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Why Chinese Neo-Confucian Women Made a Fetish of Small Feet

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Beginning in prehistoric China, one's body was viewed as a gift from one's parents; cutting of the hair, ear piercings, and the like were considered disrespectful to the two individuals who were responsible for giving one his or her body.¹ It was therefore seen by the ancient Chinese that the human body is something precious and should be taken great care of. That being said, it is a wonder that the mutilation of the feet of young Chinese women, known as footbinding, became so popular starting in the last years of the Tang dynasty that it was in demand until the last half of the twentieth century.²

The Tang period, considered as a "golden age of Chinese power and culture," spanned a length of 289 years, from 618 AD to 907.³ The dynasty produced one of China's most revered emperors of all time, Emperor Taizong, who displayed a sense of keen intelligence and a notable willpower for hard work.⁴ Under Taizong and the Tang's nineteen other emperors, Chinese territory expanded to the countries of Tibet and Korea, Tibet especially proving to be a recurrent external threat to the empire's people.⁵ The dynasty's ultimate downfall came from within, however, as internal provincial rivalry fatally weakened the central government.⁶ With the imperial eunuchs becoming the effective rulers during the last years of the Tang period, fifty years of instability resulted—the Period of the Five Dynasties—before the country returned to normality under the Northern Song dynasty in the year 960.⁷ Chinese society once again flourished, in large part because the Song dynasty brought back much of the magnificent Tang respect for scholarship and high art.⁸

Along with its restoration of the Tang's cherished love of learning and the arts, so, too, did the Song dynasty adopt the Tang culture of footbinding. In their research, authors Valerie Steele and John S. Major of *China Chic: East Meets West* found that many historians point to the practice being "initially associated with dancers at the [Tang dynasty] imperial court and professional female entertainers in the capital."⁹ Once footbinding became widespread throughout the Tang empire, the practice became increasingly popular during the Song dynasty

¹ WM. Theodore De Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600, Volume One*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 423.

² Valerie Steele and John S. Major, *China Chic: East Meets West* (Singapore: Yale University Press, 1999), 37.

³ Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding, "Tang Dynasty 618-907," Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding, last modified February 19, 2012, <http://www.sacu.org/dyntag.html>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding, "Northern Song Dynasty 960-1126," Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding, last modified February 19, 2012, <http://www.sacu.org/dynnsong.html>

⁹ Steele 37.

among the households of the elite in particular.¹⁰ The practice of footbinding also seeped into the lives of the gentry families and finally China's mass population over the next few centuries.¹¹ Wang Ping, the author of *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*, identifies the origins of footbinding as having come from an Indian tale based on a beautiful "deer lady," which first inspired Emperor Li Yu of southern China (the eighth of the twenty Tang emperors) to have his court dancers' feet bound to "exhort the allure of the deer-footed beauty."¹² Perhaps this is why the most popular interpretation of the rise in popularity of footbinding is that it is a "feminine mystique designed to please men."¹³ According to Wang Ping, the "prohibition, the mystery and the traces of violence" is what stirs up man's desire, "a desire derived from fear, pity, and awe."¹⁴ Nevertheless, there have been additional interpretations offering insight into the nature of footbinding besides that it pleased men sexually. Among other interpretations, these further viewpoints include emphasizing the difference between men and women, Chinese and non-Chinese, and preparing girls for adulthood. While the various arguments that attempt to explain the great popularity of footbinding are reasonable, they all lead to the same explanation: footbinding became so popular because it was the best hope for a girl's family to marry her into a family of the highest possible class.

Even during its time of great popularity, the practice of footbinding was not attractive to everyone living in China. Perhaps one of the first protests came from Che Ruoshui of the Song dynasty, who wrote, "Little children...who have done nothing wrong, nevertheless are made to suffer unlimited pain to bind [their small] feet."¹⁵ He continues to write that he does not understand the concept behind this.¹⁶ Many centuries later, during the late 1890s, another man, Liang Qichao, wrote in an essay of the "atrocities of inflicting on innocent women the corporal mutilation caused by binding the feet."¹⁷ Liang's essay, titled "Discussion of the Anti-Footbinding Society," is in reference to the society set up by Kang Youwei, who was so against the practice of footbinding, that he created the Anti-Footbinding Society in the early 1880s, which spurred another Anti-Footbinding Society by his younger brother Kang Guangren in 1895 and the

¹⁰ Ibid 37, 38.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 12.

¹³ Londa Schiebinger, *Feminism and the Body: Oxford Readings in Feminism* (U.S.A.: Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 2000), 429.

¹⁴ Ping 4.

¹⁵ Steele 38.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ono Kazuko, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*, trans. Joshua A. Fogel (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989), 32.

Movement for the Natural Foot, organized and run by missionary wives around the same time.¹⁸ Additionally, certain groups of women objected to the practice of footbinding.¹⁹ These groups included the Hakka women and the Tanka women, who required natural feet that provided them the stability to work hard in the fields, as well as the Manchu, the largest ethnic group inhabiting the region during the peak of the footbinding craze.²⁰ The Manchu rulers disapproved of the practice of footbinding so much that they prohibited any women with bound feet “from the imperial harem for their entire reign.”²¹ Many historians agree that this is not because the Manchu found footbinding brutal, but because they wanted to keep the Manchu imperial line of succession pure and superior to the Chinese.²²

In fact, it has been argued by some that the main reason of footbinding was to separate the Chinese from non-Chinese.²³ Steele and Major, for example, mention that Chinese anxieties about “racial boundaries” resurfaced when the Manchus invaded and conquered China with the fall of the Ming dynasty.²⁴ Dorothy Ko adds that, with the establishment of the Qing dynasty by the Manchu, the Chinese felt they needed to “re-emphasize the differences between ‘we’ and ‘they’.”²⁵ The author of *Women and the Family in Chinese History*, Patricia Buckley Ebrely, also analyzes the practice of footbinding more generally, stating that a great contribution to the popularity of the practice was the possibility that, during a time of almost constant invasions, anxieties of national unity were suppressed.²⁶

Identifying that a woman’s bound feet represented Confucian ideals and nationalism, some historians have taken this argument a step further, claiming the main reason for footbinding was that victims of footbinding were seen to represent a woman who was obedient, moral, and both respectful and respectable.²⁷ These labels appealed to males, and so made foot-bound young women attractive proponents to bachelors seeking a good wife. Such characteristics were associated with footbinding for a few reasons. Seventeenth-century author Liu-hsien stated that “if their [girls’] feet are not bound, they go

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Beverly Jackson, *Splendid Slippers: A Thousand Years of an Erotic Tradition* (1998; repr., Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 2000), 17. Oxford Reading from C. Fred Blake, ‘Foot-binding in neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor,’ *Signs*, 19 (1994), 1-25, 93-5.

²⁰ Ibid 17, 18.

²¹ Ibid 17.

²² Ibid.

²³ Steele 38, 39.

²⁴ Ibid 40, 41.

²⁵ Ibid 41.

²⁶ Ibid 39, 40.

²⁷ Harold Koda, *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001), 152.

here and there with unfitting associates” and would therefore take up a bad name.²⁸ Today, many scholars agree that footbinding served the purpose of impairing the mobility of woman, which was seen as serving a positive moral function in that women were less likely to have sexual relations with a man other than her husband because she could not move as freely to see and do all that she pleased.²⁹ While it has been determined today that walking was not precluded as long as one with bound feet elevated her toes off the ground and put all her weight on her heels, it was earlier believed that the freedom of movement offered the “potential for unconstrained female sexual license.”³⁰ Liu-hsien stressed the importance of women’s feet being bound short, explaining that it shows “they are persons of respectability” and, on the contrary, “if [one’s feet are] not bound short, they say the mother has not trained her daughter carefully.”³¹ Having lived in the era of footbinding, the author further attested that, “One of good family does not wish to marry a woman with long feet. She is commiserated because her feet are not perfect.”³² Perfection is what the Chinese bachelors and his parents were looking for in a woman and, as a woman’s bound feet represented discipline, Confucian ideals, and nationalism, the woman as a whole was displayed as a perfect candidate to serve as a Han Chinese bachelor’s future wife.

Yet another viewpoint of the main objective of the practice of footbinding is seen by social theoretician Thorstein Veblen. He associates footbinding with economics in that the deprivation of mobility and the deformation of one’s feet became for upper-class Chinese women a symbol of their husbands’ “pecuniary reputability.”³³ In other words, a woman with bound feet was her husband’s representation of wealth for her “explicit uselessness and costly maintenance.”³⁴ In 1836, John Francis Davis, a member of the early foreign Chinese community, described footbinding in his publication *The Chinese* as a form of “*exemption from labour*,” and a custom that diminished women’s “charms and domestic usefulness.”³⁵ It was this ‘uselessness’ that attracted men, as Beverly Jackson, author of *Splendid Slippers: A Thousand Years of an Erotic Tradition*, writes, “anyone who could afford a ‘helpless’ wife must be a successful man, regardless of his actual social or economic reality.”³⁶

²⁸ Jackson 18, 19, 21.

²⁹ Koda 152.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Jackson 18, 19.

³² Ibid 19.

³³ Koda 152.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History* (29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001: Routledge, 2003), 198.

³⁶ Jackson 15.

On the contrary, the author of *Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor*, C. Fred Blake, states footbinding as a “body politic,” in that footbinding was a mechanism for capturing not only a woman’s “uterine power” to “reproduce biological units of labor” but also capturing a woman’s “labor power” to produce economic goods.³⁷ In other words, footbinding had an influence on women in two economic ways: first, women opted to stay at home so they didn’t have to walk on their feet as much, which gave them time to bear and raise children and, secondly, women could produce economic goods inside their home, allowing them to still be productive, but keeping them from having to walk on their feet. The women only appeared to be “useless” to the society because, as Hill Gates puts it, the goods these women produced were “appropriated by male kinsmen in the patriarchal family system.”³⁸ Hill Gates also adds that footbinding caused women to participate in the system of economic production such that “the labor women contributed was veiled by a mystique of women as sexual and maternal but otherwise worthless.”³⁹ Therefore, both the “uterine” and the “labor power” that resulted from a woman having bound feet was to her husband’s advantage.⁴⁰ With more time for children, there was a better opportunity for the birth of a male heir and, in addition, the goods produced by the wife at home could be sold for an additional source of income while she still appeared to be exempt from labor.

Another interpretation, as Ebrey suggests, of why Chinese women had their feet bound was because it emphasized the difference between men and women.⁴¹ Liu-hsien backs up Ebrey’s argument when she writes, “if a girl’s feet are not bound, people say she is not like a woman but like a man.”⁴² Similarly, Adele Fielde, who lived in the Shantou area of China during the early 1800s, noticed that women whose feet resembled those of men would be “laughed at and despised.”⁴³ Some, like Fielde, have taken the argument even further, to interpret footbinding as a display of male superiority. Fielde, in her ten years of living in the Shantou area, observed that couples in which the wife did not have bound feet were looked down upon because the wife was considered to be as strong and powerful as her husband and could not be so easily confined nor beaten.⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud viewed footbinding as an allayer of men’s castration anxieties and the “pecuniary reputability” of Veblin’s theory, in which “women surrendered

³⁷ Schiebinger 431.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Steele 38, 39.

⁴² Jackson 18.

⁴³ Ibid 16.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

their usefulness,” signifies male and female status in a patriarchal world.⁴⁵ Like Veblin, a more recent interpretation by Mary Daly discusses footbinding as “an example of victimhood in the grip of patriarchy.”⁴⁶ On a grander scale, the idea of male superiority or, rather, female inferiority, coincides with the traditional beliefs of the Chinese philosophical movement of Neo-Confucianism which, as Steele and Major put it, “placed a pronounced ideological emphasis on female inferiority.”⁴⁷ C. Fred Blake argues that the practice of footbinding was “the muted voice of women in contention with the dominant discourse of Neo-Confucian values and definitions of reality.”⁴⁸ In other words, bound feet is a protracted discipline that represents, as well as helps young women learn to cope with, the realities of being bound to her husband, his family, and society in general.

Even though over a thousand years have passed since the practice of footbinding first became popular in China, there is still limited research on the topic. While there is currently debate on the origins of the practice and what spurred its popularity across China, the interpretations all come down to one particular theme: the aspirations of a young woman being married into a family of the highest possible class. Recent scholar and author Lin Yutang claims that the popularity of footbinding with women was “based on their desire to curry men’s favor.”⁴⁹ With male nobility lusting after beautiful concubines with small feet, it makes sense that other women would attempt to make their own feet, or their daughters’ feet, smaller to win over the hearts of men of such high status.⁵⁰ To the advantage of Chinese mothers, it was seen that, while bound feet were regarded as sexually attractive, they were not considered “forward or immodest,” unlike many other traits of concubines.⁵¹ Therefore, these Chinese mothers practiced footbinding on their daughters because it likened the chance of a male with such high standards of choosing a daughter—who could be a potential wife—with attractive bound feet over a concubine. While the footbinding process itself displayed to the society the ability for the adolescent victim to cope with the burdens of becoming a productive, *reproductive* member of society, the fascination the tiny feet held with men and the facts that Chinese women with bound feet were distinguished from men and non-Chinese all resulted in a victim of footbinding being particularly attractive in male Han eyes, as they were seen as the epitome of the true, traditional, Confucian Chinese wife that males typically

⁴⁵ Schiebinger 429.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Steele 40.

⁴⁸ Schiebinger 430.

⁴⁹ Jackson 17.

⁵⁰ Ibid 12.

⁵¹ Steele 40.

looked for to bear them sufficient sons.⁵² To conclude, Beverly Jackson answers the question of the footbinding craze with: “It was tradition. It was fashion. The men wanted it. Without bound feet, a Han Chinese girl might not get a good husband.”⁵³

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⁵² Jackson 16.

⁵³ Ibid 18.