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Unbinding the Dominant Notions of Foot Binding: Exploring Foot Binding in China Through Disability Identity and Compulsory Able-Bodiedness

In a few years, without thinking about whether it is right or wrong, he [a girl's father] forcibly binds his daughter's soft, white feet with white cloth so that even in her sleep, she cannot find comfort and relief until the flesh becomes rotten and the bones broken. What is all this misery for? Is it just so that on the girls wedding day friends and neighbors will compliment him, saying, "Your daughter's feet are really small"? Is that what the pain is for?¹

Qiu Jin, a prominent Chinese Revolutionary, wrote the speech above, "An Address to Two Hundred Million Fellow Countrywomen" in 1904. In the speech, Qiu used the common story of a father binding his daughter's feet for marriage as a way to fervently denounce the practice. In addition, she called both men and women to join the revolutionary movement. This quote highlights the discourse of the anti-footbinding movement during the height of its popularity. Stories like Qiu's, where fathers force their daughters to bind their feet with the hopes of good marriage prospects, saturate the mainstream beliefs about foot binding. Though these stories are truthful, they simplify the narratives around foot binding. Instead, foot binding was very complex, as it involved relationships between mothers and daughters and can be connected to disability identity. Likewise, the ending of foot binding was also complicated, as it was tied to encroachment of Western beliefs and able-bodiedness.

Previous scholarship has primarily focused on foot binding as a tool for women to secure a marriage. Scholars of foot binding approach the subject through various disciplines. However, there is a gap between Disability Studies and scholarship on foot binding. This paper aims to address the gap and highlight how the practice and tradition of foot binding can be interpreted as a disability identity for many Chinese women. Not only was the act of foot binding quite literally

¹Qiu, Jin. "An Address to Two Hundred Million Fellow Countrywomen," trans. Nancy Gibbs. 1904.

disabling, but the practice and tradition of foot binding was a creation of disability identity for many Chinese women. Disability theorist Margaret Murugami says identity “can be structured upon shared social experience” and “self-identity of persons with disabilities [disability identity] can be achieved not through a sidelining of impairment but through a reconstruction of what is normalcy.”² While the practice of foot binding created disability identity, the Western missionaries utilized the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness to change the perception of foot binding into a disability that needs to be cured.

Robert McRuer coined compulsory able-bodiedness and defines the theory as a cultural belief where “Able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for.” Compulsory able-bodiedness inherently positions disability as the imperfect subordinate to the robustness and normalcy of able-bodiedness.³ Compulsory able-bodiedness is based on the larger paradigm of the medical model of disability. The medical model casts disability as a personal problem that needs to be fixed. The social model of disability, created in response to the medical model, argues that society’s ableist attitudes and lack of accessibility create disability.

Overall, much of the discourse around foot binding has discussed disability without actually naming it as such. Thus, this paper explores the connections between foot binding and disability, and how Western missionaries used the framework of compulsory able-bodiedness to shift the idea of foot binding from disability identity to a condition that needed to be changed.

Although the origin of foot binding is ambiguous, it is thought to have started during the Song dynasty (960-1270 AD).⁴ Like many customs, foot binding was not homogeneous, as the

² Margaret Wangui Murugami, “Disability and Identity,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (November 5, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v29i4.979>.

³ Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald E. Hall et al. (Routledge, 2012), 304.

⁴ Anzi Dong, “Walking through Modernity: The Social Experiences and Cultural Representations of Boundfoot Women during the Anti-Footbinding Movement in China, 1900s-1930s” (2019), https://scholarspace.library.gwu.edu/concern/gw_etds/3j3332919.

practice was adopted across China and persisted for centuries.⁵ “Lotus foot” was the most extreme foot binding style, resulting in 3-inch feet. The process started when girls were between the ages of three and seven and was achieved by binding and “bending the small toes under the foot and towards the heel, forcing the arch upward...the process led to pressure breaks in the arch as well as the toes.”⁶ Not all women who bound their feet went to such extremes. Less destructive versions of foot binding existed, like the “Cucumber foot” or the “Half-slopping foot,” which still involved the breaking and binding of women’s toes and soles, but due to a looser bind or more relaxed binding schedule, usually resulted in 5 to 6-inch feet.⁷ At the least extreme, some families just loosely bound their daughter's feet without breaking the toes or arches.⁸

The number of women engaged in the practice, or “art form,” as many scholars call it, is not well documented. Historian Dorothy Ko ascribes this lack of documentation to the stigma around foot binding, explaining, “Before the nineteenth century, the subject of footbinding was taboo in official genres such as public history, local gazetteers, and dialectic texts.”⁹ Yet, anthropologist Hill Gates conducted a study where she interviewed 5,000 rural women from Sichuan, China, but had a full sample size of 16,478 women, which included family members of the 5,000 women. She found that “virtually 100% of women born in 1850–54 had bound feet,” which supports the notion that the art of foot binding was extremely popular.¹⁰

⁵ Saman Rejali, “From Tradition to Modernity: Footbinding and Its End (1839- 1911) – the History of the Anti-Footbinding Movement and the Histories of Bound-Feet Women in China,” *Pandium: The Journal of Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2014): 1–2, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/prandium/article/view/21844>.

⁶ Melissa J. Brown et al., “Marriage Mobility and Footbinding in Pre-1949 Rural China: A Reconsideration of Gender, Economics, and Meaning in Social Causation,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 4 (2012): 1035–67, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23357433>.

⁷ Meghann Burgess, “Love and Labor: Footbinding in Rural China in the Twentieth Century,” 2023, https://digitalcommons.bridgewater.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=research_awards.

⁸ Willem Vogelsang, “A Brief History of Foot Binding,” TRC Leiden, 2009, <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-digital-exhibition/index.php/chinese-lotus-shoes/item/142-2-a-brief-history-of-foot-binding>.

⁹ Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Burgess, 4.

As Ko says, foot binding was “The single most important experience in [their] life.”¹¹ They considered the practice “tradition” and fashionable.¹² Foot binding was not simply just the act of binding one's feet, but it was also “a highly structured endeavor that was rich with tradition. Through the centuries, exact methods of binding were established.”¹³ Female family members passed the practices down from generation to generation¹⁴ Much of the actual binding and consequential maintenance of having bound feet created a women's quarters, in which women could gather together to care for their feet.¹⁵ Foot binding led to an “emotional bond” between mothers and daughters and served as “an extension of a woman's place in the female network.”¹⁶ Also, foot binding created other rituals between women and girls like gifting each other accessories and shoes for their bound feet.¹⁷ These connections between women and girls formed the basis of a disability identity by creating shared experiences.

Women with bound feet experienced significant mobility limitations including the decreased ability to squat and stand up from a chair unassisted and heightened risk of falling, thus resulting in disability. Yet, despite the restricted mobility, many women still engaged in the practice and created a shared culture centered around the act. The shared social experience of foot binding that many women and girls experienced created a sense of identity for them. Foot binding is quite literally a disabling act, but for them, it was a normal tradition through which they created emotional bonds. Without the practice of foot binding the women would not have developed customs and rituals like gift giving, which highlights how integral the identity of bound feet was to them.

¹¹ Dorothy Ko, *Every Step a Lotus : Shoes for Bound Feet* (Univ. Of California Press, 2001), 12.

¹² Beverley Jackson, *Splendid Slippers: A Thousand Years of an Erotic Tradition* (Ten Speed Press, 1997), 18.

¹³ Jackson, 24.

¹⁴ Jackson, 24.

¹⁵ Saman, 3.

¹⁶ Saman, 3.

¹⁷ Sibers, 143.

Foot binding began to decrease by 1860 following the end of the Second Opium War when China became subject to Western influences. Western influences resulted in the opening of new treaty ports, which allowed more trading, but also served as justification for missionaries to move into China's interior regions.¹⁸ The Western missionaries also learned about foot binding and championed the anti-foot binding movement as they viewed the practice of foot binding as an extreme form of female oppression deeply rooted in patriarchal Chinese society.¹⁹ The missionaries believed foot binding violated their Christian values. Simultaneously, the missionaries were promoting the notion of a universal human body, which was intrinsically tied to Western ideals. The shaming of foot binding by the missionaries pressured male Chinese reformers to adopt Western views on foot binding as the cause of China's weaknesses.²⁰ Eventually, the notion of viewing the body as a machine took hold, which required complete functional mobility of all people.

With the influx of Western missionaries came an increase in Western ideals. From the beginning of the missionaries' involvement in China, they aimed to reconstruct China by transmitting their Western ideas and values to the Chinese people.²¹ The missionaries founded anti-foot binding societies, which enlisted Chinese support. In a letter to the editor of the *North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, a missionary, who went by the initials J.N.O, wrote, "I think that every legitimate measure should be adopted to accelerate the anti-foot-binding movement, so that its objects may be speedily accomplished. There are no

¹⁸Saman, 4.

¹⁹Patricia Angela Sieber, "Corporal Transactions: New Perspectives on Traditional Practices in China, India, and Africa," *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 4 (2005): 142–47, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2005.0056>.

²⁰ Gail Hershatler, "Marriage, Family, Sexuality, and Gender Difference," in *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (University Of California Press, 2007), 37.

²¹ Fan Hong, *Footbinding, Feminism, and Freedom the Liberation of Women's Bodies in Modern China* (Frank Cass, 1997), 54.

commercial interests involved; the question is purely one of common humanity.”²² Their letter emphasizes the urgency with which they viewed their mission to abolish foot binding, given they viewed women with bound feet as inhuman and needing to be fixed.

The actions and attitudes of the missionaries can be understood as compulsory able-bodiedness. The missionaries viewed the “natural unbound foot” as preferable to the bound foot and assumed that this was a universal belief. The application of compulsory able-bodiedness on foot binding thus cast women with bound feet as subordinate to those without bound feet and made the bound foot as “Other” to the normal natural unbound foot.

As the anti-footbinding movement grew, their demands grew as well. Now instead of only attempting to stop the practice of foot binding, Western missionaries tried to convince women to unbind their feet.²³ Women’s liberation began being associated with unbound feet. The missionaries believed that the only way to achieve women’s emancipation was to abolish foot binding, and often tried to enforce this practice.²⁴

Gradually the anti-movement spread to other groups, including Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries. In a poem called “Regrets: Line Written En Route to Japan,” Qiu Jin wrote, “Unbinding my feet I clean out a thousand years of poison.”²⁵ Qiu Jin, a Chinese Revolutionary who sacrificed her life for the liberation of Chinese women, is referred to as “China’s Joan of Arc.” Born in the late nineteenth century, Qiu was privileged to receive an extensive education, which led to her passion for reading and writing. When Qiu was eighteen, she married a much

²²J. N. O, “Foot-Binding: North-China Daily News,” *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, August 21, 1899, <https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/foot-binding/docview/1369464549/se-2>.

²³ Rachel Keeling, “The Anti-Footbinding Movement, 1872-1922: A Cause for China rather than Chinese Women,” *Footnotes: University of Guelph’s Undergraduate Journal of Gender, Sexuality, and Social Change* 1, no. 2008 (December 7, 2016), <https://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/footnotes/article/view/3837/3872>.

²⁴ Hong, 55.

²⁵ Qiu Jin, *Regrets: Lines Written En Route to Japan*, 1904.

older man. Dissatisfied with her marriage, she committed the extremely radical act of leaving her husband to further her education in Japan.²⁶ While there, she became more involved with women's liberation in China, and denounced the oppressive conditions faced by women under the Qing Dynasty, including the practice of foot binding. Despite Qiu's dedication to women's liberation, her views on foot binding did not account for the physical effects that unbinding one's feet would have on women.

Unbinding one's feet was not as simple as the anti-footbinding movement propagated. Younger women who had recently started binding their feet could regain the shape and function of their unbound feet. However, for women who had been binding their feet for many years, unbinding their feet was a difficult and painful process that often resulted in "wobbly and misshapen" feet that never returned to the original shape of the unbound foot.²⁷ This compulsory able-bodiedness created a tension between the notion of liberation and disability, where liberation actually caused greater disability for many women. The idea of being nondisabled was preferable to having one's feet bound, despite the fact that unbinding feet caused even greater disability.

Many Chinese reformists were also heavily influenced by Western socio-economic ideals, which cast Chinese men and women as the means to achieve modernity. With the decline of foot binding, women's role in society started to change. Instead of women primarily taking part in the domestic labor economy, they were encouraged to get a formal education and participate in the manual labor economy.²⁸ In a letter to the *North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, an anonymous missionary explained the importance of women's active participation.

²⁶ Amy Qin, "Qiu Jin, Beheaded by Imperial Forces, Was 'China's Joan of Arc,'" *The New York Times*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/obituaries/overlooked-qiu-jin.html>.

²⁷ Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, 49.

²⁸ Saman, 6.

The Empire at the present time is both poor and weak; all parties must arouse themselves and seek to raise her up. Women too must lend her aid. If woman is still forced to suffer, and grieve, and be ill-treated, her womanly instincts are harmed; if she cannot move without pain she cannot take her right place in the home, and man's difficulties in caring for his family are increased; women is regarded as a trouble and a burden.²⁹

This sentiment highlights how foot binding was viewed as a direct opposition to China's transition to modernity, as women who had bound feet were more restricted in their mobility and were unable to complete physical work. Similar to the Western missionaries, many Chinese reformists started to view the body as a machine and believed one's body as a source of productivity.³⁰ In 1896, Liang Qichao, a famous Chinese reformer, wrote "all two hundred million of our women are consumers; not a single one has produced anything of profit... no wonder men keep them as dogs, horses, and slaves."³¹ Liang was able to reach a wide audience and thus motivate many people to join the anti-footbinding movement and push it to its peak, shifting a majority of public perception against foot binding. China's shift to modernity and focus on socio-economic growth exemplifies compulsory able-bodiedness. Viewing the body as a machine automatically assumes the nondisabled body is superior because of its ability to be physically productive. It then considers the disabled body as invaluable and unproductive and stripped of personhood.

The Chinese Nationalist Party and Chinese Communist Party adopted the anti-footbinding movement's beliefs and emphasized the importance of able-bodiedness through

²⁹"The Natural Foot Society: Essay on Foot Binding," *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, June 26, 1896, <https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/natural-foot-society/docview/1369850222/se-2?accountid=10427>.

³⁰ Saman, 6.

³¹ Liang Qichao, "On Women's Education."

various campaigns. The 1911 Nationalist Revolution enacted an official ban on foot binding, which virtually ended the mainstream practice of foot binding.³²

Despite these efforts by Western missionaries and subsequently the Chinese government to eliminate foot binding, some women still maintained the practice, including a 79-year-old woman from Yunnan, China. When discussing her experience, she said

I started to bind my feet at around five years of age... It was ever so painful making them small but, luckily, there isn't any pain now... At that time, I didn't really care about the pain – there wasn't much I could have done anyway. I wanted to make my feet small, and I wouldn't want them to be any bigger. I think the smaller the feet, the more beautiful you are.³³

These comments show this woman viewed foot binding as an overall positive aspect of her identity. She recognized the pain involved; however, the aesthetic of small feet was more important. She had years of opportunities to unbind her feet but chose not to. Recounting one experience, she said

When I was younger, there were a few foreigners who visited our village. They came to tell us that we can no longer bind our feet [...] When they were here, we took off the bandages and told them we would stop. Then I wrapped my feet back up as soon as they had gone.³⁴

Without using the term compulsory able-bodiedness, she recognized that this was what the foreigners were attempting to enforce upon her. When they were in her village she pretended to accept their demands, but when they left she asserted her own autonomy and went back to her preferred identity. She explained that she continued to bind her feet by saying “I still bind my feet now, which is quite a hassle, but it keeps my feet small and comfortable. I still sleep with my feet bound. And every two days, I clean them well and wrap them up again.”³⁵ Even when

³² Dorothy Ko, “Footbinding and Anti-Footbinding in China,” in *Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism*, ed. Anupama Rao and Steven Pierce (Duke University Press, 2006), 215–42, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822387930-008>.

³³ Cameron Hack, “The Woman with Bound Feet: Stories from Humans of China, Yunnan,” WildChina, December 30, 2019, <https://wildchina.com/2019/12/the-woman-with-bound-feet/>.

³⁴ Hack, “The Woman with Bound Feet: Stories from Humans of China, Yunnan.”

³⁵ Hack, “The Woman with Bound Feet: Stories from Humans of China, Yunnan.”

discussing death and her hopes for her next life, she said, “I will wear these clothes and still have bound feet, so I have made a lot of aprons and little shoes for my family to burn and pass on to me when that time comes.”³⁶ To her, her small bound feet were so central to her identity that she could not fathom herself in any iteration of life without them. Her comfort with the practice and direct defiance of the ban challenged the notions of compulsory able-bodiedness advocated by Western missionaries and the Chinese government. Through her actions, she refused to perpetuate their belief that women with bound feet are in pain and wanting to unbind their feet.

In analyzing the rise and fall of foot binding, we can conclude that foot binding can be interpreted as a disability identity for many Chinese women. The process of foot binding is often remembered as an inhumane practice encouraged and enforced by men. With the growth of Western missionaries and their efforts in the anti-footbinding movement, the practice was deemed immoral and an aberration from the norm, leading to compulsory able-bodiedness. However, this ignores the sense of community that women created around the practice of foot binding. Because foot binding was disabling, the identity and community developed through foot binding resulted in what can be considered a disability identity.

The lack of scholarship on the intersection of foot binding and disability shows the profound gap in the history of foot binding, and this paper serves to bridge the gap. Disability identity is a complex framework, so examining foot binding through the lens of disability identity adds additional layers to the narrative of foot binding. Without including disability in the discourse on foot binding, the history of foot binding remains incomplete.

AI statement; No AI was used.

³⁶ Hack, “The Woman with Bound Feet: Stories from Humans of China, Yunnan.”

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