

Missionary Journal, Foot Binding 2

This article was published in a missionary journal printed in the cities of Fuzhou and Shanghai. *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* operated between 1868 and 1912. It was read by English-speakers living in the major cities of China as well as abroad. The article takes up a subject that excited great interest among Western residents of China: foot binding. The author begins with a review of the origins of the practice, discusses it as current fashion, relates the practice to public health, and concludes with a detailed description of the bound foot. The author pronounces a relatively benign interpretation of the practice (compared to “Small feet of the Chinese females...,” *The Chinese Repository* 3 (1835): 537-539 for example), noting that it does not render women incapacitated. Nevertheless, Dudgeon makes clear the abhorrence Westerners feel for the custom, labeling it “positively repulsive and disagreeable.”

Source: Dudgeon, J., M.D. “The Small Feet of Chinese Women.” *Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* 2 (1869): 93-96.

THE SMALL FEET OF CHINESE WOMEN. — — — BY J. DUDGEON, M. D. — — —

My attention has been called to this subject by a case of a remarkable bony-fibrous tumour of the small foot, the result of a fall seven years before, and which is fully detailed in the Hospital Report for 1868.

Those who have looked into this matter, even in the most cursory way, must have been struck with the uncertainty of the time at and the manner in which the practice first obtained. The reasons assigned for it, also, are equally curious. Some ascribe the honour of having set the fashion to Li-yao-niang, the favorite concubine of Li-heu-chu, the last prince of the Heu T'ang dynasty (A. D. 934.) she had the repute of being slender, beautiful, and an accomplished dancer. The Emperor caused golden lilies to be made, adorned with all manner of precious stones, and covered with images of snowy clouds; and upon these the favorite danced, with her feet compressed by bandages into the shape of the new moon.

Mention is made in Chinese books of small feet in the time of Chen-heu-chu, the last prince of the Chen dynasty (A. D. 583.) But their statements are not quite to be relied upon. The similarity of the story may be traced to the likeness in the names and characters of the two Emperors, both being also the last princes of dynasties.

Others ascribe a similar story to Yang-ti of the Sui dynasty (A. D. 505-613.) The practice is not referred to in the classics, which is presumptive evidence that it did not exist so early as the time

of Confucius. We know from reliable authority that the Empress of Hieuntsung (A. D. 713) had large feet; it is therefore highly probable that the practice does not date further back than the 10th century. From the concubine P'an-fei of Chen-heu-chu, it is said to be derived "golden lilies," a term applied to small feet. Tradition reports that this poetical term originated in this way; her lord caused the palace floor to be adorned with lilies, figured in gold, and exclaimed as his favorite walked upon them, "Every step produces a lily." This may be the date of the origin of the practice, or at least of the poetical term, although it may have been 500 years later before small feet became general.

Among the sundry reasons assigned for the origin of this custom, some relate that one of the princesses or concubines in the Shang dynasty (B. C. 1766-1122), of extraordinary beauty and virtue, had feet like a bird, and therefore kept them always carefully wrapped up and concealed, even from the Emperor, her husband. The court ladies followed her example, and thus it soon became universal. The literati place little faith in this story. Others inform us that it arose from copying the pattern of a club-footed Empress; or, in other words, because of her own club-feet, she caused all the court ladies to adopt small feet, to appear like hers—a condition of parts resembling what we term *talipes calcaneus*. It is alleged by others that small and delicate feet being fashionable and much admired,

even one sought to be in the fashion, and thus what could not be had by nature was gained by art. Perfect beauty is thought to lie in extreme delicacy. By others, the concubine of the T'ang prince is said to have begun it, by first binding her own feet; and the people imitated her example. This account is not inconsistent with the usual course of the capricious dame, Fashion. On the other hand, it is said that having some deformity in her feet, she had recourse to compression to remedy the natural defect, and gallantry suggested that all women should imitate her. In regard to this last course, an old writer points the moral, that princes ought to avoid making themselves the authors of ridiculous novelties. Of this personage with the ill-shapen feet, it is said she was so lowly and virtuous, that the court matrons naturally and voluntarily bound their feet to appear like her.

Li-yao-niang's whole conduct has received quite another construction by some Chinese, and considerable weight has been attached to it. It is attributed to her that she adopted this mode to gain increase, and to excite the affection of her imperial lord; and it is said to be on this account, even at the present day, that the small foot is always robed and concealed in pictures, that it is banished from the conversation of the polite and learned society, that it is rude and immoral to gaze upon it, or seek to examine it, and that having done so, it is made a matter of the confessional in Roman Catholic churches. As it originated in a desire, and is probably partly

maintained or at least found, to create and excite lustful and licentious feelings, by the display of a small foot, a small and highly embroidered shoe, and flowery and gaudy under dresses, so the subject on this account is shunned in society. It is evidently inconvenient for all the purposes for which the foot was intended; and to the Chinese—who, not to speak of their highly practical turn and character, abhor amputations, decapitation, cutting into a thousand pieces, and even tooth extraction, because of its filial impiety—its existence must indeed seem strange and inconsistent. Their bodies, received from their parents, should be kept complete and un mutilated; how otherwise, too, could they appear respectable in the next world? Moreover, Confucius did not know of its existence, or at least never inculcated it, and this too should be a good reason for its discontinuance! This view of the subject is here lightly touched upon (further digression and amplification would be out of place in a journal of this kind), as some prominence has been given to it by one or two modern French writers, who, for the reasons above stated, have ascribed some unusual development of certain organs as the cause and effect of the practice; and this is founded on the law of equilibrium, which it is said the Chinese fully understand when applied to the vegetable world. I do not believe that any such result follows from compression of the foot. It is difficult to see what osseous, vascular, muscular or nervous connexion there is to account for this supposed condition of parts.

There are not wanting those who ascribe it to jealousy—a device of the husbands to keep their wives at home, prevent too much gadding about, to curb their power, and place them under subjection to their lawful lords. One of their ancient Emperors is said to have planned this, and to have purposely given the preference to small feet. But this crippling of the instruments of locomotion, and attempt to render walking a burden, has not deprived them of the power of walking, or of longing to see the world. It is also said to have sprung up from the desire of an Empress to please her royal master; and having

succeeded in this, the other ladies of the court vied with her by following her example, and so divided the imperial attentions. The peculiar, graceful, easy, and waving-to-and-fro motions of the stage in dancing and playing were much admired and coveted by the ladies, and the desire for the obtainment of this excellence resulted in bandaged feet. Such are a few of the many reasons given by different persons for the origin of this practice.

Different nations vary in their ideas of beauty. All have more or less adopted some standard, and practised it; no matter how far that standard may be removed from the natural one. The Chinese thing *small feet* beauty, *par excellence*. To us these little feet, "which lie in their gilded haunts like some criminals, who for parricide or other heinous offences are buried alive," and which give to the body that hobbling, unsteady, always inclined gait, are anything but charming. The

club appearance, the unnatural instep the uncouth ankle (!), or the shriveled, lifeless skin, and the apparently ankylosed joints, are to us positively repulsive and disagreeable. The Chinese are not alone in having departed from the standard of nature, and having sought beauty and distinction even in deformity. The Caribs, Mexicans, and at an early date the peoples of Eastern Europe (and the Poles of the present day), flattened the foreheads of their children by applying boards, bandages, or other suitable contrivances, because they thought those the most noble who had the longest heads; as Hippocrates, the Father of Physic, says regarding the Macrocephali, a Scythian race, who probably inhabited the Crimea; and cranial remains, recently brought to light at Kertch, would go to prove the truth of the practice. The Malays file off the enamel of their teeth, and dye them black, for the all sufficient reason, according to Davis, that dogs' teeth are white. The Greek and Turk are believed to have in part produced their rounded heads by the effect of the national cap and turban. (The continued compression however for centuries has had no perceptible influence on the structure and size of the Chinese female foot, which if allowed to grow becomes perfectly natural in size and figure.) The Polynesian chiefs have had their distinctive coat of arms emblazoned on their skin and the Esquimaux are said to have bits of stone stuffed through a hole in each cheek.

In Europe even, at the present day, fashion has compelled too many to cripple a region much more essential to life than the feet. The tightly compressed wasp-like waist is quite as absurd and much more mischievous than the cramping of the foot, which after all is more inconvenient than dangerous. I have never seen a strong, robust, small-footed woman; but neither have I seen any diseases of the small foot, or other parts, traceable directly to this cause; and the tumour case, mentioned in the Report, might have happened to a large-footed person. In the South, a few cases of caries, necrosis or softening of bone, sprains, bruises, and fractures, simple and compound, have been noted; and in a few instances gangrene, where the feet dropped off at the ankle-joint. Many of the diseases peculiar to woman are however, more amenable to treatment in the large-footed class; for as a rule they are without those restrictive, seclusive and sedentary rules prescribed by society for the small-footed class. The former, except where the Tartar element prevails, as in the capital and the garrisons of the large cities, are of a low grade in society. One reason, however, why diseases of the small foot are seldom if ever seen, may probably be owing to the natural reluctance to exhibit their feet. By no means can a

sight of them be had for examination. There is a sort of masonic secrecy about them; the maid turns away her gaze, it is said by some, while her mistress is engaged with her golden lilies. The repulsion is sometimes so great, that it is said that the husband even is not permitted to see the bare feet of his wife. But the experience of this and other hospitals in China proves that diseases

of the small foot are rarely, if ever, seen; and at the same time the dispensaries are often thronged with this class, who frequently come long distances on foot. In most cases, the better class come in chairs or cart, and are supported while walking by leaning on the shoulder of a maid servant.

Such diseases as chlorosis, dysmenorrhœa, amenorrhœa, leucorrhœa, &c., are found more frequent and intractable among the small-footed class, and these affections seriously affect population. As a rule, Chinese families are smaller than European; the number of unfruitful marriages is enormously great—partly owing to the causes above stated, but doubtless also in part to the extensive use and deleterious effects of opium smoking, and to the practice of suckling their children for three, four, or five years, which is so common here. At the same time in no country is the desire for posterity greater, especially for the male children.

The Tartar women do not wear small feet, but shoes with large square piece of wood in the middle of the sole. These likewise appear very inconvenient; but in wet weather or muddy streets, they raise the finely embroidered satin slipper above danger. In Peking, the Tartar element is so strong, that small feet are less frequently seen than in the South. The small foot, too, is much larger here. A milder form of compression, especially among the country people, exists; the four toes being bound under the foot, without changing the direction of the heel very much. Ladies in the South desire a three inch foot; here they are content with a seven inch. The Chinese have naturally very small hands and feet. The proximity of the large-footed Mongols and Mantchus, and the influence of the court, we have said, exert their influence here, and render possible the marriage of large-footed daughters to Mantchu husbands. It is illegal for the bannermen and Chinese to intermarry; nevertheless about 20 per cent of the former marry large-footed Chinese; but the marriage of Mantchu daughters to Chinese husbands—a union not considered respectable and complimentary from a Mantchu stand-point—is rare, not more probably than about one per cent. The Emperor's wives and concubines must belong to the large-footed class; in other words, must be Mantchus. Women of no class beyond the above are permitted to enter the palace; and some one has said, with what degree of truth I know not, that a small-footed woman entering the palace would be put to death immediately. One of Tau-kuang's concubines, tung-fei, out of sport, one day dressed herself in the habiliments of the small-footed class, and appeared before the Emperor. She was instantly ordered from his presence, and he refused ever to see her again. She remained in strict seclusion in the palace. It is a rule of this dynast never to expel those who have been once admitted to the seraglio. Once in the Forbidden City, always there. The Chinese generally choose, or rather have chosen for them by their mothers or go-betweens, a small-footed woman for their first or principal wife; and they themselves add to this, by purchase or otherwise, a large-footed concubine; and vice versa, a

Mantchu with a large-footed wife, if of sufficient means to maintain more, adds the desired number of small-footed secondary wives to his stock.

Poverty and necessity sometimes lay an interdict on this essential of all female beauty. Were it not so, all would be in fashion. The richer the families, the earlier in life is the compression commenced. Like the long nails, small feet convey the idea of gentility and exemption from labour. The strength of this fashion may be judged of from the very poorest striving to conform to it. Fashion leads mothers not to neglect this part of the education of their daughters, however careless in other matters. Few girls are taught to read; almost all have their feet bound. Fashion must always prevail over convenience. Women ought never to appear in public; in state affairs they neither assist by their counsel, nor disturb by their ambition; and thus, to make this maxim more observed, they are taught that small feet constitute beauty, and the mother's first care therefore is to make her daughter fashionable by making her a cripple.

It has been said by some one, that before the marriage engagements take place, the parties not being permitted to see each other, the exact size of the lady's foot is given, after the manner of sending photographs sometimes practised in Europe. And again, that the small shoe is exhibited to the parents of the bridegroom, as one of the arguments employed in discussing the amount of purchase money, or money to be given in presents, to the bride and her family; which after all looks very much like a business transaction. Ripa tells us of the case of a physician, who he knew, whose only intercourse with a woman, with whom he lived, was viewing and fondling her feet. In most parts of China, and especially in the South, the relatives and friends of the bridegroom have a custom of examining on the day of marriage the feet of the bride. The smaller they are, the greater the rejoicings; and the fortunate husband, and the living and attentive parents of the bride, are highly congratulated. In the North of this province, in the district of Suen-hwa fu, there is said to be a custom among the inhabitants of holding, in the fifth month of each year, a sort of "Small Feet Exhibition." All classes of the people turn out in mass, and line the streets, and fill the door ways, while the young and the married ladies strive with each other in the display of the smallest feet. This show takes place through the principal streets of the town.

The age at which the process of cramping commences varies with regard to the social status of the family. Some report bandaging at the age of three months, but this is evidently false. The usual period is from six, seven, or eight years of age to thirteen or fourteen. The feet are bandaged afresh every day, and undone each night. Sleeping shoes, without soles, are worn at night to prevent the foot expanding. The cotton bandages are about six feet long, by three inches broad, and the edges are sometimes stitched to prevent their becoming loose. The greatest care in

these respects is exercised by those who are anxious about their children, and love them very much. The feet often swell and suppurate, and these sores are difficult to heal, because they cannot intermit the bandaging. At night when unloosed, they are dusted with alum, to absorb the perspiration, or washed with millet spirit, to harden the skin. They do not, on the whole, seem to suffer much. It is somewhat wonderful that this severe and constant pressure, and suppuration in many cases, does not lead to disastrous results in the case of the scrofulous and ill-conditioned. Custom and fashion oblige parents to conform to this practice, however much opposed to it and however great their *true* love for their daughters. Three

excellences are always held out to the little sufferers, which carry them through this severe hardship—viz., the fact that small feet are pretty, other people will admire them, and the certainty of getting good husbands, and being thereby introduced into a good family.

The fashionable size is about three inches, but oftener five, and sometimes seven. The size depends upon the time when it was begun, and the regularity and tightness with which it is maintained. The bandages are never left off; for, after the standard size has been obtained, they are still retained to keep the shape, and give strength to the foot. Without them, walking would be impossible; the unbound and unsupported foot is too weak to support the superincumbent weight. The feet are never encased in iron shoes, as some have thought. Simple bandages are all that are employed, and are so applied across the foot as to carry the second, third, and fourth toes and especially the fifth toe quite under the foot, and so to obtain the least possible breadth; and, by one or two turns of a figure-of-8 bandage, the foot is shortened, the heel is brought close to the ball of the big toe, and instead of forming an angle with the leg bones, it looks more like a continuation of them. The *os calcis*, from being horizontal, becomes vertical, and its posterior surface is brought to the ground. The bones of the instep are pushed out of their proper place, and made to bulge, thus giving a great prominence, and an arched crescentic form, resembling the new moon, to that part. The plantar concavity is therefore much exaggerated, and more or less filled with tough cellular tissue. The three points, then, upon which the foot rests, are the heel in its new position, the ball of the great toe, and the fourth and fifth toes—their upper surface having now become part of the sole. The foot and leg are greatly atrophied, and the skin shriveled. The leg tapers from the thigh joint to the foot, in the form of a cone, without the usual feminine risings and depressions, owing to the undeveloped calf; and that, again, is caused chiefly by want of exercise and proder motion to call these muscles into action. Were it from atrophy entirely, we should expect the limb to grow from bad to worse till it was entirely destroyed. The knee and ankle joints do not bend; all movement is from the thigh joint; the gait is mincing, with the arms slinging from side to side, and the body never straight or steady.

They walk or stand, one might say, on their heels; the heel one or two inches higher than the toes, they may be said to walk on their toes. The heel extends upwards and backwards beyond the heel of the shoe, sometimes, as in the larger, poorer and neglected foot, entirely outside the shoe, and projecting, as it were from the calf—thus showing a smaller foot than really is possessed. In this way, also, Chinese ladies look taller than they truly are.

PEKING, June, 1869. (To be continued.)