Research on the Role of Missionaries in the Chinese Anti-footbinding Movement

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Abstract. The long-formed Chinese custom of footbinding first started to decline in the late Qing period, with western missionaries playing a part in it. However, exactly how important were the missionaries in this anti-footbinding movement, and what can be learnt from their role in the movement, remained insufficiently discussed. Through analyzing primary sources from and/or about missionary societies in late Qing China, this paper concludes that the missionaries were important in raising the footbinding issue to the Chinese public, but were unable to make any actual impacts on the abolition of the practice, because they failed to gain the support from the powerful Chinese elites. The paper then uses the partial failure of the missionaries to reflect the role of today's NGOs in solving domestic human rights issues, and points out that the NGOs' impacts in such issues would be limited unless they have the support from the domestic forces.

Keywords: Footbinding · Anti-footbinding Movement · Missionaries · Domestic Human Rights Issues · Late Qing China

1 Introduction

How did the Chinese women change from hobbling with bound feet in the 19th century to winning the volleyball Olympics using their "healthy legs" in the 20th century? For as long as seven centuries (i.e., from the 13th century to the 19th) [1], the Chinese women had their free movement hindered by footbinding, a practice that binds females' feet by breaking their bone structures [2]. The practice was widely adopted because it symbolizes women's chastity and obedience, while promising them a decent marriage [3]. It had, however, started to decline from 1890 and almost became history in some areas by 1920 [1]. This leads to a question of scholarly concern: how did the footbinding practice turn from being a fashion in the 19th century to an abandoned custom in the 20th century? Understanding the successes and failures of the factors behind the fight against footbinding produces a clearer insight into the roles of foreign and domestic forces in today's human rights movements. Scholars back then and many historians today credited missionaries' efforts in the anti-footbinding movement. However, through analyzing primary sources, this paper argues that the impacts made by the missionaries in this respect were, in fact, limited. While foreign missionaries did play an important role in raising the anti-footbinding agenda to the national attention, in the end they had limited impact on the actual abolition of the practice.

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2 Missionaries Were Successful in the Movement

An example of historians crediting missionaries' successes in the anti-footbinding movement is Brent Whitefield's article published in the Southeast Review of Asian Studies, 2008. In the article, Whitefield argues that missionaries succeeded in drawing attention to and hastening the extinction of footbinding, but failed in their own mission of Christianizing China [1]. Although the second half of the article focuses more on the failure of missionaries in Christianizing China, which is irrelevant with this paper, the first half is demonstrative of historians' general identification of the missionaries' achievements. In this part, Whitefield argues that, "though there were other important factors involved in the development of public opinion against footbinding, the role of Western and native Christians can hardly be overstated" [1]. This paper agrees with Whitefield that the missionaries helped to raise the issue to the Chinese public, which will be proven by the primary sources in the next section. Nonetheless, this work disagrees that "the role of Western and native Christians" in the movement was as important as what Whitefield believes to be. This will also be proven in the following sections.

3 Success of the Missionaries: The New Anti-footbinding Agenda

Christian missionaries were important in that they successfully started the Chinese "crusade" against footbinding and raised the issue to the public. In this section, their successes will be proven by two primary sources. The first primary source is a tract published on the Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal, titled "Foot-binding; Two Sides of the Question". It was published by a missionary society called Tian Zu Hui (the Heavenly Foot Society) [4]. Tian Zu Hui was an anti-footbinding society set up in 1895 by Mrs. Archibald Little, an English travel writer living in China. It was consisted mostly of missionaries' wives, and aimed at "saving" China and emancipating the Chinese women from the "barbarous" custom of footbinding [5], through scattering tracts, written in Chinese, that criticized the evils of the practice [6]. The tract published on the Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal was written by Mrs. Little in English, with the help of other members in the society, but was then translated into Chinese for Chinese readership [4].

In the first half of the tract, Mrs. Little pointed out the traditional arguments supporting footbinding and skillfully refuted them respectively. For example, when facing the common argument which claimed that footbinding "preserves the chastity and modesty of the women", Mrs. Little argued by using a rhetoric question: "Are all women with bound feet chaste and modest? Certainly not," and said that "chastity and modesty are not preserved by outward forms but by moral principles in the heart" [4]. The strong reasoning, logic and the use of rhetoric techniques made the argument convincing, proving that the western societies had indeed helped to raise the anti-footbinding agenda to the Chinese public skillfully.

In the second half of the tract, Mrs. Little raised several arguments against the footbinding custom. The arguments include "it is contrary to nature", "it hinders the free movements of the body" and "it is in the way of women earning money". However, what is truly convincing and skilful is the link Mrs. Little made between anti-footbinding

and Confucianism, the general belief of the Chinese public. Mrs. Little argued that "the wives of all the sages and the old ancestors did not bind their feet", and that the "mother of Confucius and the mother of Mencius had un-bound feet", so Chinese people should "follow the example of the mothers and wives of the Chinese sages". Furthermore, Mrs. Little argued that women with bound feet could not fulfill their family duties, because "girls cannot run quickly to carry out the orders of their father and mother", "wives cannot fulfil their household duties" and "mothers cannot watch and look after their children properly when they are playing in the open air" [4]. The failure of Chinese women to fulfil their family duties because of bound feet makes the practice contrary to Confucianism, which believes that women carry a range of responsibilities toward their husband and parents. The attempt to relate the issue to Confucianism is significant because it demonstrates the skillful techniques with which Tian Zu Hui used to raise the issue. Instead of relating it to their own religion, Christianity, the society related the necessity to remove the practice to Confucianism. This proves that the missionary's wives had skillfully raised the issue of footbinding to the national attention.

The second primary source is a newspaper article published in The Washington Post in 1898, titled "REFORM FOR THE FEET: AMERICAN GIRLS TACKLE AN ANCIENT CHINESE CUSTOM…". Aiming for American readership, the newspaper reports the efforts made by another missionary society, the Anti-Foot-Binding society. According to the newspaper, this society was set up in late 19th century by four Christian ladies, who were the eldest daughters of the British missionary, John MacGowan, the founder of the first Tian Zu Hui in Amoy, 1874 [5, 7]. Unlike Mrs. Little's Tian Zu Hui that scattered tracts, the Anti-Foot-Binding society aimed to "revolutionize this ancient and hideous custom" through Christian schools and Chinese converts. As mentioned in the newspaper, if the Chinese girls wanted to enroll for the Christian school where the four ladies taught, they had to unbind their feet and sign a pledge promising "never to allow the feet to be bound and crushed". Once the Chinese girls unbound, they were soon persuaded of the good of having natural feet and therefore became converts and members of the Anti-Foot-Binding society. The Chinese converts and missionaries were then sent into villages to preach the parents of the evils of footbinding repeatedly until the parents yielded and promised to unbind their girls' feet, showing the society's determination to "revolutionize" the custom.

The newspaper article also points out that the Chinese girls, who had become converts soon after they unbound, "evince an earnest desire to work against the cruel custom" and that "their enthusiasm [to work against the custom] entitles them" [5]. This shows that the early efforts made by the four Christian ladies had indeed gain the Anti-Footbinding Crusade passionate support from Chinese girls, who at the same time also converted to Christians. However, the percentage of the Christian converts in favor of unbinding within the Chinese population was never more than 1% [8]. While the newspaper did not mention exactly how many girls unbound, the proportions of the emancipated feet made possible by the Anti-Foot-Binding society within the whole country also remained unclear. Moreover, even though the newspaper implies that the society's efforts were effective among some ordinary people, it does not offer information on how successful were the missionaries among the Chinese elites, the ones who had the real power to end the practice.

Starting the anti-footbinding crusade and bringing up the agenda to the public attention is not the same as leading to the actual abolition of the practice. To do so, the missionaries needed not only to convince the Chinese general masses, but also the elites, the ones who had the actual power to end the practice, of their cause – that only the west could "save" China and the Chinese women from such "savagery" of footbinding [6]. Unfortunately, the Christians, as will be proven in the next section, failed to win the support from both a large group of ordinary Chinese and the elites.

4 Limitations of Missionaries' Impacts

However insightful their arguments might have been, the missionaries had limited impacts in drawing a full stop to footbinding. For one thing, there were only a few of them compared to the vast Chinese population. By 1900, although the number of missionaries (including wives and children) grew from 50 in 1860 to 2500 [9], this number remained negligible compared to contemporary China's total population of about 4 billion people [10], who had long viewed footbinding as normal and necessary. But more importantly, two primary sources from the time indicate, in two different angles, that the impacts made by missionaries were bound to be limited. The first primary source focuses on the role of Chinese anti-foreign sentiments in limiting the missionaries' impacts, while the second source highlights the importance of the missionaries' own failure in winning the support from Chinese elites.

The first primary source points out that the missionaries' impacts were limited because their very presence in the country was unwanted by many. In 1892, an editorial comment, written by Rev. L.N. Wheeler, in the Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal reported on a meeting between the foreign residents. The meeting was held in Hankow (a city in Hubei province), in which the discussion of an issue in Hunan, a province next to Hubei, was indicative of the strong anti-foreign sentiments prevailing among the Chinese people. The report points out that, in Hunan province alone, there was a "wide diffusion of highly inflammatory anti-foreign literature, in which men of the West are accused of most revolting and unheard-of crimes", and that "over a hundred different anti-foreign productions have been ascertained to be in circulation, and there is every reason to believe that millions of copies have been distributed amongst the people" [11]. The report on the "wide diffusion" of anti-foreign literature in one single province alone is demonstrative of the anti-foreign sentiments held by some, if not many, Chinese at the time. The strong dislikes toward westerners – partially because of the Opium wars and the humiliating treaties signed after them – meant that, however hard they tried, the missionaries' anti-footbinding arguments would remain impenetrable and even resentful for at least some groups of Chinese. This sets great limits on the actual impacts that the missionaries could make.

Moreover, the second primary source from the time indicates that the missionaries' cause remained impenetrable toward the Chinese literati and nobles. In 1900, Frank G. Carpenter, an American journalist and travel writer, published an article on the Atlanta Constitution titled, "THE T'IEN TSU HUI: THE ANTI-FOOT BINDING SOCIETY AND ITS MOVEMENT…" In the article, Carpenter noted a conversation between the Tautoi of Shanghai and the United States Consul General Goodnow, which was retailed

to him by the Consul General himself. The Tautoi told the Consul General that "'at any rate they [footbinding] are in fashion here and I would not have a big-footed woman [as wife]'", and that "'I really don't think much of your women coming over here and making a fuss about our fashions'" [12]. What is ironic is that, just a few days before this conversation, the tautoi had made "'a speech in favor of anti-footbinding at a meeting of the foreign ladies'", in which he praised the missionary wives and called them the "'benefactors of China'" [12]. This account proves that, although missionary societies like Tian Zu Hui might seem successful on the outlook, with nobles supporting their cause, under the rose, some nobles were not supportive of them nor convinced by them.

Besides the failure to convince the nobles of their cause, the missionaries also failed to convince the Chinese literati. In his newspaper article, Carpenter mentions that, in The North China News, a Chinese had counter argued the missionaries' arguments against footbinding by comparing this Chinese practice to "waist-binding" in the West. The Chinese argued that footbinding "is of the same use as tightening the waist among you Europeans…they are both for the benefit of men", and that footbinding actually "does not do as much harm as waist tightening". In addition, he argued that "your enlightened, Christian ladies should begin at home by forming an anti-waist-tightening society; then we Chinese may follow your example" [12]. Judging by the strong reasoning and comparing techniques used in this argument, it can be evaluated that the argument was from a literates in China. This evaluation is significant because it shows that, even though the westerners had tried hard to convince the Chinese of their cause through linking to practice to Confucianism, as shown by Mrs. Little's tract, the educated Chinese literati, who were the ones that had the real power to make a change, were not convinced. Quite oppositely, they held the westerners' efforts in contempt.

The failure to convince the Chinese nobles and literati of their cause limited the missionaries' impacts in the movement, because it meant that the ones who had the actual power to end the practice were not using it to help them. In the early 20th century, when the Chinese elites indeed fought for anti-footbinding using their power, because they realized the disadvantages footbinding had posed for China in the competition with the west [7], they were not fighting alongside the missionaries and supporting their cause. Instead, the Chinese elites believed that China could save herself without foreign intervention and thus dissociated the missionaries from the final stages of the movement [6]. The failure to convince the educated Chinese of their cause, therefore, resulted in the missionaries being dissociated from the movement when it nearly reached success, thereby limiting their impacts on the final abolition of footbinding.

5 Conclusion

All in all, the missionaries' role in the fight against footbinding has two sides of interpretation. On the one hand, the missionaries were important because they had raised the issue of footbinding to the public attention. On the other hand, however, the missionaries were less important in the actual abolition of the practice. Their cause did not gain enough tractions because of the prevailing anti-foreign sentiments in the country. But more importantly, their cause was not supported by the crucial domestic forces, the elites, which led to their dissociation from the movement when it nearly became

successful. This finding is significant, because a clearer understanding toward the role of missionaries in the Chinese anti-footbinding movement leads to a better idea on the effectiveness of foreign forces in solving today's domestic human rights issues. Judging by their actions and organizations in the anti-footbinding movement, the Christian missionary societies in the 19th century China appeared similar to toady's NGOs in the fight against national human rights issues. In this sense, the limited impacts made by the missionaries in the anti-footbinding movement, due to the lack of support from the Chinese elites, imply that, to solve a national human rights issue, the efforts from NGOs alone would not be enough. However hard they work, the NGOs can hardly make any significant changes in a nation-specific human rights crisis, if the domestic forces are not on their side. Thus, the story of the end of footbinding, on the contrary to what scholars from both the past and the present believe, cannot just be about the missionaries; they could hardly end the practice alone. Other factors, such as the domestic efforts from the Chinese elites, are also important and await future investigation.

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