

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Cinderella's Lessons on Footbinding: How Tiny Feet Found their Way into the Chinese Cinderella Story

Tyler Scott Smith

### Cinderella: Bound To China

Shoes, slippers, feet and sandals play one of the most pivotal roles in the prominent Cinderella stories through the tale's history. Tracing versions of the tale geographically as it spread throughout Central Asia and then throughout the globe can exemplify the different traditions and mores a society entrusts to the story. However, feet and their coverings survive all of these retellings after a certain point. Footbinding and the spread of early versions of the Cinderella tale share the same time periods in the ninth-century, and the tradition of footbinding makes a lasting impact on the story once it begins moving from southern China.<sup>1</sup>

### Review of the Literature

The popularly agreed upon origin for the tale is in southern China and is thought to have been recorded by Duan Chengshi in the early ninth-century. He is credited with recording the tale of Yeh-Shen, a mistreated stepchild who is subjected to hardship but later is elevated by her selection for a marriage into power and affluence. The most extensive research on the tale's origin is authored by Marian Cox who catalogued and classified over three-hundred variants of the tale throughout the world, in her book *Cinderella: Three Hundred and Forty-five Variants of Cinderella, Catskin, and Cap O'Rushes*.<sup>2</sup> She explains the motifs required in the construction of a Cinderella tale. Cox states that the 'Type A motif,' the most common in Cinderella tales, is made up of two key elements, an 'ill-treated heroine' and her 'recognition by means of a shoe.'<sup>3</sup> These same motifs are utilized by Anna Birgitta Rooth, who updates and augments the work of Cox by bringing another 300 versions of the tale to the attention of researchers in her work, *The Cinderella Cycle*.<sup>4</sup> Alan Dundes compiles the scholarship of both Cox and Rooth, along with many others, in his book, *Cinderella: A Casebook*.<sup>5</sup> The variants pointed out by Rooth, Cox and Dundes display that the tales which reach Europe maintain the shoe motif. Charles Perrault's recording of the *Little Glass Slipper* in 1697 made the impact on the westernization of the story. However Perrault's version allows for Cinderella to be noticed for her beauty and elegance, and even adds a meeting between the Prince and Cinderella before their marriage. These aspects are missing from Yeh-Shen.<sup>6</sup> Later, in 1812, the Brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published their collection of stories; they also maintained the shoe motif and also allow for a meeting between Cinderella and the

<sup>1</sup> The time periods cited for this observation are derived from data collected and published by Dorothy Ko. Ko's work explains the development of footbinding, which is compared in this paper to the emergence of the Cinderella tale in correlative regions.

<sup>2</sup> Marian Cox, *Cinderella; Three Hundred and Forty-Five Variants of Cinderella, Catskin, and Cap O'Rushes* (London: The Folk-lore Society, 1893).

<sup>3</sup> Cox, xxv.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Rooth, *The Cinderella Cycle* (New York: Arno Press, 1951).

<sup>5</sup> Alan Dundes and W. Gregor, ed. *Cinderella, A Casebook* (New York: Wildman Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Lai, 'Two Translations of the Chinese Cinderella Story', *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 15.1 (2007) 50.

'Cinderella's Lessons on Footbinding: How Tiny Feet Found their Way into the Chinese Cinderella Story.' Tyler Scott Smith.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

prince before his obtaining her slipper. These two well-known European versions of the story represent the versions after their journey through China.

Yeh-Shen was brought to the attention of the scholarly community in 1947 when Arthur Waley published his paper, *The Chinese Cinderella Story*.<sup>7</sup> His translation of the folktale recorded by Duan Chengshi in the ninth-century became the definitive text for the story. Waley credits the roots of his version of the story with the ‘aborigines in the extreme south of China.’<sup>8</sup> The evidence of geography and the time period point to the ‘aborigines’ Waley spoke of as the people of the Yungchow Clan. Duan Chengshi actually stated in his original text that the story was obtained by his servant, Li Shih Yuan, who was from the Yungchow familial group in the region.<sup>9</sup>

Although the story is widely regarded as having its roots in the southern most part of China, Wayne Schlepp argues that a version of the tale of Ye Shen can be found in Tibet and it predates the Chengshi record.<sup>10</sup> He cites the Tibetan collection tales, *The Twenty-five Stories of the Magic Corpse*, in which similar motifs from the story Yeh-Shen are observed. In the translated tale presented by Schlepp the main character is tricked into killing her own mother and then moves in with two ogresses who mistreat her. When she is granted wishes from her mother, who has been reincarnated as a cow, she attends a local fair and there catches the eye of a prince. The girl flees the fair for fear of the ogresses and leaves her slipper which is how she is then confirmed to be the beautiful girl at the fair. If Schlepp is correct in his analysis of the text, it would mean that story travelled along the Tang Dynasty’s Tea-Horse road.<sup>11</sup> The road is likely how the tale travelled from Schlepp’s Tibet to China. Gary Sigley’s 2010 article on Chinese cultural heritage points to the two major trade roads of ancient China. The first of those trade routes being the well-known Silk Road, which was the main channel of trade to Europe. The second was the lesser-known Tea Horse Road.<sup>12</sup> Sigley describes the Tea Horse Road as being the main route that ran from Tibet into China, reaching its peak of use during the rule of Tang Dynasty.<sup>13</sup> Shi Shou, a professor and researcher at the Center for Tibetan Studies of Sichuan University confirms Sigley’s description of the Tea Horse Road. Shou explains that the road was ‘not only a channel for ancestors’ migration and also a key tunnel for ancient intercultural communication among these regions.’<sup>14</sup>

If Schlepp is correct in his assertion that the story of Yeh-Shen is from Tibet, then the version he translates would be unaffected by the southern Chinese tradition of footbinding. Schlepp himself notes that although the story contains a shoe, it is ‘not protracted and seems

---

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Waley, ‘The Chinese Cinderella Story,’ *Folklore* 58.1 (1947), 226-38.

<sup>8</sup> Waley 226.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Milne, ‘Good Science, Bad Science: The Contribution of the Modern Anthropologist to the Delivery of Human Rights,’ *Anthropologist Special Issue* 1 (2002) 191.

<sup>10</sup> Wayne Schlepp, ‘Cinderella in Tibet,’ *Asian Folklore Studies* 61.1 (2002) 123-47.

<sup>11</sup> Li Qian, ‘A Forgotten Ancient Passageway,’ *Beijing Review* 45 (2002) 23-4.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Sigley, ‘Cultural Heritage Tourism and the Ancient Tea Horse Road of Southwest China,’ *International Journal of China Studies* 1.2 (2010) 535.

<sup>13</sup> Sigley 536.

<sup>14</sup> Shi Shou, ‘Changdu: Junction on the Ancient Tea-Horse Road and its Ancient Culture,’ *Journal of Tibet University* 4 (2003) 12.

almost matter of fact by comparison.’ He goes on to state that the Tibetan authors were likely concerned with things other than the shoes.<sup>15</sup>

It should be said, that Schlepp does not touch upon the possibility of the monogenesis spread of the tale. Stith Thompson argues that Lang, who wrote Cox’s introduction, believed the tale was not one of polygenesis.<sup>16</sup> Thompson also cites the criticisms of a polygenesis theory being applied to the story of Yeh-Shen. He says that this theory is based on ‘the presumption of a parallel development of culture everywhere, a parallelism which would manifest itself in analogous tales.’<sup>17</sup> Gerald Gresseth agrees with Thompson’s assessment. He analyzes Rooth’s text and explains the likelihood of the tale having a stationary origin and traveling in various cultures.<sup>18</sup> The agreement of Thompson and Gresseth makes the tale traveling along the Tea-Horse road entirely probable.

### **Yeh-Shen and Cinderella**

In Waley’s translation, Chengshi tells the story of a young girl, who is adopted by her stepmother after the death of her mother and father. The girl finds a fish in a nearby pond. The fish is an incarnation of her mother and she feeds the fish. The stepmother finds out who the fish is and promptly kills and eats it. Yeh-Shen finds the remains, which grant her wishes. Yeh-Shen attends a royal gathering in a kingfisher cloak and she wears shoes of gold. Yeh-Shen grows fearful of her stepmother finding her at the gathering so she flees, leaving behind a gold slipper. The king obtains the slipper and sets out to find the original wearer. He orders all of the women in the kingdom to try it on, but none of their feet were small enough to fit the shoe. Finally the king finds a woman with small enough feet to fit, Yeh-Shen. The king marries Yeh-Shen and they return to his court with the fish bones from her mother. The king misuses the bones and suffers a mutiny by his soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

The variants for comparison show an interesting trend with the shoe motif. The three variants with which to compare Yeh-Shen are the Tibetan Cinderella presented by Schlepp, the Cinderella tale written by Perrault and finally the Brothers Grimm and their story retelling. All of the stories have the structure of a young girl separated from her biological parents and being abused by her new caretakers. All of the variants also offer a magic being who helps the Cinderella character to attend a celebration of some kind. Where the stories lack congruency is that in Schlepp, Perrault and Grimm the prince/headman is in attendance at the celebration. In Yeh-Shen the ruler is nowhere on the premises. In Schlepp’s retelling the girl goes to the fair and sees the prince:

The girl went to the fair; she circled the crowd to the right and saw that those two were begging for something to eat. She then circled against the direction of the sun and there saw a great prince who was most handsome of all. She enjoyed herself very much looking at all the things at the fair. Before the crowd dispersed, she hurried

---

<sup>15</sup> Schlepp 138.

<sup>16</sup> Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Dryden Press, 1946) 380.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson 380.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Gresseth, ‘The Odyssey and the Nalopakhyana,’ *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 109 (1979) 71

<sup>19</sup> Waley 227-9.

‘Cinderella’s Lessons on Footbinding: How Tiny Feet Found their Way into the Chinese Cinderella Story.’ Tyler Scott Smith.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

home but on the way back she lost one of her slippers while jumping across a stream. When she got home she hid away all her clothes and jewelry.<sup>20</sup>

The prince upon being presented with the shoe lost by the girl remembers her, having seen her during the fair:

When the prince's horse keeper went out to water the horses, the bay horses did not drink but instead wandered upstream and the keeper followed after it. The horse sniffed out a beautiful slipper, which the keeper picked up, and when the horses were watered, he led them back and gave the slipper to the prince and reported the matter. The prince said, 'Yesterday among the crowd was a girl about fifteen years old who had all the signs and marks of a goddess. If she comes again today, since I have found her through [the good offices of] this fine horse, I shall make her my queen and take her into the palace.'<sup>21</sup>

It is clear that the prince was enamored of her, describing her as having marks of a goddess. In his description of her though he does not mention her shoes, only her beauty, his only interest in the shoe is that will be a useful tool in identifying the young lady he saw. Marian Cox, Anna B. Rooth and Alan Dundes all identify that one of the most common motifs of all variants of the Cinderella story is her identification by her shoe. Rooth, who built heavily on the research done by Cox, defines the loss of a foot covering as a 'Type A' Cinderella motif because of its frequency and associative nature to the story.<sup>22</sup> Perrault's version of the tale has a similar sequence of events to Schlepp's. The girl goes to the event and finds her true love who sees her as a beauty:

The king's son, who was told that a great princess, whom nobody knew, had arrived, ran out to receive her. He gave her his hand as she alighted from the coach, and led her into the hall, among all the company. There was immediately a profound silence. Everyone stopped dancing, and the violins ceased to play, so entranced was everyone with the singular beauties of the unknown newcomer.

Nothing was then heard but a confused noise of, 'How beautiful she is! How beautiful she is!' ...

She jumped up and fled, as nimble as a deer. The prince followed, but could not overtake her. She left behind one of her glass slippers, which the prince picked up most carefully. She reached home, but quite out of breath, and in her nasty old clothes, having nothing left of all her finery but one of the little slippers, the mate to the one that she had dropped.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Schlepp 128.

<sup>21</sup> Schlepp 128.

<sup>22</sup> Rooth 73.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* ed. Dee Ashliman: 'Cinderella,' 2003, University of Pittsburgh, 03/31/2013 <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0510a.html>.

The consistent trend being that the prince is aware of the girl, he sees her and is aware of her beauty. It is only after he is in love and aware of her beauty that the shoe makes an important showing in the story. The Grimm story, though more grizzly with the identification process has the same order of importance. First the prince notices the girl, falls in love because of her beauty and then uses the shoe to find the girl he fell in love with:

Then the bird threw a gold and silver dress down to her, and slippers embroidered with silk and silver. She quickly put on the dress and went to the festival. ...

The prince approached her, took her by the hand, and danced with her. Furthermore, he would dance with no one else. He never let go of her hand, and whenever anyone else came and asked her to dance, he would say, 'She is my dance partner.' ...

When evening came Cinderella wanted to leave, and the prince tried to escort her, but she ran away from him so quickly that he could not follow her. The prince, however, had set a trap. He had had the entire stairway smeared with pitch. When she ran down the stairs, her left slipper stuck in the pitch. The prince picked it up. It was small and dainty, and of pure gold.

The next morning, he went with it to the man, and said to him, 'No one shall be my wife except for the one whose foot fits this golden shoe.'<sup>24</sup>

All of these versions contradict the order of events in Yeh-Shen. With the aforementioned variants she is noted as a beauty and the shoe is later found by a by a passer-by and the shoe is subsequently sent to a king. The king loves the shoe's small size and goes to great lengths to find the person who can fit into it, despite never having seen her:

When the time came for the cave-festival, the step-mother went, leaving the girl to keep watch over the fruit-trees in the garden. She waited till the step-mother was some way off, and then went herself, wearing a cloak of stuff spun from kingfisher feathers and shoes of gold. Her step-sister recognized her and said to the step-mother, 'That's very like my sister.' The step-mother suspected the same thing. The girl was aware of this and went away in such a hurry that she lost one shoe. It was picked up by one of the people of the cave. When the step-mother got home, she found the girl asleep, with her arms round one of the trees in the garden, and thought no more about it. This cave was near to an island in the sea. On this island was a kingdom called T'o-han. Its soldiers had subdued twenty or thirty other islands and it had a coastline of several thousand leagues. The caveman sold the shoe in T'o-han, and the ruler of T'o-han got it. He told those about him to put it on; but it was an inch too small even for the one among them that had the smallest foot. He ordered all the women in his kingdom to try it on; but there was not one that it fitted. It was light as down and made no noise even when treading on stone. The king of T'o-han thought the caveman had got it unlawfully. He put him in prison and tortured him, but did not end by

---

<sup>24</sup> Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 'Aschenputtel,' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* ed. Dee Ashliman: 'Cinderella,' 2003 University of Pittsburgh, 03/31/2013. <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0510a.html>.

'Cinderella's Lessons on Footbinding: How Tiny Feet Found their Way into the Chinese Cinderella Story.' Tyler Scott Smith.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>



finding out where it had come from. So he threw it down at the wayside. Then they went everywhere, through all the people's houses and arrested them. If there was a woman's shoe, they arrested them and told the king of T'o-han. He thought it strange, searched the inner-rooms and found Yeh-Shen. He made her put on the shoe, and it was true.<sup>25</sup>

The heroine of the story, is identified and propelled into wealth and power by marrying the king because of the size of her feet, whereas in the other variants the shoe is used solely as a form of finding her. In Yeh-Shen the king has never even seen the girl who wore the shoe, his mad crusade to find the owner is fueled only by his love of the slipper and the assumption that the wearer must be beautiful because of the shoes small size. This 'Type A' storyline is found first in China. The development of the slipper or shoe motif is also derived from the Chinese influence on the story. Rooth states that the shoe motif survives into the other variants that leave southern China after the shoe component is added and continue on into the European and Near Eastern versions.<sup>26</sup> Her beauty and worth were all based on the fact that she was the only girl in the kingdom with feet small enough to fit the slipper. This is evidence that rather than the 'love at first sight' motif that the western Cinderella is renowned for, Yeh-Shen is not fallen in love with because of her aesthetics. She is still only recognized and appreciated by the king for the size of her feet, not her beauty.

### **Footbinding and Yeh-Shen**

Less than one-hundred years after the recording of Chengshi's tale, southern China saw the emergence of the custom known as footbinding. While the timeline presented here for footbinding puts the recording of the tale prior to there being static evidence of footbinding, it is widely believed by researchers that the custom had been in practice for centuries before the story came to China. The congruence of these two events in history is more than coincidental. By following the Tea-Horse Road from Tibet into southern China, the story was shared by tradesmen or travellers as they transported their goods. In the story, the Tibetan authors and storytellers treat shoes indifferently, however in the southern Chinese version in the early ninth-century it becomes a tale that decides the protagonist's fate on her shoes and foot size. As southern Chinese traditions infiltrated the story, it was also moving across the country, making its way north and west along the trade routes. It follows the same path that saw the development of foot binding and did so in less than a century before the custom became standard. The embedded motif of small feet and shoes became so indoctrinated to the story that even centuries later, in a continent away, the smallest feet in the kingdom still resulted in royal marriage.

The history of footbinding was long thought to have its roots in the court of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE). While court was being held at the city of Nanjing, the dancing girls are commented on because of having 'bow-shoes' giving their feet the look of being very

---

<sup>25</sup> Waley 228-9.

<sup>26</sup> Waley 192.

small and beautiful. The central dancing girl mentioned is Yaoniang, and she danced for the ruler of the Southern Tang Dynasty, Li Yu.<sup>27</sup>

Dorothy Ko whose book, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*,<sup>28</sup> supplies the most comprehensive study on the subject, presents the most recent and accurate retelling of Yaoniang and Li Yu (937-78 CE). Ko translates from the text of Zhou Mi, an eleventh-century scholar, that Yaoniang's feet were wrapped with silk to make them small and slim. So enticing were her tiny feet that Li Yu constructed a six-foot tall golden lotus statue in her honor. It is believed likely that Yaoniang never existed, but the statue and Yu's desire for small feet are a fact of the story.<sup>29</sup> The story also alludes to the connection between beauty in the form of small feet and the acquisition of increased social and economic status attained through the use of them as a sexual object.

Ko cites two lesser known stories that share similarities with the Yaoniang legend. She explains that the sources for the two 'origin' stories are not concrete, which is why they are often ignored by scholars. Both the story of the Duke of Donghun's spouse, Consort Pan, and the story of Consort Yang are indicated as footbinding records that predate the Zhou Mi writings. Consort Pan, dated in the sixth-century and Yang dated in the mid eight-century, make no direct specific indication of bound feet. It is the lack of this specificity that causes them to be discredited as sources.<sup>30</sup>

In a search for textual evidence of footbinding that is considered decisively dependable, Valerie Hansen, in her book *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600*,<sup>31</sup> looks to Zongyi Tao's *Nancun chuo geng lu*<sup>32</sup> translating his notes to read,

...one can know [that] flattened feet began only since the Five Dynasties (907-60 CE). Before the Xining (1068-77 CE) and Yuanfeng (1077-86 CE) reigns, the practice was rare. Recently people have copied each other and no longer feel shame.<sup>33</sup>

Hansen views this excerpt as the most dependable, textual evidence of the origination of footbinding. She points out that most researchers of the subject still consider the Tang poetic descriptions of court dancers binding their feet to be the evidential key, however, she explains that it is not grounded in recorded text and therefore should be carefully used as a source.

Footbinding was a custom unique to the southern regions of China, spreading most aggressively during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279 CE). The custom did not become adopted in northern China until the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368 CE). The custom itself was

---

<sup>27</sup> Sidney Gamble, 'The Disappearance of Foot-binding in Tingsien,' *The American Journal of Sociology*, 49. 2 (1943) 181.

<sup>28</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Ko 114.

<sup>30</sup> Ko 112-14.

<sup>31</sup> Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600* (New York: Norton, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Zongyi Tao, *Nancun chuo eng lu*, (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju : Xin hua shu dian Beijing fa xing suo fa xing, 1360).

<sup>33</sup> Hansen 286-7.

rooted in the southern regions during the Tang Dynasty.<sup>34</sup> For over three hundred years, the people of the north did not wrap or bind their feet. It was considered to be a southern custom well into the fourteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Yeh-Shen did not bind her feet, nor did Cinderella; however they both became emblematic for the custom of footbinding. By perpetuating the belief that small feet will allow a potential bride to marry well, these stories embody the cultural custom of footbinding and validate it through folklore. The time periods, geographical spread and manipulation of variants all are evidence that footbinding found its roots in the southern tale of a girl with the smallest feet in the kingdom.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ko 114.

<sup>35</sup> Gamble 181.