

Missionary Journal, Foot Binding 3

This article and corresponding letter were both written in response to J. Dudgeon's piece, "The Small Feet of Chinese Women," *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* 2 (1869): 93-96. This journal was printed in the cities of Fuzhou and Shanghai between 1868 and 1912. It was read by English-speakers living in the major cities of China as well as abroad. Dr. Kerr responds to Dr. Dudgeon's relatively innocuous description of the practice of foot binding with great energy, condemning the author for his sanguine portrayal and insisting that the practice is morally unconscionable. "H.G." responds to Dr. Kerr's criticisms in turn, refuting Kerr's argument point by point. His opposition notwithstanding, H.G.'s own aversion to foot binding is clear in his letter. What he takes issue with is the question of whether unbinding bound feet should be a prerequisite to Christian conversion. These letters are most interesting in that, first, they show the heightened interest of the foreign community in the practice and, second, that they demonstrate the manner in which "knowledge" about Chinese culture is quickly abstracted from its social and historical context to become the material for arguments that relate to Western concerns. Despite the considerable dispute over the physical effects of foot binding, at no point did any author ever interview a Chinese woman on the topic— their own opinions on the practice were sufficient evidence for their audiences.

Source: Kerr, J.G., M.D. "Small Feet." *Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* 2 (1869): 169-170; G., H. "Correspondence: Small Feet." *Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* 2 (1870): 230-232.

Small Feet By J.G. Kerr, M.D.

Two or three articles have appeared in the Recorder on the subject of compressing women's feet. In the October number, p. 131, Dr. Dudgeon pronounces it "not morally wrong." If that is true, then it is right; and instead of condemning it, we should approve and encourage it by all lawful means.

With such a view I cannot agree. Most emphatically do I say it is wrong, morally wrong; a sin against God, and a sin against man.

Allow me to give some reasons.

1st. It is cruel, causing long continued suffering and pain. Cruelty to animals is wrong, and would not be tolerated in the church. Shall this life-long cruelty to human beings be regarded with indifference?

2nd. It makes cripples of its victims for life, and thus takes away much of the enjoyment of life, unfits them for work, on which their living may depend, weakens the constitution, generates debility, shortens life, and gives rise to enfeebled offspring.

3rd. It places an obstacle in the way of their attending the means of grace divinely appointed, and necessary for advance in Christian life.

4th. The custom is established and fostered by pride and lust, both of which are condemned by our holy religion.

Pride induces mothers to sacrifice much in order to have their daughters in the fashion, and in the present case the fashion requires the mutilation of the child for life.

That lust originates and perpetuates the custom is sated by Dr. Dudgeon in the Recorder for September, p. 93, as follows: "As it originated in a desire, an is probably maintained, or at least found, to create and excite lustful and licentious feelings * * ." Such being the case in the eyes of the heathen, how can this practise be consistent with a religion which requires purity and chastity of heart, as well as of life?

To say that such a thing is not morally wrong is to confound light with darkness, truth with falsehood.

5th. The practice is in conformity with the world. No precept in God's word is more clear or imperative than that which requires the followers of Christ "not to be conformed to the world." They are a peculiar people. Their light is to shine, and dissipate darkness and error.

6th. The practice is unnatural. God has given to everyone a desire to have a body not deformed; and this desire is especially strong with reference to one's children. A deformed body is universally considered a great calamity. That parents should produce deformity in their own children is abhorrent to the better feelings of our nature, and at variance with all the precepts of our religion.

In conclusion, the compression of women's feet, as practiced in China, admits of nothing being said in its defence; and any apology for it only shows how utterly inexcusable it is when examined from a Christian point of view.

CANTON, Oct. 21st, 1869.

CORRESPONDENCE SMALL FEET

To the Editor of the Chinese Recorder:—

The subject of “Small Feet” has already occupied a place in several number of the Recorder: but still, considering the importance of the matter, further discussion may not be thought our of place. The paper by Dr. Dudgeon, which appeared in the September and October numbers, contained a lengthy and valuable history of the practice from the beginning; and of course, coming from the pen of a physician, discussed the subject chiefly from a medical standpoint. The Dr.’s conclusion, as given on p. 131, is to my own mind the most correct that can be arrived at; for, in the present state of the church in China, legislation cannot be brought by missionaries to bear upon the matter without

detriment to the cause of missions. Dr. Kerr however does not agree with this view, and in his article which appeared in the November number of the Recorder condemns Dr. Dudgeon’s conclusion so strongly, and lays down his own views so dogmatically, that we would imagine he must have truth on his side. I think, however, that exception may be taken to most of the reasons which he brings forward to support his side of the question; and I will endeavour briefly to show where I think he errs.

Reasons 1 and 2 I will not touch upon, I am not a medical man, further than to say that I think the charge of this custom taking away “much from the enjoyment of life” is somewhat overdrawn. Here in Hangchow the majority of women are small-footed, and certainly do not appear to be so wretchedly situated as the Dr. makes them to be. One thing is very certain, the binding of the feet does not prevent them from indulging in that peculiarly feminine failing, “gadding about” to learn the latest gossip.

Reason 3 I scarcely comprehend, unless the obstacle mentioned be the inability to walk to church or the place of worship. If this be the case, I think it sufficiently met by saying that while in a state of heathenism small-footed women constantly go 14 and 16 li, in order to pay their devotions at a favourite temple, and walk back again the same day. Surely, what was no obstacle in the way of their attending to the worship of idols can scarcely be brought forward as a hindrance in the way of their attending to the worship of God.

In Reason 4, the Dr. has thrown a shaft which is not unlikely to rebound, and strike somewhat near home. How many of our western fashions and customs have been established and fostered by pride—yea, and lust too, in some instance! What originated and fostered the fashion of low-necked dresses for balls and parties? What originated the crinoline, chignons, and many other things which Western nations receive and hold? It may be said, indeed has been said by “F.” in

one of your numbers, that Western customs ought not be brought forward in such an argument. Granted; but still I think they may be brought forward to shew the injustice of making a more stringent law for incipient Chinese Christians than is imposed upon the highly endowed and matured Christians of the West.

Reason 5 combats the custom on the ground of its conformity with the world, and is supported by the precept in Rom. 12: 2. This precept is doubtless clear enough; but will Dr. Kerr undertake to show what the phrase "the world" means? Till he does this, his reason drawn from it does not carry much weight. Cowper's humorous poem on the renouncing of the world clearly shows the indefiniteness of the phrase. In things essential to salvation, this indefiniteness in a measure vanishes, because we are careful to keep far on the right side of the line; but in non-essentials it still remains, and will always remain. But to show the real value of this argument drawn from Rom. 12: 2, I will adduce another passage, written by the same apostle, in equally clear terms with the one under consideration. In 1st Cor. 11: 14, St. Paul says, "Doth not nature itself teach you that if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?" Here we have a passage of Scripture condemning the practice of men wearing long hair, but what missionary on the strength of this passage has ever thought of ordering the Chinese male Christians to forego their

long and beautifully plaited queue, reaching in many cases down to the heels? And yet an argument drawn from their words would be as strong against the queue of the men, as the argument drawn from Rom. 12: 2 is against the small feet of the women. So that the practice must be condemned on other grounds than that of its conformity to the world. At the close of this reason, the Dr. says that Christ's followers are "a peculiar people." Doubtless; but let us not be too peculiar.

Reason 6 combats the practice on the ground of its being unnatural. This is doubtless the case in a measure, but the strong language used in working out the argument to my mind proves too much. The same reasoning, if carried out, would prove God to be the author of a custom which is essentially wrong; or to use the Dr.'s own words, which "is abhorrent to the better feelings of our nature, and at variance with all the precepts of our religion." The Dr. assumes, as the starting point, that God has implanted within us a kind of inherent principle prompting us to preserve our bodies entire and that any deviation from that principle in the shape of mutilation of the body is sinful. Now, it is undeniable that circumcision is a mutilation of the body; therefore circumcision is a sinful act; and the conclusion arrived at is that God commanded His ancient people to keep up an institution which involved a sinful act, and which necessitated their constant violation of a principle implanted within them by God himself. Such a conclusion is abhorrent to our notions of God, and His dealings with the children of men, and would doubtless be repudiated by the Dr.;

but, with his strong language, I do not see how he can escape it.

In the above remarks, I have taken neither the affirmative nor the negative side of the question; but have simply tried to shew that the reasons given by Dr. Kerr in support of his view will not hold good; and therefore, if the practice is to be successfully opposed, it must be on other grounds than those advanced. My own view of the matter is that it need neither be opposed nor defended, but just left to the consciences of the Chinese Christians. If the gospel has any power over them, it will surely enable them to forego all practices which are “abhorrent to the better feelings of our nature;” and if it has no power, no influence over them, then making the unbinding of the feet a sine qua non to entering mission schools will in my opinion only defeat its own end, for it will elevate non-essentials to the detriment of true essentials. A Christian mother in this city has already set a good example by her determination to allow the feet of her two girls to grow to their natural size. This is as it should be. Let the Chinese take the initiative, and let not the foreign missionary make any stringent rule on the subject; for I feel convinced that such a course would not promote our object at all.

H.G. HANGCHOW, Nov., 1869.