

The Impact of the Anti-Foot-binding Movement on the Liberation of Chinese Women

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Abstract. This paper examines the historical practice of foot-binding in China, which explores its historical origins, its physical and psychological harm against women, early modern China's effort to gradually abolish the practice and how it has ultimately contributed to the liberation of Chinese women. Foot binding, a practice that originated in the Northern Song Dynasty and wasn't widely abolished until well into the 20th century, has been a source of multifaceted torment against women that have suppressed their social role and autonomy for generations. The anti-foot-binding movement, which gained momentum in the late Qing dynasty and continued into the 20th century, was a critical component of broader societal reforms aimed at modernizing China and uplift the appeal of feminist thoughts. By tracing the historical trajectory of foot-binding and the resistance against it, this paper highlights the significance of the movement in promoting women's rights and shaping modern feminist consciousness in China.

Keywords: Foot-binding, female liberation, Chinese women.

1. Introduction

The ancient tradition of foot-binding has been a practice that has long been symbolizing oppression and physical suffering for Chinese women. Originating during the Northern Song dynasty, the practice persisted for nearly a millennium, becoming a means of physical control and a reflection of women's subjugation under patriarchal structures [1]. According to popular legend, foot binding began with a court dancer in the Southern Tang dynasty who wrapped her feet in silk to please the emperor, creating a standard of beauty that soon became widespread among the upper classes [2]. Over time, the practice transcended social classes and became deeply entrenched in Chinese patriarchal culture, as bound feet were associated with femininity, moral virtue, and social status [1]. Bound feet not only caused severe physical harm, such as chronic pain and mobility issues, but also limited women's participation in public life and reinforced their isolation within domestic spaces [3].

The anti-foot-binding movement, which gained momentum in the late Qing dynasty, sought to challenge this oppressive custom and became a significant step toward the liberation of Chinese women. Influenced by Western ideas and modernization efforts, reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao linked the abolition of foot-binding with national strength and progress [1][4]. Despite facing opposition from traditionalists, the movement persisted into the 20th century and played a pivotal role in the broader feminist awakening in China, and it was used as a symbol for women's liberation and the general embrace of a new cultural shift away from traditional social values [5-6].

This paper will explore the origins of foot-binding, the physical and psychological harm created, the steady development of the anti-foot-binding movement, as well as how this movement contributed to the broader liberation of women in China.

2. The History of Foot-binding in China and Its Harm to Women

2.1. The Origins of Foot-binding

Foot-binding is commonly believed to have originated during the Northern Song dynasty, a historical period in China that started during the 10th century. A popular legend around the origin of the practice comes from a court dancer for the Emperor Houzhu of Southern Tang in the early 10th century, who was known for her small feet and dancing skills. The dancer, to please the emperor,

would wrap her feet in silk, making them small and curved upward in the shape of a crescent moon, which gradually developed into a beauty standard.

As the aesthetic standard developed, people, especially men in upper classes, shared a common pursuit for women's small feet. Over time, this aesthetic spread to the women of the upper classes, and soon became a symbol of wealth, status, and nobility, as only women with all three had the luxury of time and energy to have a pair of feet that were useless in physical labor. It was also a symbol of moral virtue, as women at the time were expected to stay home with their families. Although bound feet were initially a symbol for the elite, girls from families of lower statuses followed suit to climb the social ladder during marriage. The trend soon spread across all social classes, becoming a widespread tradition that dictated both the social standings and physical appearance of all women [1].

Foot binding was not always universally supported. For example, during the Song Dynasty, a poet named Che Ruoshui questioned this practice in a passage where he wondered why girls from a young age needed to bind their foot involuntarily: "Children as young as four or five years old, innocent and guiltless, are made to suffer endless pain—what is the purpose of binding their feet from such a young age?" Unfortunately, these early doubts did not have a deep explanation of the harm caused by foot binding. In the prevailing trend where aesthetic preferences for women favored the delicate and the small, such voices had very limited influence [2].

2.2. The Physical Health Damage of Foot-binding on Women

Foot-binding practices the tight wrapping of a young girl's feet with cloth to halt their growth, creating a deformed compact foot known as the 'lotus foot', used to describe the notion that these feet are delicate enough to dance on lotus flowers. The process typically took place between the ages four to nine, and was known to be extremely painful, often causing long term side effects and health issues. The mutilation of the bones, muscles and tendons lead to incurable mobility problems, with women in bound feet often being unable to walk properly, whilst a wide number experienced chronic pain, infections, and in many cases, permanent disabilities.

The physical harm of foot binding was not just limited to the feet; it affected women's entire bodies. Women with bound feet often struggled with balance, posture, and general mobility. They could not walk long distances without assistance and frequently relied on family members or canes to move around. This physical frailty, ironically, became a symbol of feminine grace and delicacy. In a male-dominated society, these frail movements were viewed as desirable, as men admired the way women with bound feet walked with a swaying gait, which was considered both elegant and seductive. This perception of beauty and status placed enormous pressure on women to conform to this practice, even though it was severely detrimental to their health. The admiration of men for these distorted physical traits only reinforced the continuation of foot binding, despite the suffering it caused [3].

In such a patriarchal culture, women's voices and concerns were largely ignored. Their subjective experiences, including the pain and long-term suffering they endured from foot binding, were seen as unimportant compared to the societal ideals of beauty imposed by men. Women had little agency to oppose the practice, as rejecting foot binding could significantly reduce their chances of marriage and social standing. In many ways, foot binding exemplified the broader theme of male dominance and female submission in Chinese society at the time. The extreme physical harm caused by the practice was downplayed or dismissed in favor of upholding these traditional gender roles. Thus, foot binding not only damaged women's bodies but also reinforced a deeply entrenched system of male control and female subjugation.

2.3. The Psychological Harm Caused by Foot-binding Culture

Beyond the physical suffering, the severe and irreversible psychological constraints the practice of foot-binding imposed were also obvious. Since bound feet were seen as symbols of moral virtue and desirability, women who didn't undergo the process were spread to be the opposite, and deemed unmarriageable. Such societal pressures forced women into conforming into the aesthetic ideals, leading to a sense of internalized inferiority and shame to those who didn't adhere to the practice.

The binding of feet also kept women within domestic spaces, as their lack of mobility disabled them from the engagement of public life, as well as limiting their opportunities in society. This caused an enforced isolation which not only heightened their restrictions but pushed them further into a cycle of subjugation within the patriarchal society.

The psychological trauma inflicted on women in ancient China extends beyond the practice of foot-binding, and relates to a general enforced expectation of chastity that is rooted in the dismissal of women's right to make her own choices. Ideological indoctrination of Confucian moral teachings, along with complex political and social factors, focus on loyalty applied to both men and women; however, as women are not seen as independent on their own, any practice that defies such moral codes are seen as a betrayal and will be condemned by the system, which includes the unbound feet for women, which were seen as classless and crude.

The intertwining of morality and politics placed women in an emotionally damaging position, where societal expectations overruled personal agency. As women were celebrated for obeying these moral codes, their suffering was either romanticized or downplayed to align with male-dominated ideals.

3. The Development of the Anti-Foot-binding Movement in Modern Times

3.1. The Anti-Foot-binding Movement in the Late Qing Dynasty

As the late Qing dynasty arrived, a rise of modern consciousness sought to challenge several of the old customs. Such long-held customs, including the pervasive belief in superstition, which had deeply influenced all levels of Chinese society. Superstitious practices, such as fortune-telling, Feng Shui, and various forms of idol worship, were widespread across both educated and illiterate populations, from the wealthy to the poor. Social reformers of the time expressed strong disdain for these practices, seeing them as an obstacle to China's progress.

Proposals to combat superstition included repurposing funds from religious rituals to establish schools, confiscating temple assets to fund education, and burning books that promoted belief in ghosts and spirits. Although not all suggestions were practical or widely accepted, they reflected a growing recognition that China's development required the eradication of superstitious beliefs [5].

These social reforms—along with others related to health, education, and civic engagement—reflected the broader transformation China was undergoing as it attempted to modernize and cast off the harmful habits and beliefs of its feudal past [7].

Influenced by western traders and an increasingly international world, many who were able to receive education spoke out publicly against this practice. Two of the most well-known reformers were Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, and were written into history as pivotal figures in the movement, who linked the abolition of foot-binding with the wider need for a stronger nation and modernization.

The movement to eradicate foot binding emerged from these similar movements to modernize the society, and the country in general. In 1895, the Anti Foot-binding Society was formed. Their aims included the education of people against the harms of foot-binding, and to encourage parents not to bind their offspring's feet. As the Society gained significant momentum in urban areas, the practice was increasingly seen as a backward tradition that ought to be discontinued, with its incompatibility to modernity. Soon, the efforts from Kang and Liang led to the rapid expansion of the anti-foot-binding movement throughout the southern provinces, with dozens of local chapters forming in a short period [1].

Despite these efforts, anti-foot-binding societies encountered significant social pressure throughout the country. To resist this opposition, the societies formed groups to support one another, with many stipulating in their charters that members should not marry women with bound feet [1].

During a period of rapid governmental reform known as the Hundred Days' Reform, he sent a pamphlet known as "Plea to Forbid Female Foot Binding," where he directly contrasted the practice with women in Western societies "If we look at the people of Europe and the United States, we can

see that they are straight and strong, and their mothers did not bind their feet, so they are strong and can pass on their genes. If we look at the people of our country, we can see that they are weak and scrawny, and their mothers bound their feet, so they are weak and can pass on their genes. Now, in a world where the whole country is conscripting soldiers to compete with all countries, it is especially worrying to keep this weak species” [4].

During the Hundred Days' Reform, Kang Youwei, who had already prevented his daughters from binding their feet, submitted a proposal to Emperor Guangxu calling for a national ban on foot binding. Although the emperor approved, the 1898 coup led by Empress Dowager Cixi halted the implementation of these reforms, and the movement was suppressed, which led to the execution of several of the reformers, the exile of Kang and Liang, and the end of the reform effort at the time from the government directly [2].

3.2. The Anti-Foot-binding Movement During the Republican Era

In 1912, the Republic of China was established after the Empress Dowager Longyu, the de facto ruler of the Qing Dynasty, decided to abdicate, ending Qing rule. Political and social changes of distinct significance were brought about by the formation, where an official ban on foot binding was imposed by the new government. In the announcement declared by Sun Yat-sen, the first President of the Republic, it said in part, if one wants to strengthen their country, one must first develop the physical strength of the people. As for foot-binding, it maims and disfigures the body, blocks the blood flow, and causes harm not only to the person who is bound, but also to their children and grandchildren. This is supported by medical evidence, so how can it be called a lie [2]? Such forceful language demonstrates how eager and strong the plea is for women to stop binding their feet.

The reflection of modernizing ambition was coherent in this decision, as it was an era of distinguishable innovations and breaking of outdated rules. The Republic's political leadership, under the influence of the feminist movement which was the result of the efforts brought on by a global wave of women's rights activists, abolished the practices because they believed it was essential to emancipate women [8]. Although such practices continued in certain rural areas, widespread support was seen in cities and the younger generations freed from such a fate. As inspired by the new educational opportunities and gradual change of traditional gender roles, they were able to embrace new means of femininity, therefore the resistance of foot-binding became the norm.

3.3. The Anti-Footbinding Movement During the Sino-Japanese War

From the years 1937-1945, the Second Sino-Japanese war took place and affected the lives of all Chinese civilians. In response, the anti-foot-binding movement took on a whole new dimension. The practice of foot-binding, because of the war, was seen increasingly as a symbol of China's internal weakness and backwardness due to heightening nationalistic passion. This patriotic atmosphere not only facilitated the rallying up of Chinese society in the face of war, but women's rights as well. As more and more female participation was gained in the war effort, either directly or indirectly, further undermined the practice. Bound feet were clearly impractical during active involvement in the defense of their homelands, and hence intensified the urgency of liberating women's bodies.

The Communist Party of China, which was based in the socially conservative Northwestern region in China at the time, has made the effort to eradicate foot binding a part of their prerequisite goals to eliminate the pain for women, including in villages. In their statements, they called the movement to release their feet as both an effort to reduce pain and to “prepare the war against aggressors and for the future establishment of a new country,” as well as to “establish and reinforce the revolutionary base areas [9].”

At a moment of supreme peril for Chinese sovereignty, the practice of foot binding is seen as even more debilitating for women's development and the improvement of the society to modernize. The proclamation during this period tied the practice of unbinding feet to the broader goals of ending oppression, which is meant to create a stronger image against fascist aggression.

4. The Anti-Foot-binding Movement and the Liberation of Women

4.1. The Anti-Foot-binding Movement and the Physical Liberation of Women

Abolishing foot binding was one of the many first steps towards the liberation of Chinese women. Bound feet were the symbols of not only feminine beauty under the male gaze, but also the oppression and the restriction of female physicality for many centuries. Women were able to reclaim their bodies as well as their rightful freedom of movement through the process of anti-foot-binding, and of which they were given back their abilities to walk and participate in diverse roles of society. Such a liberation was a key precondition for a woman's increased mobility to access education, labor, and social activism.

However, the progress was slow and inconsistent in many places, especially in enclosed societies where traditional values are often upheld for generations. Across Southwestern China, in provinces like Yunnan and Sichuan, for example, despite public announcements and decrees from the government to forcefully stop the practice of foot binding among women, those with bound feet were still widely preferred and seen as a standard for beauty, to a degree where when women were arranged for marriage, the parents of the groom would ask if "the girl has small feet [9]."

4.2. The Anti-Foot-binding Movement's Influence on the Development of Feminist Thought in China

In terms of development in feminist thought, the anti-foot-binding movement was of absolute crucial relevance. By challenging deeply entrenched gender norms and patriarchal values, women broke free of their century old constraints to be in subordination. The advocacy of abolition not only sought to improve women's physical well beings, but also to elevate their social statuses and intellectual freedoms. This specific fight was only an element of a broader feminist awakening in China, which aimed to redefine women's roles and to push for true gender equality. Thus, the abolition of foot binding became a victory symbolic to women's rights, creating possibilities for future revolutions in education, marriage and employment rights.

According to the research in early 1900s Chinese magazines like *Linglong*, this movement toward bodily autonomy reflected a growing awareness among women that their physical emancipation was intrinsically linked to social and intellectual freedom. The demand for an end to foot-binding paralleled calls for women's participation in education, professional fields, and public life [10].

Magazines like *Linglong* played a pivotal role by advocating for the abandonment of oppressive customs like foot-binding and promoting modern ideals of beauty based on health and strength. This shift in bodily consciousness, as represented by the magazine, also challenged patriarchal control over women's bodies, encouraging them to take ownership of their health and well-being. It wasn't just about freeing their feet; it was about freeing their minds from centuries of patriarchal conditioning.

5. Conclusion

The anti-foot-binding movement in China was not only a significant step toward abolishing an oppressive cultural practice but also a critical turning point in the broader liberation of Chinese women. Foot-binding, which had long symbolized the physical and psychological subjugation of women, was intricately tied to the patriarchal structures that constrained women's bodies and lives. As this movement gained momentum in the late Qing dynasty and into the 20th century, it became a symbol of resistance against centuries of gender-based oppression.

The abolition of foot-binding marked an important moment in the shift toward greater bodily autonomy for Chinese women. This newfound freedom extended beyond physical liberation; it empowered women to reclaim their roles in society, opening possibilities in education, work, and public life. As women began to unbind their feet, they also began to unbind themselves from the deeply entrenched norms that had limited their opportunities and agency for generations.

The anti-foot-binding movement also played a critical role in the development of feminist thought in China. By confronting deeply rooted gender norms, it challenged the idea that women's worth was determined by their physical appearance and their ability to conform to patriarchal standards. This movement was one of the early victories in the broader fight for gender equality, contributing to an ongoing redefinition of women's roles in Chinese society. It paved the way for future movements advocating for women's rights in education, employment, and marriage, helping to set the stage for the broader feminist awakening that would follow.

Future research on the topic of foot-binding and the anti-foot-binding movement could benefit from a deeper exploration of regional variations in the practice's persistence and abolition. While urban areas quickly adopted anti-foot-binding ideologies, rural areas often lagged in embracing these reforms. Comparative studies between different provinces and communities could shed light on how cultural, economic, and political factors influenced the success or resistance of the anti-foot-binding movement in various parts of China, the potential causes of these differences, and what that difference tells us about social reforms in that era in general.

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