
Secularizing the Pain of Footbinding in China: Missionary and Medical Stagings of the Universal Body

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How did foreign Christian anti-footbinding activists treat the distinctive forms of human embodiment they encountered in China? What were their assumptions? How should we understand the transition from religious to secular imaginings of the body and its pains? Here I discuss late nineteenth and early twentieth century religion and medicalized hygiene through the voices of two English people who campaigned against and wrote extensively about footbinding. Not an easy story about God traded for Nature, but a far more uneasy and subliminal borrowing and cross-fertilization of tropes between the religious and the scientific. In both evangelical religion and biological science our protagonists created powerful narrative technologies for making cultural process disappear into nature, and thus to re-channel agency, making it available for new projects. Here we see the secular and the religious informing and reinforcing one another as moments in the creation of the modern.

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This paper had its origin in a panel organized by Dorothy Ko at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meetings in Boston, 1994. The session was called "The Mindful Body: Footbinding," and she and I have had many conversations about footbinding over the intervening decade, as I worked on this paper, and on my "Bound to be Represented: Fetishizing/Theorizing Footbinding" (2006).

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EVERY CRITIQUE THAT WE PRODUCE also produces us, contributes to our finding a speaking voice, creates for us a subject position. Such “subjectifications” depend upon our installation within specific regimes of bodily discipline and practice that work invisibly at the level of common sense. Not surprisingly, we often find it hard to imagine other subjectifications within other bodily regimes. From their twenty-first-century perspective, students tend to see the past lives of Chinese women as one of tremendous oppression, and footbinding as the summarizing signpost of that oppression.¹ The impulse to “save” these Others from their own culture still motivates many student essays in classes about gender in China. Many feel that taking footbinding seriously as cultural practice constitutes a form of collusion—even though, as historian Ebrey (1993: 8) has trenchantly observed, no one is advocating a return to the system that produced footbinding.

This student attitude has something in common with the critiques of violence against women developed by radical feminists of the Seventies such as Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin. Such critiques, unfortunately, lumped many practices together as evidence of universal patriarchal evil, eliminating any distinctions of culture and historical experience (Dworkin 1974; Daly 1978). They included historical practices like footbinding and witchcraft burnings alongside current practices such as female circumcision and sati.² In doing so, they erased the political work done, often by women themselves, to change their own conditions.³ They reduced these women to their bodies, and in doing so, engaged in a moment of “fetishizing the body as the lost object” in a world dominated by masculinist projects of abstraction.⁴ I feel that we must understand why this reduction has remained compelling from the earliest days of European interest in footbinding until today, and not only for that slippery entity called “western feminism.” Far from being a footnote to history, early encounters such as those of the missionaries to China that I write about in this essay comprise an important moment in the construction of the world we live in now, with profound

¹ I take the classroom to be an aspect of the “already institutionalized reality” that I hope to make intelligible and transform, through better theorizing. For more see Apter and Pietz 1993: 128.

² More recent work on *sati* (Sunder Rajan 1990, 1993; Mani 1998) has tried to remedy this one-sided approach, not through apologetics, but by resituating it within the colonial encounter between England and India.

³ See my essay “Bound to be represented: Theorizing/fetishizing footbinding” (2006) for how attitudes toward footbinding show us changes in feminist theorizing about the feminine Other.

⁴ Ahmed and Stacey (2001: 3).

implications for the kinds of politics possible within that world. Our current “secular modernity” has inherited to a surprising extent nineteenth century projects of the “naturalization” of culture and, most importantly for this essay, the tendency to substitute sexed difference/women's difference for cultural difference as its most privileged marker. For nineteenth century missionaries and Chinese reformers, the woman's bound foot came to stand for the sad plight of Chinese culture itself. The equivalent today surely must be Muslim women's veils as marker of the oft-mentioned “medieval” and non-modern cultural burdens that Islam places upon its adherents.

This essay concentrates deliberately and specifically upon nineteenth century English constructions of footbinding, along with what I think of as their legacy for a wider discourse of the secularization of ethical bodily engagement, rather than upon a history of Chinese attitudes and practice.⁵ What kinds of bodies do we think we are dealing with, anyway, that they should have remained so stable in their configuration? The case of missionary apprehension of footbinding in China allows us a glimpse of how this “universal body” came into being.

Bio-science, the form of scientific and technical discourse originating in Europe to represent and discipline the human body in its individuality and sociality, maintains and manages the body's materiality as simply another aspect of Nature. And indeed, as sensory creatures, human beings are always already enmeshed in material life via their own bodies. This body of biology provides an ever-firmer basis for community with everybody's Other body, the “rock bottom of universality, the hard core of nature, the backdrop of any history.”⁶ Yet, since its moment of formal abandonment into acting as merely the material ground of mind by Descartes, has not this “natural body” represented for European philosophy the Other of its own subjectivity? Only to pop up as the privileged, naturalized exterior to society in postenlightenment, modern, now globalized life? From this European vantage, twenty-first-century bodies are precisely what we have in common with all Others—the nature we know we share beneath the annoying or charming differences of culture. Here we find the universal body of human rights discourse. But what does it say about the possibilities for communication and justice when the body, the “natural body” as the

⁵ For such a history, readers are recommended to Ko (2005) and Gao (1995). For polemics situated within present-day China on the subject, readers can see Dai and Ke (1996), and Fan (1997).

⁶ Latour (2002: 13).

Object of the European Subject, becomes the naturalized ground upon which we can base our relationship with Otherness cross-culturally?

I am not arguing that the body has no materiality, or that its physical structure, and concomitant vulnerability, can be ignored or is infinitely plastic. On the contrary, we live on the cusp, at the interface of two materialities: that of the world, and that of our bodies.⁷ In that belief, I will argue that the Chinese female body (whose feet were bound) could be imagined and lived in distinctive ways: whether dematerialized into process, or slowly brought into focus by the favoring of one of its organs, or redistributed as newly “experienced” in a politically disciplinary regime, it was/is not *this* body-taken-for-granted at *this* moment in global history: an inert, bio-medical materiality. Instead, it was a body-coming-into-being through the discursive practices of Chinese traditional medicine, kinship, ritual, and art (Zito and Barlow 1994, “Introduction”).

How did foreign Christian anti-footbinding activists treat this different embodiment? What were their assumptions? How can we see the transition from European (and then American) religious to secular imaginings of the foot-bound body and its pains? Here I discuss the interconnections between the late nineteenth century religion and the early twentieth century medicalized hygiene through the voices of two English people who worked and wrote extensively about footbinding.

The two people I discuss here literally met and conferred over footbinding, albeit from different angles. In 1874 Rev. John Macgowan convened, with the help of his wife, the first public discussion of bound feet by sixty Christian Chinese women.⁸ Sometime thereafter, while on a sojourn to Shanghai, he was introduced to Mrs. Archibald Little by missionary Timothy Richards.⁹ Impressed by his story of the Amoy society, she convened a meeting of Shanghai’s foreign elite to hear Macgowan speak (Macgowan 1913: 89–93). Thereafter, in April 1895, she founded the national anti-footbinding movement that would have

⁷ See Mol and Law (2004), for a sensitive discussion of how to reduce this process of “doing” the body-in-the-world to a simple subject/object split. Note also Asad’s (1993) discussion of how over-emphasis upon agency can elide important (objective) aspects of social life that elude subjectivity.

⁸ Drucker places the meeting in this year (Drucker 1991, 187–188.)

⁹ Alicia Helen Neva Bewicke, in the convention of the times, signed her books as “Mrs. Archibald Little” after her marriage. Historian Croll (1989: 23–62) presents a very sympathetic portrait of her in her book on European women writers in China. I intend to honor Little’s conventional claim to her status as married woman by referring to her as Mrs. Little, rather than using her first name, and thus performing a kind of twenty-first century feminist rescue mission.

far-reaching political consequences (Little 1899: 149).¹⁰ The encounter of Macgowan and Little represents a change in eras in the China mission experience. An evangelical emphasis was giving way to the new “social gospel” that sought to address the needs of “whole men and women” (Hunter 1984: 9).

Their, respective, translations of the early name in Chinese of the antifeetbinding movement indicated their different perspectives. Rev. Macgowan translated *Tianzu hui* as “Heavenly Foot Society”; Mrs. Little, a Christian lay reformer, preferred “Natural Feet Society” (Little 1908: 253).¹¹ For Macgowan the body belonged to God, while for Little it belonged to hygiene; both shared a late nineteenth-century image of the body as “natural,” as the ground of culture, and the source of the labor power that fueled the capitalism and industry so necessary for China’s progress. They conceived of the body as a natural ally, whether in the cause of conversion or civilization, against a Chinese culture that degraded, maimed, and even murdered it. They overlooked the fact that the Chinese bodies they confronted were not virgin territory, fenced in by Chinese culture, waiting to be liberated. They never granted to the Chinese the same implicit continuity between the body and social life that they claimed for European bodily disciplines of religion and medicines as both naturally and culturally superior.

Talal Asad has called for an anthropology of secularism that begins with investigating its attitudes toward the human body (Asad 2003). From our current vantage, this seems a good starting point, for we live in a world where, for some of the very discursive reasons I discuss below, we are certain that we all do share this physical body, and that we can rely upon it as a motive for comparative work. I would, at least, like to draw attention to the architecture of these assumptions. The argument is structured like this: I will talk about Macgowan’s body-obsessed religiosity, then about Little’s body-obsessed medicalized secularism, and finally a bit about the Chinese female body from a Chinese discursive perspective that eluded these approaches.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Macgowan relates his meeting with Mrs. Little in Shanghai in great detail, although he gives no precise date. (He does indicate that she founded the Shanghai society fairly immediately, so it was in the mid-nineties.) She, on the other hand, does not mention meeting him in conjunction with the founding of the Society in Shanghai.

¹¹ The word *tian* was used in pre-Han texts (before 200 BCE) in several ways: to designate the sky itself; the principle that guided the myriad creatures of the world; the pneuma or energy of the world; fate or destiny; and the principle of production or birth and cycling of all things. Out of these myriad of early definitions has evolved *tian* as the place where the pantheon of the gods dwells, or *tian* as the original endowment that one has at birth. Hence, the conventions of usage in English of “heaven” or “natural” as possible translation for the term. See Luo (1988: v. 2, 1403–1404) for annotated definitions giving classical sources.

 TIANZU: THE HEAVENLY FOOT

The London Missionary Society (LMS) was founded in 1795, in the early days of the evangelical revival in England. Although it professed openness to all denominations at first, by 1812 it was the missionary organization of Congregationalists, in other words it was an evangelical organization, like most other Protestant missions in China (Stanley 1990: 56–57).¹² Macgowan himself arrived in Shanghai in 1860 and went to the LMS mission in Amoy in 1863 (Wylie 1867).

Before they could actually proselytize, missionaries required a taxonomy of Chinese life. Chinese religion remained a vexing question because upon its definition depended their decision of whether or not to intervene in non-religious “social customs” like footbinding. The great dividing line between Catholics and Protestants fell upon ritual and hence the proper disposition of the worshipping body. Early Jesuits were tolerant of ancestral veneration, including bowing to the memorial tablets of the dead, but the Papacy eventually disagreed violently with their point of view and condemned ancestral veneration as idolatry in 1742, ending the great Rites Controversy (Latourette 1929: 102–156; Minamiki 1985). Though this decree brought the Church into line with other Christians on the problem of idolatry in China, Catholics remained less interventionist in their proselytizing strategies. Reinders (1997: 296–322) argues convincingly that more aggressive Protestants imported their distaste for “the holy mummeries of the Romish Church” to China, allowing the Chinese, with their mysterious rituals, to be slotted into a familiar position of degraded and feared Other, next to European Catholics. This attitude inclined the Protestant denominations toward more intrusive tactics when it came to their missions.

At their General Conference in 1877, Protestant missionaries in China were still recalling their differences with Rome over the issues of bowing. Rev. A. E. Moule pointed out that the similarity between ancestor worship and filiality toward the living “was the ground upon which the Jesuits based their sanction of Ancestral worship in the Romish Communion” (Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10–24, 1877, 1879: 399). Rev. Yates of Shanghai proposed that, far from being acceptable as mere

¹² The LMS failed to draw people of the Anglican (High) Church. Thus, its membership tended to “dissenters,” with all the implications this carried of class differences in England (Stanley 1990: 56–57). The LMS sent the first Protestant missionary to China in 1807, Robert Morrison. (Macgowan 1889: 11–12; Latourette 1929: 215). Macgowan had a keen sense of the historic importance of his mission station. (See his *Christ or Confucius. Which? The Story of the Amoy Mission*).

civil respect, Ancestor Worship was “the principal religion of China—a most degrading slavery—a slavery of the living to the dead” (Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10–24, 1877, 1879: 368). But what to do about bowing, tainted because it was performed before the tablets memorializing the dead (clearly “graven images”), but a beloved sign of respect before living parents, relatives, and friends, as noted by Rev. Sheffield?¹³

The arguments over bowing show us how the materiality of Chinese bodies had begun to operate for missionaries. They divided the world of Chinese social life between the dead and the living, the image and the body, and the spiritual and the physical.¹⁴ Most preserved a purely “hard-line” that all worldly customs should be sacrificed to the spiritual work of teaching the gospel, while others were willing to peer over those boundaries, if not cross them.¹⁵

Macgowan left behind a sizable oeuvre of writings on China, perhaps ten books. Here, I will concentrate on the unsubtly titled *How England Saved China* (Macgowan 1913). In its three parts, Macgowan shows how England saved China by saving Chinese bodies first from footbinding, then female infanticide, and finally disease. The style and tone of *How England Saved China* shares the main paradoxical feature of his other books: a devotion to the description of the local scene that marshals a wealth of detail to produce a convincing reduction of Chinese life to stereotype. As this work of critique was written in 1913, fifty years after he first went to China, we are probably also dealing with the weight of nostalgia upon Macgowan's pen.

He remarks various instances of terrible physical suffering in order to clarify why British missionaries should continue to go to China: *How England Saved China* is really the tale of how England's

¹³ Rev. Sheffield equivocated, wishing to preserve it for the living (*Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10–24, 1877, 1879: 389*). But see Hartwell who opposes bowing altogether (*Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10–24, 1877, 1879: 389*). On the significance of the “kowitz,” as the English spelled “ketou,” in Chinese guest *li*, see Hevia (1994, 1995) and Reinders (1997).

¹⁴ John notes that Ancestor Worship has two elements, the “religious” and the “human,” the first to be opposed, the second respected (*Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10–24, 1877, 1879: 398*).

¹⁵ Williamson, Yates, Mateer, and John in *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10–24, 1877, 1879: 139, 387, 397–398*. The Shanghai American Presbyterian Press published in 1867 a volume entitled *Memorials of Protestant Missionaries to the Chinese*, giving a list of their publications and obituary notices of the deceased. Although some men wrote on observed behavior, or on medical problems, or produced works on the classics, by this early time in the missionary endeavor, the overwhelming majority devoted themselves exclusively to religious tracts and translations in both English and Chinese.

missionaries saved China. Insofar as England the *nation* has been the source of violent intrusion, England owes China the solace of continued missionary succor. Although in his book title, Macgowan conflates England-as-missionary and England-as-nation, he was no simple imperialist. More personally, supporting missionary work against British imperialism allowed him to produce something crucial to his work and self, a clear evangelical conscience. His critique simultaneously bore personal and social fruit.

Despite the retrospective distance that informs the book, Macgowan never hesitates to include pages of “remembered” and “quoted” material from Chinese people he meets.¹⁶ He also speculates endlessly upon what “they” think and imagine in a way that reminds me of Flaubert’s *style indirect libre*. He places his own consciousness as the motivating but absent center of the work; his presence infuses the text like overheard heavy breathing as he labors to describe. He conveys a strong sense of eye-witness, as befits his evangelical emphasis upon having been there himself, witnessing for the Lord. In fact, the story he tells is one of the triumph of this divine presence, *channeled through his own very embodied efforts*, into a Chinese reality.

For Macgowan, footbinding was first and foremost a problem of Chinese culture that called into doubt the whole of Chinese civilization. “Many a savage tribe has shown barbaric ingenuity in the methods they have devised to disfigure and maim the human body, but it has been reserved for the Chinese people, with their great intelligence and civilization, to carry out such a system of mutilation as the world has never known in the long history of the past” (Macgowan 1913: 19). In his view, this nefarious civilization interferes with Divine Nature. (He always capitalizes both words). He describes nature as “[t]his beautiful power, with its Divine instinct and its unswerving belief in the human body as being one of God’s ideals, which could never be improved upon” (79). Macgowan feels that footbinding interferes with women’s natural beauty, but that ultimately, “No other human pattern would ever be allowed to usurp the place of the Divine one” (80).

In his other writings (Macgowan 1907), Macgowan also divides Chinese culture from Chinese nature, blaming the former in order to save the latter. For instance, the Chinese “mind” is not *intrinsically incapable* of solving problems like lack of initiative and wealth; the problem is that Chinese people are paralyzed by idolatry (Macgowan 1866: 83).

¹⁶ For one example I will discuss later, see the Chinese mother’s two page retort to Mrs. Macgowan’s interruption of a painful binding session (Macgowan 1913: 25–26).

According to Macgowan, one aspect of Chinese nature that footbinding as culture particularly perverts is the “mother instinct.” “All pity from the heart of the mother for her little child... was crushed out by the very bandages that were distorting the feet of her daughter” (Macgowan 1913: 30–31). When Macgowan describes the time his wife rushed to the sound of intense screaming to interrupt a binding, he “quotes” the mother’s angry defense for two pages. Interestingly, he has the mother display intense sympathy for her daughter, but not for her daughter’s feet. She explains that her daughter’s *social* position would be intolerable if her feet were not bound (26–27). Macgowan draws our attention to the difficulty parents had resisting their daughters’ “piteous pleas” to bind their feet lest they fail to make a good marriage and suffer the tragic fate of being a slave girl (43). Somehow he does not regard this as “mother instinct,” but rather as collaboration in the unfortunate work of Chinese culture, a temptation resisted only by parents who have converted to Christianity (45).

With such a worked up critique of footbinding as culture, one might imagine that Macgowan would have informed himself on its history. Indeed, he does describe its spread, but most peculiarly. Of footbinding he says: “As if with the *foot* of fate, it stole its silent way through the city gates of the capital toward the north... It also turned invisible *feet* toward the south, and it overleapt great rocks and climbed the loftiest mountains, and descended upon the plains and valleys... It has followed in the *footsteps* of the Chinese armies and into the wild uncivilized tribes...” (19; my emphasis). In fact, the reason why footbinding seems to catch on with the putative barbarians is that “the women there, touched by the mystic something that *binds* a woman by a common kinship to every other woman in the world, came under the spell...” (20; my emphasis). So footbinding is fatalistic, sneaky, opportunistic, and irresistible to women. This is not footbinding as history, but footbinding as impersonation (complete with puns). In fact, footbinding sounds suspiciously like Macgowan’s description of Chinese men in his other writings, with their belief in fate, their deceitful, lazy, and sensuous natures (Macgowan 1912: *passim*). But Macgowan never, never connects footbinding to sex. In fact, he notes that he once asked a man publicly at an antifootbinding debate: “Do you consider that a woman’s feet are made more beautiful by binding?” At this his countenance fell as did that of every man in the assembly. To this he remained absolutely silent” (74). Considering footbinding’s notoriously sexual and private discursive place, we can well imagine that shocked silence, as something thought proper only for the women’s chambers was discussed in a meeting.

What pattern emerges here? According to Macgowan, footbinding represents some of the worst of Chinese culture, running right along with female infanticide and idolatry. However, Macgowan's idea of Chinese "culture" is so vague and ahistorical as to, in fact, be no concept at all—it is more a black hole wherein things disappear. This is no accident, for as a Christian outsider, by categorizing footbinding as cultural, he constitutes an ideal Chinese nature available to salvation through God's divine intervention. In fact "only the power of God" would cause footbinding to "crumble and vanish before its invisible touch" (39). "Mere human argument," he continues, "had no power to solve it" (39).

Now, the "mere human argument" must come from Macgowan himself or his fellow missionaries. Yet, a profound denial of his own agency animates Macgowan's writing on footbinding and female infanticide—a very useful way to absolve himself from failure and to comfort himself during long years of frustration. If things do not change it is not his fault, but God's divine will.

In fact, in this text, Macgowan denies culture to everyone, English and Chinese. Humans relate only through divine mediation and Macgowan shows himself a true Evangelical in this regard. Evangelicals believed that divine mediation used the body as its vehicle and that signs of its workings were visible as actions and gestures. The Evangelical Revival in England opened in 1792 and propounded a new, antirationalist and more activist stance of religiosity, one absorbed in the "message of Christ on the cross" (Stanley 1990: 62). The worldwide missionary movement was heavily influenced by Evangelical Christianity (even if, as time went on, they were not all evangelical) (Stanley 1990: 61). As John James preached to the London Mission Society in 1812: "If then you would arrest the savage of the desert... and hold him in a power altogether new to him, do not begin with cold abstraction of moral duties or theological truths, but tell him of Christ crucified, and you shall see his once vacant countenance enlivened by feelings of a new and deep interest" (62). Evangelicals disliked abstractions and emphasized personal experience and witnessing in one's own body. In China, even though they were deeply committed to spiritual awakening, and not merely to "social gospel" ministrations, their own emphasis upon piety as experience drove them to engage their Chinese audience in the flesh. In fact, their dilemma was often whether to serve only the spirit, or to serve the body too.

John Macgowan solved this theological dilemma retrospectively in his writing by relentlessly placing that necessary body (whether his own, or those of the Chinese) in the service of the spirit. He was fascinated by Chinese bodies: what they wore, how they looked, moved, and

suffered. And he was equally committed to describing the extraordinary effect the physical presence of missionaries had upon the natives. Time and again a crowd mysteriously falls silent, or is moved by a missionary performance (Macgowan 1913: 120–121; 1912: 330). For example, his wife takes a leading role in a baptism of foundlings saved from infanticide: “Unconscious to themselves, the simple acts of love toward the little ones of my wife, who was quite forgetful of the many eyes upon her, seemed to lightly touch some chord within their hearts that made them vibrate with a melody that had never sent such sweet music into them in all their lives before” (132). Or this, about missionary smiling: “It finds its way into the heart that is filled with hatred, and with an alchemy, whose secret has never yet been discovered, it dissolves the fatal forces that have been at work and actually transmutes them into love” (191).

Macgowan's devotion as an Evangelical depended upon the currency of a certain sort of English body. That body was natural, not cultural, and nature disclosed the Divine plan. That “natural body” could be counted upon as an ally in the never-ending battle against the “artificial laws” of men (Macgowan 1866: 91). Patiently nurtured and exposed to the Truth, mother's instinct awakens and they cease to bind their daughters' feet; unbound, feet return to Nature's (divine) design.

Years later, Macgowan writes *How England Saved China* to advocate continuing missionary presence in China in order to undo the wrongs of imperialism. He bases his authority to speak upon his own experience living beside Chinese bodies: “We lived amongst them, and had learned to know their hearts. We spent nights with them in their villages; we came to them when they were in sorrow, and we ... proved to them that our hearts beat in unison with their own” (313).

Rev. Macgowan produced a critique of footbinding (and infanticide) that also served to produce him simultaneously as an author, a dedicated Evangelical and a loyal British subject. These are not easy subject positions to reconcile. Luckily he has the ally of natural bodies, British and Chinese, that carried out the actionless actions of Divine Will. He told a story about his own experiences, but vacated its agency to God. It is and is not his story, just as British imperialism is and is not his fault, or the fault of anyone who is involved in it.

TIANZU: THE NATURAL FEET

By the 1880s the missionary movement in China and elsewhere was drawing back from its public commitment to the Evangelical stance of

attention primarily to the soul, albeit through witnessing in the flesh (Hutchison 1987: 99–104). Perhaps the actual practice of evangelicals like Macgowan enabled recognition that the soul and body were intimately linked and inevitably opened up more possibilities for purely bodily salvation. By the time Mrs. Archibald Little enters the scene, a Christian woman such as herself knew that the body serves as much as the vehicle for the state's civilization as for God's secret workings. It was not so much that medicine would replace evangelizing as build upon it in new ways.

The antifootbinding activist Mrs. Archibald Little, an Englishwoman, lived mainly in the southwest area of Szechuan for twenty years at the turn of the century, married to a shipping magnate. She visited Macgowan's "Heavenly Foot" organization and brought it to Shanghai. Along with nine other western women of different nationalities, she helped launch it as the "Natural Feet Society" on a national scale, in 1895. Although it was a non-denominational effort to secularize antifootbinding work, it came into being under the aegis of the Shanghai Mission (Little 1899; Drucker 1981: 189).

Mrs. Little's writing style differs considerably from Macgowan's. She exudes a quality usually called "objectivity," achieved by often presenting her own views through the words of others more expert, such as physicians (see below). She cultivates a reportorial stance, with much use of names, places, dates, allowing her to appear as an actor among many others in her text, while yet maintaining a certain distance. For instance, she satirized the views of Europeans who adore individual evangelists, yet decried them as a class, continuing to believe all the myths about them (Little 1899: 238). This tone persists when she discusses the Chinese. Of course, this sense of irony allows her to fully air all myths, while avoiding the tone of hysterical stereotyping that marks Macgowan's text. No missionary herself, she lets us know that she is a Christian supporter of missionary efforts at the end of the chapter (247).

Little wastes no time haranguing readers on the idea that footbinding is barbarous. Instead, she briskly shows how it bars good health and happiness. In her usual reportorial style, Little imports medical testimony into her text to make her points. Physicians from Shanghai, Nanjing, and Chongking discuss the loss of toes, whole feet, and even lives to footbinding (Little 1899: 141–144). Little concludes a chapter on footbinding with the cool observation that "It would require a medical work to describe the various maladies more or less directly traceable to binding" (Little 1899: 144). Little's observation bases itself upon a whole worldview, indeed, a whole world: of technologies and understandings of embodiment along with concepts of "human nature"

that differed profoundly from what she faced in China. Biomedicine has appeared.¹⁷

Not that earlier Victorian-era scientists had not been interested in footbinding, but in a fashion that reduced and dismissed its living context, focusing only on the foot as a reified fragment (Zito 2006: 22–26) We have record of a much earlier anatomical dissection of a bound foot from 1829 by the English surgeon Bransby Blake Cooper.¹⁸ Cooper's account excludes any speculation about the social origins of this "hideous deformity." He will not enter, he says, "into an inquiry whether this curious dissection ... of the Chinese female foot, had its origin in oriental jealousy or was the result of an unnatural taste in beauty" (Levy 1966: 287). He details the dimensions of bone and muscular tissue, and imagines how difficult walking on such a foot would have been for the individual woman. Divorcing the foot completely from social context, Cooper concludes that "I do not pretend to attach to the subject any more importance than it deserves; nevertheless, I have thought it would be considered as curious and calculated to interest scientific men" (Levy 1966: 293).

Cooper's account speaks to us from an age before biomedicine had seized the *social* imaginations of Victorians. His is not the "medical text" that Little wishes she had available. Her text would use medicine to present a practical explanation of the deleterious effects of footbinding on women's bodies *and* lives. Little understood that medical knowledge could function rhetorically as selfevidently persuasive and useful, even to Chinese. At one antfootbinding meeting, "[a] missionary lady in fluent Chinese explained the circulation of the blood, and with an India rubber pipe showed the effect of binding some part of it. There were no interruptions then. This seemed to the Chinese practical, and it was quite striking to see how attentively they listened" (Little 1899: 152).

As John and Jean Comaroff show in their historical anthropology of South Africa, biomedicine slowly displaced missionary comforting as the gift imported to native people by Europeans bent upon conversion cum civilization. "With the rise of the colonial state, missionary healers in South Africa were to find themselves eclipsed by the newly formed

¹⁷ Macgowan also devoted one third of *How England Saved China* to discussing medical missionaries' work, but concentrated upon medicine as the means whereby the doctor witnessed to the benevolence of God that heals people through the doctor's skills. Macgowan dwells ardently upon the sweet temperaments and generous natures of these doctors (Macgowan 1913: 169–300, especially 191 for miracles of smiling, 207 "love as moving power in English dispensary," 209 doctor perceived as heroic on house calls, 214 doctor as "middle-man," 251–253 description of a "heroine" and *passim*).

¹⁸ Reproduced in full in Levy (1966: 287–293).

agencies of public health. By the turn of this century, their talk of civilizing Africa had given way to a practical concern with the hygiene of black populations” (Comaroff 1992: 216). Whatever her commitments to physical health may have been, Little’s skill at actually organizing the beginnings of an antfootbinding campaign were clearly social. She also recognized from the start that footbinding was embedded in the life cycle of women, and immediately took up concrete problems of matchmaking in her text, for a major problem in persuading women to unbind or spare their daughters was the fear that they would never then find a marriage partner. The “other voice” that Little imports into her text to tell this story comes from a long letter from an ardent foreign “antibinder” from North China who provides the information (Little 1899: 147–149). Little’s gender must have allowed access and insights denied by Macgowan. She was much better informed on the actualities of both physical and social consequences of footbinding.¹⁹ Perfectly aware of the erotics of the process of binding, she exhibits quite astute understanding of the shifts in a Chinese male sexuality that admires the small feet in sexual partners when young, but regrets their necessity in daughters once the man has aged.²⁰

Little stood within a tradition of feminine public service that originated in the church but by the turn of the century was becoming medicalized and professionalized. Kunzel (1993) brilliantly analyzed this process back home in England *vis-à-vis* the care of unwed mothers from 1890–1945. Moving out from the center to the periphery during colonial expansion, women like Little carry this ethos abroad. They transformed a class-based dialectic of self-other construction into a racialized one (Zito 2006: 29). Little appears on the cusp of this transition into professional, scientific and medical solutions to social problems. She worked at a time when the physical body was still read closely for signs of moral goodness or failure, but when medicine was already promising escape to a utopia of objective custody.

Just as Rev. John Macgowan’s writing on footbinding produced for him a plethora of contradictorily empowering subject positions, so too with Alicia Little. She operated within the ironies engendered by a

¹⁹ Contrast Little (1899: 137–140) to Macgowan (1913: 17–18).

²⁰ For her remarks on the changing attitudes of men as they age, see Little (1908: 256). She was very aware “that feet are the most risqué subject of conversation in China and no more improper can be found” (Little 1899: 150). Little, even though the founder of the Natural Feet Society, discussed how even the foreign women of the society were embarrassed to bring up the subject before their male servants.

white women's situation as "civilized" colonial racial superiors from a society that marked them as gendered inferiors. If western women admitted boundfeet as gender markers, rather than scars of torture and signs of barbarity, they would have been admitting the existence of a kind of femininity quite different from their own, admitting that they were not, in local terms, women. And they needed to because their feminine identities within the rhetoric of the Cult of Domesticity were crucial to their missionary work and sense of self. Bigfooted missionary women, especially unmarried, literate, professional ones, were *not thought of as women by the Chinese*. This lack of recognition of their gender led to a "profound confusion of sexual stereotypes... western women found Chinese men unmanly and Chinese men found western women unwomanly." (Hunter 1984: 204) So while western women were able to criticize footbinding as torture, speaking from a position of dis-owned "unwomanliness" enabled by their own big-footedness, they did not speak of it as specifically gendered.

This confusion added the final fillip to a wonderful sense of empowerment already fostered by racial superiority—they were often physically bigger than Han Chinese men who did not, in any case, cultivate a warrior virility, but rather ruled as scholars—and status preeminence in the face of male servants. Jane Hunter maintains some "delighted in it" (Hunter 1984: 215). Yet, many activist or missionary women were uneasy in their public roles, especially before Chinese women who sympathized with them for having no husbands if single, or for having to speak in public. It seems that these missionary women were no gender at all to the Chinese, and clearly, in terms of their expectations and livelihood, existed in some confusion on this issue themselves. They lived a position of contradiction, like and not like the Chinese women they wish to save; like and not like the missionary husbands and leaders they wished to work beside; constantly uneasy about their ability to function in the Chinese world in which they lived.²¹

²¹ At one point in *Intimate China*, Little suddenly switches from her usual robust first-person narrative to the third person. This remarkable chapter, which occurs between "Hindrances and annoyances" and "Footbinding," is entitled "Current Coin in China." It tells of value, and about the difficulty in ever understanding the true price of anything in a country where there was no fixed exchange rate not only between foreign currency, but even between domestic forms of money—silver taels and copper cash. "The woman" confounded by all this confusion "was not long out of England" and after detailing her failures at financial exchange, Little launches into the difficulties of linguistic exchange:

"The woman" plans to learn Chinese but...now she is giving it up—giving up being polite in Chinese, giving up ever ascertaining the value of money or the price of

That earlier English notion of meaningful embodiment seems to have been congenial to some late nineteenth century Chinese reformers, who agreed that certain body disciplines were simply no longer healthy or civilized. Chinese non-Christian elite male reformers reasoned that strong citizens were needed in service to the nation. They expressed intense embarrassment as it became clear that in world opinion, foot-binding was considered far from civilized behavior. They became anti-footbinders, insisting that the nation would no longer be crippled by its own past (Chau 1966: 115; Levy 1966: 72–73; Drucker 1981). Ko (2005: 18) provides an account of what she calls a “China-centered narrative of the birth of *tianzu* as a category and a social movement.” One reform-minded male writer named Xu Ke (1869–1928) wrote “A Survey of natural feet” (*Tianzu kaolue*) in which he noted that “Today if we say ‘natural foot’ (*tianzu*) everyone in the metropolis and urban areas would know what you mean. In ancient times, there was no such term as *tianzu*; they called it ‘plain or unadorned feet’ (*suzu*).” We see that, by the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese writers themselves were apprised of a sense of “*tian*” as “heavenly bestowed” that resonated quite plausibly with the idea of natural in a western, scientific sense, and had moreover, a keen sense of the newness of this term.

CONCLUSION

For Europeans, the Chinese woman's bound foot operated ambiguously in a late nineteenth century universe in a way that tended constantly to evacuate social and cultural problems into the “natural” physical body. In the local context, however, for those Chinese who had themselves become social reformers, it performed in a reverse fashion, turning the physical into the cultural, as when the bound foot became a sign of Chinese cultural failure and national weakness.

anything. For how can things have fixed prices where money has none? There is only one comfort to her soul: if any one looks offended, or if a too sensitive conscience makes her fear she has given cause of offence, she promptly says *tetsui*—“I am to blame, I apologize.” *Tetsui* is the one golden word for her. And while she is in China, she must live in one constant state of being to blame (85).

This moment of alienation in which Little feels so dissociated from herself that she speaks in the third person, revolves around two displacements; first from England to China (she opens the chapter with “She was not long out from England...”)(82), and secondly, into a public realm that she simply cannot yet understand. The first displacement propels her into the second, and coping with uneasiness in public roles was one hallmark of Little's discussion of the antifootbinding campaign, making her perseverance all the more noteworthy.

A shift in perception of the “natural body,” as Macgowan understood it, undergirded the new, later nineteenth-century efforts of secular salvation. Natural biomedical science was exempted from the taint of “culture” and thus could be relied upon to save embodied humanity from its own worst ills. Added to the religious notion of the body as a fallen Eden invaded by cultural artifice, and thus a site of sin and redemption, was the notion that “natural” biomedical science could save it. Both religiously and medically motivated foreign workers shared an impulse to heal. Did those earlier understandings of the body as heir to and bearer of moral failing prepared the way for medical salvation?

By the late nineteenth century Europeans and Americans felt certain that humans were, in their deepest identities, *biologically* raced and gendered in ways that could be scientifically demonstrated (Laqueur 1990; Stoler 1995). Certain Chinese in port cities were, likewise, making their way toward this sense of bio-health out of historically quite different plots about the health of the body, and under conditions of forced, colonizing encounter (Rogaski 2004; Dikotter 1995). In the nineteenth century, missionaries confronted footbinding within the “historically different” plot of a distinctive cosmology of “transforming resonance.” By that, I mean that, according to traditional Chinese medicine and the tenets of ritual protocol, Chinese bodies were thought to be formed of a complex network of energized matter known as *qi* that was in constant flowing motion. Since *qi* formed all matter of the universe, human beings were able to “resonate” with the things of the world in complex patterns that could induce well-being or disaster. In Chinese medicine and religious practices such as *Falun gong* today, the body's systems are organized as functional multiplicities, not as subsets of substantialized “organs.” Health is based upon constant, patterned change, and circulation and not fixity or stability. People do not consist of divinely endowed or biologically fixed human nature. Instead, they are materializations of dynamically contingent positions both in space and in social hierarchy.²² In the coastal cities that were under attack and occupation by the British from 1858 onward, ideas of “*weisheng*” as “guarding the health” of this cosmically implicated body continued to hold sway. This term summarized the practices that people themselves could carry out to preserve health, and it was replete

²² For excellent discussions of the intricacies of these systems, and their fate alongside biomedicine, see Porkert (1974), Kaptchuk (1983), Farquhar (1994). For eighteenth century ritualized bodies, see Zito (1997).

with a sense of human agency and responsibility that actively worked upon the body.²³ Ruth Rogaski (2004: 1) notes:

Before the 19th century, *weisheng* was associated with a variety of regimens of diet, meditation, and self-medication that were practiced by the individual in order to guard fragile internal vitalities. With the arrival of armed imperialism some of the most fundamental debates about how China could achieve a modern existence began to coalesce around this word. Its meaning shifted away from Chinese cosmology and moved to encompass state power, scientific standards of progress, the cleanliness of bodies, and the fitness of races.

Rogaski retranslates this new sense of *weisheng* as “hygienic modernity,” and it figured heavily in Chinese pursuits of their own scientific utopias of objective truth under Marxism and Maoism in the twentieth century.

In China's early modern past, however, the construction of gender was one social performance of this general devotion to patterned circulation and transformation, sharing as well traditional medicine's logic of yin/yang polarity.²⁴ These performances of gendered positions were accomplished especially within the systematic scripts for social activity called *li* (usually badly translated as ritual). Coterminous with the rise of footbinding in the medieval Song period, an interest in *li* grew among the literati class: handbooks were produced detailing every aspect of correct human behavior from what to wear, how to move, how to address superiors and inferiors, and especially how to manage relationships with the invisible world of the ancestors. Footbinding was a sort of gendered elaboration of *li* that both marked and produced female sexuality in the ever-shifting world of hierarchical encompassments that comprised Chinese sociocorporeal life. This world incorporated its own contradictions and forms of domination, it should go without saying that I do not here offer it as a Utopic alternative to our own “bad Enlightenment.”

²³ Rogaski's brilliant account of how *weisheng* lost this original meaning and became what she translates as “hygienic modernity” provides a parallel Chinese and reinforcing account of the glimpse I am giving here of the shift from a “missionary” to a “medical” reading of Chinese bodies. Dikotter (1995: 20) also notes that, in the early twentieth century: “In contrast to medical thought in late imperial China, the modern-educated elites of the coast no longer believed the physiology of the human to reflect the order of a universe.”

²⁴ Barlow discusses gender in this light: “What appears as ‘gender’ are yin/yang differentiated positions: not two anatomical ‘sexes’ but a profusion of relational, bound and unequal dyads, each signifying difference and positioning difference analogically” (Barlow 1994).

The substantialized organs that were the object of fixation for European gender distinction (the penis, the womb, the clitoris) lacked a similar discursive weight and reality in China. Instead, and as a pronounced marker of sexed gender distinction, Chinese women engaged in a process of continual physical transformation, molding a visible part of the body, which was then, of course, hidden away in shoes almost never removed in the sight of another. This very hiddenness, however, allowed for the foot to be produced as dramatic evidence: For example, the proof that the famous eighteenth-century fictional cross-dresser Meng Lijun was female was produced by taking off “his” boots—despite the availability of other obvious sites for verification (Chen 1982: 865, quoted in Wang 2000: 193). Feet were held in common with men, so that this somatic eroticized gender distinction, rather than being “discovered” in nature was created through culture. Our English missionary and reformer both found this to be brazen interference with the natural good, whether that good be considered godly or medical. In this, the reformer Xu Ke agreed.

Here we glimpse “culture” being dragged across the stage to line up with an already constituted “nature.” In both the realms of Evangelical religion and biological science, our English protagonists created powerful narrative and practical techniques for making cultural process disappear into nature, and thus to rechannel agency, making it available for new projects. Especially noteworthy is that, in terms of its reified distance from the imagined person “inside,” the gap was surprisingly small between a body that belonged to God and body that belonged to science. Such was the formation that faced the Chinese reforming elite: a hybrid of religion and science, hiding its religious component. Meanwhile, Chinese in government and universities were likewise draining older forms of cosmologically connected activity into new “scientific” channels (Rogaski 2004; Dikotter 1995).

Asad would note this as a marker of the secular turn—for secularism is above all a new narrative about agency and human possibility.²⁵ This is not an easy story about God or the Cosmos simply traded for Nature, but a far more uneasy and subliminal borrowing and cross-fertilization of tropes between the religious/cosmological and the scientific. In these various and contradictory engagements the secular and the religious informed and reinforced one another, as the hinge that opened the door

²⁵ Asad: “For what interests me particularly is the attempt to construct categories of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern-living is required to take place, and non-modern peoples are invited to assess their adequacy. For representations of “the secular” and “the religious” in modern and modernizing states mediate people’s identities, help shape their adequacy, and guarantee their experiences.” (Asad 2003: 8)

upon a modernity enabled by precisely their connection. Universal human rights discourse—and its “body” of rights—something usually imagined as emerging out of a secular turn, in fact, may never have left the religious fully behind. This lingering connection might even be a source of its moral force. However, we must ask ourselves just how this complicates appeals to something that is not at all necessarily “universal,” depending as it does on historically quite limited notions of the “human.”

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