as well as Christian Chinese had a decisive impact on the effectiveness of their campaign. Elite men began to flock to the cause and ultimately changed the shape of the campaign and the tone of the rhetoric.

Rather than focusing on the cessation of footbinding as intimately bound up with Christian conversion, missionaries simply focused on the long-term goal of reforming the practice.

[43 : 37] They shifted towards thinking that success on the social reform front would lay the groundwork for the eventual transformation of China into a Christian country. So, they're letting go of their Christian conviction in doing this, having it no longer tied up with conversion, and they're simply focusing on the reform of the practice and not so much on trying to gain converts.

Now, while this shift certainly broadened the effectiveness of the movement, it came at the cost of distinctly Christian reasoning behind it. One scholar, Brent Whitfield, argues that the 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 turned out to be a successful movement. I mean, you'd want these things to be linked, the movement and the gospel. And some missionaries regretted that they'd failed to make this connection between the two.

One missionary wrote in 1898, I wish the truth, as it is in Jesus, was taking hold of the upper classes as anti-footbinding seems to be doing. Although there were certainly other factors involved in the development of public opinion against footbinding, as I've shown, the role of Western and Native Christians can hardly be overstated.

In 1902, the Christian Literature Society published 12,090 tracts on behalf of the Natural Feet Society. And this brought enormous pressure on the government, and it actually issued an edict abolishing the practice.

[45 : 08] The Empress Dowager Sisi issued a ruling against footbinding, which, though stopping short of outright prohibition, it represented strong repudiation of the practice. While footbinding certainly continued to be practiced for many more years, this edict represented the turning of the tide against the custom.

The leadership of the Natural Feet Society deemed that their work had been so successful that they decided to turn the organization over to Chinese women to manage in 1906.

When she handed over the reins, Alicia Little summarized her work in this way. 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 the most cruel custom is merely a matter of time.

Now, while this may seem like a positive outcome for the missionary campaign to end footbinding, it really raises interesting questions for how it is that Christians engage with culture.

Although the anti-footbinding movement began with expressly Christian motives and understandings of why the practice should be abolished, the goal of ending footbinding quickly superseded the goal of making disciples.

[46 : 18] But does that really matter? Wasn't it more important that this torturous custom be brought to an end than that people come to know Jesus? And it's not just footbinding. Many Christian organizations over the past few centuries have succumbed to this same fate, beginning with strong Christian conviction to see some social or political evil transformed for the sake of the gospel.

The founding beliefs are soon forgotten, only to be replaced by a vague sort of humanistic activism. What do we do about this as Christians? How tightly do we hold on to our Christian beliefs?

Few would argue that the anti-footbinding movement was unsuccessful, but I can't help but feeling that something was lost along the way, the Christian conviction of why it is that we're doing this. And as we end, I think we just need to be thinking about that.

What are we letting go of in areas of our interaction with culture in order to see something else change? We let go of our Christian conviction. So I'll end it there. Yeah.

Thank you. Thank you. APPLAUSE hospitality Thank you.