

## Introductory Essay

“It has been justly remarked that a nation’s civilization may be estimated by the rank which females hold in society. If the civilization of China be judged of by this test, she is surely far from occupying that first place which she so strongly claims.” *Chinese Repository*, vol. 2 (Nov. 1833), p. 313.

This statement, which introduced an article on Chinese women in a missionary journal, is representative of Western journalistic writing about Chinese women in the 19th century. In two brief sentences, this comment simultaneously locates China and Chinese women in a state of cultural backwardness and places the invisible Western reader in the position of all-knowing observer.

As the sources in this module illustrate, this fundamental distinction between the Western and the Chinese was expressed in both implicit and explicit ways in the foreign press. Chinese women became representative objects for Western observers, proof of the failings of Chinese culture and the necessity of Christian conversion. Described as victims of their own society, in these pieces Chinese women were in fact victims of a foreign pen, deprived of any agency in their own existence and judged with a sympathy born of arrogance.

The representations of Chinese women in these journalistic accounts bear uncanny similarities to popular conceptions about the “place” of women in Confucian societies today—primarily that they are passive, obedient, and oppressed. A guided critical analysis of samples from 19th-century Western writing about Chinese women is one means of confronting popular stereotypes about Chinese/Asian women that abound in Western culture.

### Women in China

Generally speaking, women in 19th-century China followed gender norms classed by Western scholars as Confucian or Neo-Confucian. These norms emphasized the family as the primary social unit and advocated the primacy of women in the domestic sphere. Within the Chinese family, one’s position in the hierarchy determined rank and responsibility. Daughters were expected to obey their parents’ authority, assist their mothers in domestic tasks, and, in elite families, learn to read and write.

When the time came, young women would marry into a family of their parents’ choosing, leaving the home of their birth permanently. Once married, young wives would enjoy a position relative to their husband’s place in the family. The wife was always subject to her mother-in-law’s authority in addition to her husband’s. She took management of the household when those duties were ceded by her mother-in-law, ensuring that its members were well cared for and that its finances remained in order.

The birth of a son would be a happy occasion for the entire household, as it would guarantee not only the continuity of the family line, but also insurance for both parents that they would be provided for in their old age and worshipped after their death. The

mother would have the added comfort of knowing that her own subservient position in the household would be reversed when her son married.

Whereas elite standards of gender were promoted as the ideal throughout Chinese society, in reality “feminine” behavior was shaped by economic class and social status. Among elite families, proper young women were sequestered in the “inner quarters,” their chief company the other women of the household. Their self-imposed cloister within the domestic sphere was considered a marker of propriety and restraint, qualities promoted for both men and women in neo-Confucian culture. However, this “restraint” was only possible for women who had servants to facilitate their seclusion. By contrast, rural women who lived in farming communities regularly left their homes to tend fields or visit the market, their economic situation making the division of their household into inner and outer (private and public) realms near impossible.

### **Concubines and Bound Feet**

Western observers often remarked on two customs prevalent in 19th-century China: concubinage and foot binding. Although taking a concubine was supposed to be a method of last resort for a patriarch to acquire a male heir, the practice was long-established as a marker of elite status. Western writers improperly termed this practice “polygamy,” or taking multiple wives. In fact, the position of the wife remained sacrosanct with regards to her authority in the household and her role as “mother” to all of her husband’s progeny. A concubine was not a wife.

Foot binding is best understood as a form of beauty culture that became increasingly popular in China during the late imperial period, reaching its height during the 19th century. Thought to have originated in the late Tang dynasty [618-907 C.E.], foot binding was first adopted by elite women. By the 19th century, the practice transcended class, although families of lesser means would bind their daughters’ feet at a later age than occurred in elite families due to the need for their daughters’ labor. During the Qing dynasty [1644-1911 C.E.], foot binding became a marker of Han Chinese ethnicity, as neither the ruling Manchus nor other differentiated minority populations (such as the Hakkas) promoted the practice.

### **Protestant Missionaries in China**

The first Christian missionaries in China were the Jesuits, who arrived at the Ming court in the 16th century. Their activities were strictly proscribed in the 18th century, however, and Catholic priests were forbidden to make converts among the Chinese people.

Protestant missionaries arrived at China’s southern coast in the beginning of the 19th century. Their activities were limited to Macao and Canton due to Chinese restrictions on foreigners. This situation changed following the Opium War [1839-1842], when five “treaty ports” along China’s southeast coast were opened to foreign residence and trade.

Another significant development occurred in 1858, when foreign missionaries won the right to travel inland and establish Christian communities in the Chinese countryside. From this time forward, female missionaries who were able to directly preach to Chinese

women arrived in China in increasing numbers.

### **Representations of Chinese Women**

There is very little in these sources that provides substantive information about how Chinese women lived in the 19th century. Instead, in reading these pieces, we learn about the prejudices and mindsets of their authors. In every primary source in this module, the audience is “us” (the West) and the subject is “them” (the Chinese). This distinction between self and other is also marked in the text: the observer/author is the active agent (he or she describes) and the Chinese woman is the passive object (she is described). In many of the articles, this passivity is made real: Chinese women are presented as victims without recourse, their only hope the renovation of their own society. In some cases, however, Chinese women are endowed with the “universal” female attribute of moral authority; this development marks a shift in representation whereby Chinese women are transformed from victims in need of rescue to ignorant souls in need of enlightenment.