The anti-footbinding movement in China was not carried out for the benefit of women, but rather used as a vehicle for the larger nationalist program to achieve modernity and acceptability in the eyes of the West. The movement lacked sensitivity to the fact that footbinding was once a revered practice, deeply rooted in Han culture, and it overlooked the potentially traumatizing effects of dismantling the practice of footbinding would have on women whose lives had been shaped by the custom. To begin, this paper engages in a brief survey of the origins and growth of footbinding as a mark of status and civility. Next, a look at the failed efforts by the Manchus at the beginning of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) to end the custom show that it could not be eradicated unilaterally by simple government edict. It was in the late nineteenth century that anti-footbinding became a movement with a base of popular support. The focus of this paper will be on the period from the 1870s to about 1930. The first stage—lasting until roughly 1910—was pioneered by the actions and discourse of foreign Christian missionaries and Chinese intellectuals who effectively extinguished the cultural prestige footbinding carried. The next stage—from about 1910 to 1930—saw a more aggressive approach marked primarily by the unbinding of women’s feet. This was carried out both randomly and officially—by Yan Xishan in Shanxi province, for example—but both strategies produced unanticipated consequences that illustrate the overall fragmentation.

and insensitivity that came to dominate the anti-footbinding movement.

There are various tales about ancient dynastic rulers who favoured “fox-footed” concubines who became models at court. For example, King Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang dynasty (c.1600-1046 BC), had a concubine named Da Ji who was his favourite. She was said to be a fox sent from heaven and all the court women imitated her. Such ancient folkloric tales are indicative of an ideology or practice that is deeply rooted in the culture. The Song dynasty (960-1279) is credited with the spreading of footbinding from north to south in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Once established during the Song, footbinding gradually became more widespread. By the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), bound feet became a mark of status for the upper classes, a means of upward mobility for the lower classes, and a marker of feminine beauty and poise. With the desire for small feet rooted hundreds of years before nineteenth century reform, it would be difficult to overturn such a strong cultural affinity.

The effort of Manchu rulers to eradicate footbinding is evidence of the difficulty of eliminating the practice. Emperor Kangxi (1654-1722) tried to stop footbinding at the beginning of the Qing dynasty with a punitive decree directed at parents. This unilateral method met with such resistance and caused so much collateral nuisance—as rival families began accusing each other of continuing the practice of binding feet—that the regulation was rescinded by 1668. The Manchus issued another edict of a similar nature almost two hundred years later in 1847, which was no more effective. The Manchu rulers did not challenge the ideology behind the practice, but simply issued proclamations which were clearly no match for a Han tradition that had been around for centuries. The difference between the imperial attempt to stop footbinding and what emerged later in the nineteenth century was that tradition would be challenged in the context of a larger movement for reform. The Manchus were not aiming at a large-scale re-modeling of society like the reformers to come; they merely wanted to undo a cultural practice they saw as backward and unique to their Han subjects, and therefore threatening to Manchu culture. This suggests that the central concern of Qing officials was not to save women from a painful experience.

3 Wang, 31.
5 Ping, 32-33.
6 Ping, 34.
7 Levy, 68.
9 Ping, 35.
With western nations industrializing in the nineteenth-century and China failing to keep up with that level of production, their political status in the world was lowered. This perceived weakness proved to be helpful to foreign missionaries who, as a result of unequal treaties in the mid-nineteenth century, were able to reside in certain Chinese ports and travel into the country. For example, an early assertion of why footbinding was sinful was founded on seemingly Christian logic, claiming the practice was a “cultural contrivance, a violation of parental love, and a sexual threat to the God-loving man.” These ideas came about during a meeting which led to the formation of the first anti-footbinding organization, known as the Heavenly Foot Society. It was founded at Xiamen in 1875 by Reverend John MacGowan. The creation of societies like these characterized the first stage of the movement, as they discouraged footbinding without the aggressive tactics employed later on. Many scholars credit foreign missionaries with taking the vital first step in the emancipation of Chinese women because they formed the first of such societies, established the first schools for girls, and encouraged women not to perpetuate the practice of footbinding.

The first school for girls was opened in Ningpo in 1844 by Mary Ann Aldersey. Thirty-two years later, there were over two thousand girls studying in well over one hundred missionary schools. When the missionaries saw the difficulty girls with bound feet had participating in physical exercise and even walking, it extended their concerns past religion and into social reform. This then lead to the formation of societies, and the expression of arguments that were embraced by Chinese reformers throughout the anti-footbinding movement. Evidently, missionaries did have some compassion for the pain girls went through to bind their feet. However, this focus on female wellness was not maintained throughout the movement.

Adele Fielde published her perceptions of Chinese people in 1894, after a fifteen year stay among them. She mentions footbinding only in passing, but her account—and her negative attitude towards footbinding—are indicative of how common the practice was even at that late stage of the nineteenth century. In her description of marriage rituals, Fielde notes the existence of concubines, and states that “the chief wife is always a woman with dwarfed feet, while the inferior wives are usually natural-

10 Levy, 38.
12 Hong, 50.
13 Ko, 17.
14 Ko, 14.
15 Hong, 53-54.
16 Note that physical exercise for both females and males was a marker of low-class status in Chinese society, therefore a desire to avoid it was not limited to girls with bound feet.
17 Hong, 55.
footed." This shows that bound feet were still a mark of social status and hierarchy, as those without them were also of inferior rank. Fielde also quotes a Chinese grandmother as saying that "a daughter is a troublesome expensive thing...not only has she to be fed, but there is also the trouble of binding her feet, and getting her betrothed." Although this displays a certain disdain for the practice, it is indicative of how important it was for a daughter to have bound feet and what little choice women felt they had in the matter. The way in which footbinding is listed in succession with betrothal implies that it was presumed a girl would go through it, as it was presumed she would marry shortly after.

This missionary account is significant because it shows that despite the formation of anti-footbinding societies, the establishment of missionary schools, and the distribution of reform propaganda (discussed below), footbinding remained common in the final decades of the nineteenth century, still carrying with it the social prestige it had during the Song dynasty. If women relied on their bound feet to attain a respectable social position so late in history, the impact of taking that insurance away from them in the decades to follow would surely be problematic.

The extent to which missionaries spurred on the reform efforts of Chinese intellectuals is debatable, but in the same period native reformers were beginning to oppose footbinding. To them, it was an opposition to all aspects of China's feudal past. There seemed to be a growing self-consciousness among intellectuals about how China was perceived by the rest of the world. Many were very concerned with modernization as a means of making the nation respectable, and bound feet became a symbol of everything that held China back. Kang Youwei (1858-1927) was one of the more famous Chinese reformers, and is associated with the 1898 Hundred Days Reform. He submitted a petition to the throne that same year commenting that China was seen as a joke to foreigners and that footbinding was the primary object of such ridicule. Reformers like Kang believed that bound feet made women weak, which in turn made their offspring weak, and the nation weak by extension. This petition shows that Kang was concerned with footbinding on nationalistic grounds rather than humanitarian grounds. In 1894, Kang started the Unbound Foot Association in Canton and eventually gathered over ten thousand followers. This was one of many Chinese-founded anti-footbinding societies that emerged in this period. Like those begun by foreign missionaries, these societies held mass meetings and encouraged people to end footbinding by having members vow not to bind their feet, bind their children's feet, or allow their sons to marry women with bound feet.

19 Adele, 72.
20 Ping, 37.
21 Levy, 71, 74.
22 Levy, 74.
Chinese reformers also took an interest in the education of girls that the missionaries had begun. Kang's contemporary Liang Qichao (1873-1929) was disappointed that foreigners had established the first girl's schools, and believed that Chinese scholars should educate Chinese women. The first school for girls established by the Chinese was opened in 1898, and with the sponsorship of important local families, many more followed. Physical exercise—like in western schools—was part of the curriculum as of 1903, and impacted girls with bound feet as they were unable to participate and were sometimes banned from school altogether. It was believed that a woman "...in a physically weak condition can do nothing... [and that] women's emancipation should start from physical release through physical education." It appears that females with bound feet were excluded from most of the available education. The availability of education suggests that the movement did have an interest in improving women's status, however excluding certain women based on a physical attribute inflicted upon them at a young age shows that the status of women was not the priority. Bound feet were used as a symbol of what the larger reform movement intended to eradicate, and that symbol took precedence over allowing all women access to one of the benefits a modern society could offer.

The anti-footbinding societies founded by Chinese reformers were active in the release of propaganda which played a significant role in the dismantling of footbinding's honoured place in Han culture. Simple poems and songs reached the masses, including the illiterate. Authors used Chinese values to evoke an emotional response and convince people that those who bound their feet were doing wrong. Common themes include parental neglect and the uselessness of a woman with bound feet. A late nineteenth century song entitled "Stop Footbinding!" by Lin Qinnan included lines such as: "Your body is so heavy a burden for your feet that you fear you may stumble in the wind...She's so pitiful and her mother just doesn't care." A series of three poems entitled "Tiny-Foot Lady" use very similar imagery against footbinding, as well as a direct call to the audience: "Please persuade all women to unbind their feet, and if parental hearts remain as hard as steel, make them listen to my heart rending appeal." These and other pieces of anti-footbinding propaganda worked to

23 Hong, 62.
24 Hong, 67.
25 Hong, 35.
26 Hong, 67.
28 Levy, 86.
30 Ono, 84.
tear down positive conceptions of footbinding, and gave rise to the modernist view that for China to move forward, it must leave old practices behind. While this did contribute to women’s emancipation in terms of opening the doors to a life without physically restricted movement, it also exposed them to new abuses in a culture that suddenly valued an ideal that was opposite to what women had been raised to believe. A girl born in the final decade of the nineteenth century who had been told that natural feet would spell her social death found herself the target of ridicule and physical violation in adulthood. This was the harsh turn reform took around the birth of the Republic.

By the 1910s, the reins of the anti-footbinding movement had long been in the hands of Chinese reformers who advocated for women’s liberation only as a starting point to nationwide modernization. The bound foot was a visual reminder of the old world and was made into an abstract symbol of all that was wrong with China. It is this abstraction that carried the movement into its next phase, characterized by fangzu or “letting feet out.” Reformers used more forceful and provocative tactics to do away with footbinding in a literal sense, and also to tear it down symbolically, which had a dehumanizing effect on the women attached to each pair of bound feet. The sight of a bare foot had been considered inappropriate in China for so long that it was a highly provocative image. Societies published illustrated tracts with juxtaposed images of bound and natural feet in order to promote the message of fangzu. Rallies were held where women were encouraged to expose their feet. These meetings, which drew thousands of curious spectators, put women’s bodies on display as if they were part of a theatrical performance. In the not-so-distant past, a woman may only have bared her feet to her husband (if anyone at all), and these public displays could therefore be deeply troubling and offensive to people.

The unbinding of feet was not only promoted but in many cases enforced during this phase of the movement. Women could be fined if they refused to loosen their bindings or continued to bind the feet of their daughters, and the government might reward those who handed in binding cloths and lotus shoes. Consequently, men broke into houses to confiscate such items, and even confronted women in the streets, forcing them to unwrap their feet. This kind of action was a physical and emotional violation that shows an outright disrespect for the individuals who were allegedly being liberated by the anti-footbinding movement.

It seems that urban women in the 1910s and 20s had little choice but to let out their feet. This might have seemed theoretically simple to male reformers; however in practice the process could be painful and laborious—ironically
comparable to the process of footbinding itself. Girls who had only recently begun binding their feet could feasibly undo the process and regain the function and shape of an unbound foot, however for older women whose bodies were more resistant to such a change, it was quite different.35

Twenty women of the Letting Feet Out Society published a leaflet with methods for older women to unbind their feet, which they had tested on themselves.36 They suggested the best treatments for corns and calluses, and gave homemade alternatives for rural women who did not have access to a pharmacy. The descriptions were detailed and realistic in their representation of the female body, which marks knowledge about women that had never previously been written down in China.37 This hints at the existence of some compassion for and engagement with the real experience of women within the anti-footbinding movement that does not appear to have been commonplace. It is also significant that these leaflets were created for women, by women, when much of what was going on at the time was male directed. This fact may account for the ability of such reformers to detach themselves from the less ideal aspects of the anti-footbinding movement. At the same time, this literature was also propaganda that perpetuated the message of fangzu as it failed to mention that the "liberated foot" of an older woman was misshapen and painful to walk on.38

Another example of the anti-footbinding movement took place in the province of Shanxi, from 1917 to 1922. Yan Xishan, the warlord governor of the province, wanted to make Shanxi "acceptable" in the modern context promoted by reformers at the time. Yan began a province-wide campaign prohibiting footbinding by edict (like the Manchu's during the Qing dynasty), with a program of social surveillance to enforce it. Older women were not forced to unbind their feet, so the consequences of that process were not an issue in Shanxi; however, unforeseen conflicts did arise. To enforce the edict and gather statistics, local authorities inspected girls' feet. This was soon construed as an excuse to fondle women, so in 1919 female inspectors were dispatched. Then a debate over state versus personal boundaries ensued as people felt that the government was threatening the authority of the patriarch over his daughter. As a result, many families willingly paid fines in order to avoid meddling local authorities.39

Although Yan Xishan's method to stop footbinding differed from leaders in other parts of the movement, he shared the nationalistic outlook that was common to all the Chinese reformers discussed above. They all targeted footbinding because they believed it to be a first step in the modernization of China, not because they wanted to offer more choices to women. Shanxi

35 Ko, 46.
36 Ko 48.
37 Ko, 49.
38 Ko, 11, 49.
39 Ko, 52.
is also significant because it shows that a more official or ordered approach to prohibiting the practice did not make it any less complicated to enforce.

Despite some positive beginnings in the anti-footbinding movement, like the establishment of education for girls, good intentions were overshadowed in the end by strong nationalist aims that put women's quality of life low on the priority list. Emancipation suggests the widening of choice; however women in China (specifically in the cities where reform was most prevalent) went from being forced to do one thing by having their feet bound as children, to being forced to do the opposite by unbinding their feet as adults. It was not a choice between the two. The decline of footbinding from the end of the nineteenth century into the 1920s was by no means a thorough or unified process. What declined was the perception within Chinese culture of footbinding as something empowering for a woman in terms of her social status. Through propaganda and public display, reformers made the image of the bound foot so highly symbolic that it no longer belonged to the woman living the experience, and her experience no longer mattered in the context of national modernization.
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