

Missionary Journal, Foot Binding 1

This article was published in a Protestant missionary journal, based in Canton, that operated from 1832 until 1851. Its readership included both the foreigners living in Canton and home religious communities in Britain and the United States. The author begins the piece with the shocking statement that the Chinese are both physically and morally deformed and goes on to present the practice of foot binding among Chinese women as proof for his remarks. This article, which presents foot binding in a negative light, is noteworthy in two aspects. First, in asserting authoritative knowledge about foot binding, the author only cites texts by Western authors. Second, the author deliberately employs “Science” to serve his viewpoint in appending the transcription of a dissection of “a specimen of a Chinese foot.” The introduction of this transcription is included here.

Source: “Small feet of the Chinese females: remarks on the origin of the custom of compressing the feet; the extent and effects of the practice; with an anatomical description of a small foot.” *Chinese Repository* 3 (1835): 537-539.

Art. I. Small feet of the Chinese females: remarks on the origin of the custom of compressing the feet; the extent and effects of the practice; with an anatomical description of a small foot.

Ample evidence of the inefficiency of the ethical systems of the Chinese, is found in their national and domestic customs. Not only the minds of the people, but their bodies also, are distorted and deformed by unnatural usages; and those laws, physical as well as moral, which the Creator designed for the good of his creatures, are perverted, and, if possible, would be annihilated. The truth of these remarks is presented to our view in a clear light by the anatomical description, which forms a part of this article. Historians are not agreed as to the time or place in which the practice of compressing the feet originated. Du Halde states, but on what authority he does not inform us, that the practice originated with the infamous Take, the last empress of the Shang dynasty, who perished in its overthrow, B.C. 1123. “Her own feet being very small, she bound them tight with fillets, affecting to make that pass for a beauty which was really a deformity. However, the women all followed her example; and this ridiculous custom is so thoroughly established, that to have feet of the natural size is enough to render them contemptible.” Again, the same author remarks, “The Chinese themselves are not certain what gave rise to this odd custom. The story current among us, which attributes the invention to the ancient Chinese, who, to oblige their wives to keep at home, are said to have brought little feet into fashion, is by some looked upon as fabulous. The far greater number think it to be a political design, to keep women in continual subjection. It is certain that they are extremely confined, and

seldom stir out of their apartments, which are in the most retired place in the house; having no communication with any but the women-servants.” Others state that the custom originated in the time of the woo tae, or ‘five dynasties,’ about A.D. 925. According to the native historian, quoted in Morrison’s View of China, “it is not known when the small feet of females were introduced. It is said that the custom arose in the time of the five dynasties. Le Howchoo ordered his concubine, Yaou, to bind her feet with silk, and cause them to appear small, and in the shape of the new moon. From this, sprung the imitation of every other female.”

In regard to the extent and effects of the practice, there is not the same degree of uncertainty. It prevails more or less throughout the whole empire, but only among the Chinese. The Tartar ladies do not yield to the cruel custom, but allow their feet to retain their natural form. In the largest towns and cities, and generally in the most fashionable parts of the country, a majority of the females have their feet compressed. In some places, as many as seven or eight in ten are tormented in this way; in other places, the number is not more than four or five in ten. The operation of compressing the feet is commenced in infancy; and so closely and constantly are the bandages applied, in the most successful cases, as to prevent almost entirely the growth and extension of the limb. Ladies of rank and taste, who are fashioned in this manner, are rendered quite unable to walk. The effects of this process are extremely painful. Children will often tear away the bandages in order to gain relief from the torture; but their temporary removal, it is said, greatly increase the pain by causing a violent revulsion of the blood to the feet. This violent compression of the limbs, moreover, is injurious to health, and renders the victim a

cripple through life. In some cases the compression is very slight, and consequently the effect is less hurtful. It is no marvel that the Chinese ladies never dance; it is rather a matter of surprise that they can move at all on such ill shaped and distorted members; some of which, scarcely if at all, exceed two and a half inches in length. Those who can avoid it, seldom appear abroad except in sedans; (we speak of those in the neighborhood of Canton;) but there are frequent cases, among the poorer classes, where the unhappy victims of this barbarous custom are compelled to walk on their little feet. Their gait appears exceedingly awkward to others, and must be painful to themselves. Generally, in attempting to walk any considerable distance, they find a stick, or the shoulder of a matron or servant girl, a necessary support. In walking, the body is bend forwards at a considerable inclination, in order to place the centre of gravity over the feet; and the great muscular exertion required for preserving the balance is evinced by the rapid motion of the arms, and the hobbling shortness of the steps.

The form of these ‘golden lilies,’ kin leën, as the Chinese call them, is accurately describe din the following paper, from the Transactions of the Royal Society of London. It was written by

Bransby Blake Cooper, esq., surgeon to Guy's hospital; and was communicated to the society by the secretary, P.M. Roget, M.D., March 5th, 1829.

“A specimen of a Chinese foot, the account of which I have the honor to lay before the Royal Society, was removed from the dead body of a female found floating in the river at Canton. On its arrival in England, it was presented to sir Astley Cooper, to whose kindness I am indebted for the opportunity of making this curious dissection. Without entering into an inquiry whether this singular construction, and as we should esteem it hideous deformity, of the Chinese female foot, had its origin in oriental jealousy, or was the result of an unnatural taste in beauty; I shall content myself with describing the remarkable deviations from the original structure, which it almost every-where presents.”