

# The Integration of Anti-Foot-Binding Movement and Feminism: History, Present and Future

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.06.04

## Abstract

This paper delves into the development and significance of the anti-foot-binding movement. By systematically reviewing historical documents and existing research, it provides a comprehensive overview of the historical background, current status, and its embodiment in feminism. The anti-foot-binding movement was a significant social reform in Chinese history. It was not only a resolute resistance against feudal customs but also a crucial manifestation of feminist consciousness awakening and the fight for women's rights and interests. The research found that the movement embodied women's pursuit of bodily autonomy, resistance to social injustices, and the redefinition of their own value and social status. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the profound impact of the anti-foot-binding movement on the development of feminism, thereby providing reference and guidance for future research. By studying this historical movement, we can better understand the arduous journey of women's liberation in China and draw lessons and experiences that can support and enhance the protection of women's rights today.

**Keywords:** feminism, Chinese history, feminist movement, anti-foot-binding

## 1. Introduction

Foot binding was an ancient Chinese practice that forced women to change their body shape to suit men's aesthetic needs. This custom has had a profound impact on the physical, psychological and social status of women throughout history. At the beginning of the 20th century, with the introduction and enlightenment of Western feminist thought, Chinese intellectuals began to reflect on the custom of foot binding, and gradually there emerged an anti-foot binding movement. This paper will discuss how the anti-foot-binding movement embodies feminism and reveal the development of feminism in China.

### 1.1 Literature Review

The research on the anti-foot-binding movement is mainly concentrated in the fields of history and sociology. These studies have analyzed the cause, development and influence of the anti-foot-binding movement from different angles. Among them, the most representative views include:

- 1) Opposing bad feudal practices: Some scholars believe that the anti-foot-binding movement is a revolt against bad practices in feudal society and reflects intellectuals' concern for women's rights and interests.
- 2) Feminist awakening: Some other scholars

emphasize the awakening of feminist consciousness in the anti-foot-binding movement, believing that it is women's struggle for their rights and interests.

3) The product of social change: Some scholars regard the anti-foot-binding movement as a part of the social change, arguing that it is a conflict between new ideas, new culture and traditional ideas.

### *1.2 Research Methods*

This paper mainly adopts the literature research method, supplemented by historical analysis. By combing historical documents and reviewing existing studies, this paper analyzes the development of the anti-foot-binding movement in different historical periods and its relationship with feminism. At the same time, this paper also adopts the content analysis method to deeply interpret the relevant texts of the anti-foot-binding movement.

## **2. Historical Background and Causes of the Anti-Foot-Binding Movement**

The deplorable custom of foot binding, unique to China among all nations, severely damages the physical and mental health of women. The saying "bound feet, a bucket of tears" serves as proof. In China's feudal traditional marriage ideology, the "three-inch golden lotus" is the standard for men to marry wives. (WEI Dengyun & CHEN Yan, 2015)

Foot binding began in the Five Dynasties period. By the late Qing Dynasty, although there had long been voices opposing foot binding, many people ignored this harmful practice due to their limited understanding or belief that foot binding was a trivial matter not worth mentioning. (YANG Xingmei, 2010) As a reporter of the "Shen Bao" pointed out in 1901, foot binding is a "trivial matter in the women's chambers." He contrasted opium with foot binding, believing that the harm of smoking is "ten times deeper than foot binding," and that foot binding is a matter of no importance. Smoking endangers "the lives of tens of millions of people in the twenty-one provinces of China," while foot binding's harm is "only related to women," and they can "persuade themselves to eliminate it." Therefore, he suggested that people "should address urgent matters urgently, and not endlessly fuss over trivial matters in the women's chambers." (Shen Bao, 1901)

Zeng Jihui, the then Director of the Hubei

Hutian General Bureau, proposed to establish the "Anti-Foot Binding Society," but faced criticism from various quarters. Critics argued that foot binding was a trivial matter confined to the women's chambers, and that with the imminent threat from foreign powers, there were many urgent matters to attend to. They questioned whether it was necessary to labor over such a trivial matter, asking, "Since there are urgent matters at hand, why should we focus on these trivial things?" (ZENG Jihui, 1902) It can be seen that at the end of the Qing Dynasty, with internal and external troubles looming, some intellectuals believed that foot binding was not a major concern and should not be a priority. They believed that other more pressing matters should be focused on. Additionally, due to the long-standing and widespread practice of foot binding in society, eradicating it would not be an overnight task. It would require persistent efforts to cleanse deeply rooted concepts from the minds of the people. (MA Chunxia, 2018)

In the mid-19th century, a large number of missionaries were preaching in China, and some missionaries launched a small-scale anti female foot binding campaign due to their sympathy for the tragic situation of young girls' foot binding. Initially, missionaries demanded that Chinese believers and their daughters not bind their feet, and a large number of leaflets were issued to promote "gender equality" in God's universal love. Starting from the 1870s, many newspapers began to promote anti female foot binding, claiming that foot binding caused physical harm to women, and supported the belief that God in the Church created humans as "gender equality". In order to broaden the coverage of the audience, some authors have replaced the concept of "God" with the Chinese "Heavenly Way" since the 1980s, and used "Heavenly Way" as the basis for the physical similarity between men and women. (CAO Kaiju, 2006) The introduction of the "Heavenly Way" has led Chinese people to think that female foot binding violates natural order. Although the Confucian moral standards of Chinese people have not changed in the past thousand years of female foot binding, the infiltration of Western civilization has become an opportunity, and improving women's status has become a hot topic, leading to more discussions on the impact of female foot binding on moral order. The rise of the anti-foot-binding

movement is closely related to the introduction of Western feminist thought. In the early 20th century, with the development of the New Culture Movement, Chinese intellectuals began to reflect on traditional culture and customs, including the criticism of foot binding. At this time, Western feminist thought was gradually introduced into China, providing a theoretical weapon for the anti-foot-binding movement.

At the end of the Qing Dynasty (1840-1912), after the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform (1898) and the Boxer Incident (1900), both the government and the people gradually turned from the enthusiasm of "learning to develop skills" to the introspection of "exploring China's own problems", and "gradually turned the thinking of the object of Chinese society to the exploration of the social subject", and individuals as a member of the state began to enter the attention of the intellectual circle. The intellectual community believes that the body and intelligence of the people, especially the women who account for half of the population, need to be improved, and most Han women have their foot binding, which is "closely related to the preservation of the country and the strong species", and strongly proposes to stop this bad habit. Although Cixi issued a decree to discourage foot binding as early as 1901, the gap between the knowledge of the intellectual community and the actions of the general public could not be closed by a single decree, and the interpretation and publicity of the meaning of abstain from foot binding became prominent.

### **3. Feminist Expression in the Anti-Foot Binding Movement**

The anti-foot-binding movement stands as a profound manifestation of feminist ideals and women's empowerment, rejecting the physical constraint and subjugation of women. It ardently advocates for women's inherent rights to freedom, equality, and autonomous development.

Primarily, the movement embodies the fundamental tenets of feminism, advocating for gender equality and the dignified treatment of women. Foot binding, as a coercive practice, not only harms women's physical well-being but also curtails their freedom of movement. By championing the abolition of foot binding, the movement champions the liberation of women's bodies, enabling them to pursue their aspirations and ambitions freely, thus signifying

a profound respect for women's rights and interests.

Moreover, the movement epitomizes the burgeoning consciousness among women. Historically, women have been confined to subordinate roles, bound by societal and familial norms. However, with societal progress and the burgeoning awareness among women, there is a growing realization of their intrinsic value and rights. The anti-foot-binding movement symbolizes this awakening, urging women to cast off their shackles and strive for freedom and equality. (ZHU Shengqin, 2010)

Lastly, the anti-foot-binding movement has had a lasting impact on the evolution of modern feminism. It not only propelled the liberation of women but also galvanized them to advocate for and assert their rights and interests. In sum, the anti-foot-binding movement stands as a significant embodiment of feminism and awakening of female consciousness, staunchly opposing the physical and societal constraints on women and advocating for their right to freedom, equality, and independent development. This not only reflects a profound respect for women's rights and interests but also represents a meaningful contribution to the advancement of human civilization.

### **4. Influence and Significance of Anti-Foot Binding Movement**

The anti-foot binding movement in China had a significant social influence, challenging deep-rooted traditions and reshaping perceptions of beauty, femininity, and women's rights. It sparked debates across various social classes and intellectual circles, prompting reflections on cultural identity and national progress. Advocates of the movement, including scholars, activists, and reformers, argued that foot binding symbolized the subjugation of women and hindered their physical and mental development. By advocating for the abolition of foot binding, they sought to promote gender equality and modernization. The movement also had an impact on education and social norms, as more women with unbound feet gained access to education and participated in public life. Overall, the anti-foot binding movement played a crucial role in challenging traditional gender norms and promoting women's rights and empowerment in Chinese society.

The anti-foot-binding movement stands out as a pivotal political milestone in Chinese history,

particularly during the Qing Dynasty, where foot binding was intertwined with the feudal autocracy. The movement's emergence elevated women's status, driving social progress and fostering a burgeoning democratic consciousness. Notably, it propelled the advancement of female education, a realm historically marred by limited opportunities. By dismantling the practice, women gained access to broader educational horizons, enhancing their cultural aptitude and knowledge base.

Moreover, the movement catalyzed significant social and cultural shifts. Foot binding, once a symbol of entrenched feudal superstition, came under intense scrutiny, reflecting a broader societal critique of traditional norms. This critical lens not only stimulated societal introspection but also fostered cultural evolution, propelling the trajectory of social progress.

The movement's legacy reverberates in its lasting impact on subsequent generations. It redefined women's roles, liberating them from being perceived merely as possessions or instruments, and instead recognizing them as autonomous individuals deserving of dignity. This transformation not only propelled social advancement but also spurred a heightened democratic consciousness, challenging the prevailing autocratic structures of the time.

In essence, the anti-foot-binding movement stands as a seminal chapter in Chinese history, its reverberations echoing in the development and advancement of Chinese society. It stands as a testament to the elevation of women's status and the broader march towards societal progress, embodying a crucial symbol of China's journey towards gender equality and social enlightenment.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the development of the anti-foot-binding movement and how to embody feminism from the perspective of feminism. It is found that the anti-foot-binding movement is not only a struggle against feudal bad habits, but also an important embodiment of feminist consciousness awakening and fighting for women's rights and interests. The historical background, development status of the anti-foot-binding movement and its embodiment in feminism provide a window for us to deeply understand the development process of Chinese feminism. Future studies can explore the specific manifestations of the

anti-foot-binding movement in different historical periods and its relationship with feminism, so as to provide more valuable materials for the in-depth study of Chinese feminism.

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