Chinese Culture Revisited: The Case of Footbinding as a Cultural Phenomenon
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ABSTRACT

Has footbinding really died out in present-day China? Was it a sign of obsessive male oppression or of women's quest for feminine beauty? Do most previous works on Chinese footbinding convey a message of "condemnation" rather than an appreciation of this cultural practice? People may be surprised to learn that there are still some survivors of footbinding in present-day villages in the Yunnan Province of China. These elderly women still bind and unbind their feet on a daily basis, giving the impression that footbinding is so acceptable to them that it is a continued practice in some villages.

This article, building upon previous research in both English and Chinese, revisits the case of footbinding as a cultural phenomenon in China. It is not absolutely essential to know how this practice originated, but how and why it has been perpetuated as a cultural phenomenon in China for more than a thousand years are questions which deserve our attention. There must have been some subtle cultural meanings behind footbinding for both women and men in the bound-foot era. How did Chinese men and women perceive it? How did Westerners of both sexes view it? Patricia Ebrey, a historian of women in medieval China, has argued that the practice of footbinding had both regional and class differences. Drawing on the richest accounts of Chinese cultural practices by Western travellers, she has observed that Western interpretations of Chinese footbinding were shifting. This was partly attributable to the changing political, social, and religious climate in the West, which was leading to changes in attitudes towards China in general (Ebrey, abstract). The prominent cultural historian of China, Dorothy Ko, who at one point argued in a similar vein to Ebrey, has performed the most recent in-depth study on footbinding. One of the central themes of Ko's recent book, for example, is that there is not only one type of footbinding in China but many, meaning there is a diversity of Chinese footbinding as perceived from Chinese women's own writings, their visual art, and items involved in shoe-making (Ko, Cinderella's Sisters, 2, 228).

Ko and Ebrey are only two amongst the many previous scholars enquiring into the issue of Chinese footbinding, and their interpretations vary to some extent. This article will discuss three generated theories of Chinese footbinding, based on my own survey: (1) Chinese men's perspective: the sexual appeal theory of footbinding; (2) Westerners' perspective: the "crushed bones" theory of footbinding; and (3) Chinese women's perspective: the women's art theory of footbinding. The article will look at a brief history of footbinding in China, these three generated theories, and finally, it will give a glimpse of some elderly women survivors in present-day China. It is hoped that the article will offer both an alternative way of looking at the footbinding issue and a brief history of it.

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Brief History of Footbinding in China

Some scholars remark that the historical origins of Chinese footbinding are frustratingly confusing, even though certain texts suggest that small feet on women were preferred as early as in the Xia dynasty China (c. 2100-1600 BC). According to Du Halde, a nineteenth-century sinologist, the last empress of the Shang dynasty started to bind her feet tight with strips of cloth, believing this would add to her beauty. However, the most reliable source documents the actual binding of the feet of a palace woman from the Southern Tang dynasty. Its ruler, Li Yu (961-975), ordered his favourite palace concubine, Lovely Maiden, to bind her feet with white silk cloth and dance on a golden lotus platform decorated with pearls and gems. She whirled around like a rising cloud. Thereafter, other palace dancers imitated her style of binding, thinking the tiny feet to be beautiful, distinguished, and elegant. It gradually became standard practice in the quest for feminine beauty in the imperial court, and the "golden lotus" was a synonym for bound feet (Levy 37, 39; Vento, n.p.; Gao 1-16).

One eminent Song scholar and philosopher, Zhu Xi (1130-1200), assisted in accelerating the spread of footbinding. Zhu Xi is known for his commentaries on the Confucian classics, which formed the canon of Neo-Confucianism, an influential school of thought of his time that continued to have effects on Chinese intellectual and cultural life for many succeeding dynasties. Zhu Xi was an ardent supporter of footbinding, and introduced the practice into southern Fujian. He observed that Fujianese women tended to be unchaste and to indulge in lewdness; and therefore, he ordered that all women's feet be bound to an excessive degree, causing them to hobble about with difficulty. With such difficulty in movement, bound-foot women were expected to stay at home and devote themselves entirely to their household obligations. In Zhu Xi's opinion, a Chinese woman should preserve chastity after the death of her husband, and it was better for the woman to starve than remarry. This regulated proper relations between the sexes in a family and enforced the spread of traditional Chinese culture (Levy 44; Vento, n.p.). As the family was the most important organizational unit in Chinese society, proper behaviour of the couple determined the reputation of a family. Familial harmony was demanded, not only by couples of imperial families, but also by those from the lower strata of Chinese society. Thus, footbinding spread beyond the elite class, with some regional variations (Turner 446-447).

This article tries not to evaluate footbinding as "barbarous" and "uncivilized" for the time being, but as what Marie Vento has suggested; that it was "right" within the context of traditional Chinese culture. With this mentality, footbinding flourished for many centuries in some sectors of
Chinese society. During the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), footbinding was gradually transmitted from the north to the south of China. In songs, poems, and plays of the period, the three-inch golden lotuses (bound feet) were frequently referred to, meaning that footbinding widened its popular base under Mongol rule. It could be that, as Howard Levy has observed, the Han Chinese wanted to draw a clearer cultural distinction between themselves and their natural-foot conquerors (Mongols). Footbinding served as a reflection of cultural prestige because of its embodiment of Confucian ethics, which led to its enduring appeal. In the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), footbinding was made more popular than ever, developing concurrently with the chastity cult in Ming society. The Ming government, which had institutionalized the cult of chastity, emphatically praised chaste widows. The Ming literati often agreed with tiny feet and praised their charming beauty in their writings. Bound feet were a love fetish to the Yuan and Ming people and "lotus shoes" (shoes for bound feet) were symbols of passionate love and aristocratic status (Levy 47-51, 62; Vento, n.p.; Li and Gao 90-91).

Footbinding, however, faced several challenges under Manchu rule and later in the twentieth century. The Qing ruling class attempted to prohibit the custom among the Han people in the seventeenth century by issuing a series of imperial edicts and heavy penalties. However, the influence of Chinese culture was so considerable that, as an ingrained custom, eradication of footbinding through legislation was doomed to failure. Officially outlawed in 1911, the practice continued well into the twentieth century, when groups of both Chinese reformers and Western missionaries put much pressure on it with calls for reform. To Westerners, footbinding was painful, unnatural, and barbarous, and most of them perceived nineteenth-century Chinese as being "uneducated and uncivilized" (Moule 260; Levy 66-67). They formed several natural feet societies and launched various education campaigns in the hope of putting a quick halt to the custom. Chinese reformers joined the missionary team, leading to a true anti-footbinding movement in China. The movement may have been efficacious in unbinding the feet of girls in the younger generation, but was somewhat cruel in doing so in the older generation. As elderly women were so receptive to the custom and certain perceptions of beauty attached to it, an end to footbinding would imply that all the cultural meanings, deeply held aesthetic values, and sexual psyche attached to the custom for centuries had to be destroyed. This may explain why elderly women who resisted the anti-footbinding movement still bind and unbind their feet in some areas of present-day China. Footbinding imposed firmly rooted cultural meanings on elite women and men in the bound-foot era.
Chinese Men’s Perspective: the Sexual Appeal Theory of Footbinding

For “lotus lovers” - elite Chinese men who considered the bound foot a love fetish - the tiny feet of women were sexually appealing objects. Howard Levy, in his first in-depth English study on footbinding, presented and translated an array of source material detailing the aesthetic and sexual aspects of footbinding. Levy himself has pointed out that the lotus feet of women were precious, beautiful, and civilized, and that the practice was not barbaric (Levy 154). His monograph on footbinding may have represented the sexual appeal theory of footbinding typical of the view of elite Chinese men at the time. There are several reasons that account for this theory, both visually and psychologically as well as sexually and socially.

The bound feet and bowed shoes of women were visually pleasing and admired, and, because of this, they developed an aesthetic appeal for elite Chinese men. Their charming beauty was frequently cited in men’s writings of the bound-foot era. For example, a slender and pointed bowed sole, a touch of a warm, smooth, and soft tiny foot, and a pair of embroidered bowed shoes could drive a Chinese man crazy in the bedchamber. Documents show that, beginning at the age of six, a Chinese girl’s four smaller toes were bent under the foot to make it narrower, the ball of the foot was forced towards the heel to make it shorter, and then the entire foot was wrapped in a tight bandage day and night in order to mould an ideal pointed and bowed three-inch lotus. The foot could be moulded into several shapes, such as lotus petal, new moon, harmonious bow, bamboo shoot, water chestnut, and wild duck, among others, creating a variety of some fifty-eight styles of the human lotus. The three criteria of visual beauty of the human lotus for which elite men ached were plumpness (voluptuous beauty), softness (enticing skin texture), and fineness (mystic elegance) (Mackie 1000; Levy 108, 159).

A woman’s foot was so tiny that it possibly aroused a man’s sense of love and pity. This was more a psychological feeling towards the bound foot than an aesthetic appreciation of it. Footbinding was extremely painful in the first six to ten years of formative treatment, and the binding was never released after marriage. Bleeding, crushed bones, and the deformed feet could easily motivate a Chinese gentleman to love this seriously damaged part of the female body even more. A widespread male fantasy of the time claimed that footbinding strengthened the muscular development of thighs and hips; and therefore, it was conducive to a better sex act. Whether such
a male fantasy was scientifically and medically justitied or not, it was passed from one generation to the next, ensuring the perpetuity of footbinding. According to sexologist Robert van Gulik, a man's touching of the bound feet was the traditional preliminary to a sex act. A Chinese sexologist of the Republican time, Yao Lingxi, published four comprehensive volumes on the history of footbinding during the 1930s. In the third volume of the series, the connection between footbinding and sex was presented in great detail (Levy 128, 145, 158-166, 322; Van Gulik 218-219; Mackie 1000).

While elite Chinese men yearned for "lotus feet" during marriage negotiations, it was instinctive for women to endeavour to attract and please men, thus aiding in perpetuating the practice. We should bear in mind that, unlike the present day, spinsterhood was unthinkable in traditional Chinese society, nor was pre-marital sex attached to the cult of female chastity. It was, therefore, the duty of mothers to enforce footbinding from one generation to the next. This was conducive to the marriage market. There was a saying at the time: Mothers could not love both their daughters and their daughters' feet simultaneously. Mothers constantly reminded their daughters that footbinding was absolutely necessary in order to secure a lucrative marriage. Daughters were taught the erotic nature of footbinding and the importance of marrying into a good family, which would bring glory and prestige to the bride's family. With these perceptions in mind, bound-foot daughters constantly struggled with their mothers over the painful, bloody, and terrifying labour of the brutal footbinding process. They were told that the mark of a woman's physical attraction resided more in her determination as revealed in the bound feet, than in her natural face or body (Blake 682-683; Gao 96-98). The custom then was maintained as a means of achieving certain socially desirable goals, and this was the destiny of elite Chinese girls. Daughters' struggles with their mothers over footbinding survived for many generations, centuries, and dynasties. It was not until the nineteenth century that footbinding faced severe attacks by some Westerners and Chinese reformers.

Westerners' Perspective: the "Crushed Bones" Theory of Footbinding

From the 1840s to 1860s, a series of treaties signed between China and other countries, following its defeat in wars, legitimately recognized Westerners' presence in China. These Westerners, mostly missionaries, felt secure enough to conduct a variety of missionary works in treaty ports and elsewhere in China (Hunter 6; Davin 257; Graham 10). Their views
on Chinese footbinding, including the views of some Western travellers and observers, were devastatingly negative. They were prolific writers, who published voluminous works on China and its people, thus producing an impressive wealth of missionary literature. The term “crushed bones” is adopted from Dorothy Ko, who has indicated that most previous research on footbinding excessively consults missionaries’ and travellers’ accounts of China, but neglects pre-19th century Chinese literature (Ko, Every Step... 147; Ko, “The Body” 9). The “crushed bones” theory of footbinding presented here is partly based on missionary literature.

Most missionaries to nineteenth-century China shared a common assumption, that being the superiority of Western civilization. To conquer China for Christ and to civilize the “uncivilized” Chinese were the most popular aims of the missionary bodies (Conradson 768; Moule 260). According to the British missionary wife, Mrs. Timothy Richard, “the treatment of its women is the gauge of a nation’s civilization.” China betrayed its women because they suffered from the unfair, cruel, and “uncivilized” practice of footbinding. A founder of the Natural Feet Society, Mrs. Archibald Little, quoted a Chinese proverb in 1900: “Every pair of golden lilies [bound feet] costs a jar of tears.” She reckoned the pain caused by footbinding was so incredible that Chinese women had to adopt opium smoking to relieve it. A medical missionary from England, John Dudgeon, described in 1869: “[...] these little feet, [...] which give the body that hobbling, unstead, always inclined gait, are anything but charming. The club appearance, the unnatural instep, the uncouth ankle (!), or the shrivelled, lifeless skin, and the apparently ankylozed joints, are to us positively repulsive and disagreeable [...]” (Richard 58; Little, “Tour in Behalf” 259; Dudgeon 94). Dudgeon’s description gave a glimpse of the physical appearance of the bound feet. With regard to physiological effects on the human body, footbinding helped transfer the weight to the pelvis, enlarging its transverse diameter, and thus making a woman’s waist curvy. Nevertheless, the bones of the toes had been seriously crushed, leading to an uneasy position with the body bent forwards when walking. With such deformed feet, women were more prone to fall and less able to squat, thus creating difficulty in daily activities. In other words, footbinding produced a severe lifelong disability for millions of elite Chinese women (Levy 296-298; Cummings et al. 1678-1679).

To Europeans, as Angela Zito has recently observed, Chinese footbinding was a physical manifestation of social and cultural problems, whereas Chinese social reformers turned the physical into the cultural because to them footbinding was a sign of Chinese cultural failure and national weakness (Zito 16). The reformers’ view was justified when China’s humiliation began,
following its defeat in a series of wars in the nineteenth century. What most missionaries observed about China then was its cultural inferiority to the Western Powers. Perhaps their judgements were partly derived from Christian ideals of womanhood. They found the Confucian gender model conflicting with their perspectives on women in many aspects. The two sexes in China, for example, were treated unequally throughout their lives. Baby girls initially faced the jeopardy of being killed because conservative Chinese parents did not believe their daughters to be worth keeping. Boys, however, would build up the family tree, and therefore they were worth keeping. At the age of five, some girls suffered from footbinding but boys were exempted from this terrible misfortune. In childhood education, Chinese girls were taught "perfect submission" rather than the cultivation of their minds, and they were denied literacy. Boys, however, had a right to literary education. Missionaries were also frustrated with traditional Chinese marriage customs because the phenomena of betrothed girls, concubines, and divorced women reflected the inferiority of Chinese women. As for gender segregation, Chinese women were confined to domesticity, while their opposite sex roamed in public.

What missionaries hoped to achieve through reform in Chinese society was free social interaction between the sexes, as in their homelands (Richard 55; Faber 593, 597, 600; Allen 32-33, 38; Newton 376-377; Ewer 354-355).

Missionaries were often inclined to compare Chinese cultural practices with those of their home countries. Footbinding and waistbinding are cases in point. It was sometimes argued that footbinding and waistbinding were equally cruel and barbarous. The custom of binding Western women's waists was fashionable in nineteenth-century Europe and America. Its purpose was to make women's waists slender and attractive (Chen 125). To some Western women, waistbinding was a tyrannical fashion reflecting the inferiority of their position. A British traveller and a friend of missionaries, Isabella Bird, even abandoned her European dress during her sojourn in China. She wrote in 1899: 'As a set-off against the miseries of foot-binding is the extreme comfort of a Chinese woman's dress in all classes, no corsets or waist-bands, or constraints of any kind [...] So comfortable is Chinese costume [...] that since I wore it in Manchuria and on this journey, I have not been able to take kindly to European dress' (Bird 238). Apparently, there was dress reform in nineteenth-century America and Europe, which most likely changed the attitudes of Westerners towards Chinese costume. Frequently compared to Chinese footbinding, the practice of waistbinding involved using a corset to achieve a waist size of as little as seventeen or eighteen inches. The corset pushed up the breasts and outlined the hips simultaneously, giving elite
women an overall appearance of ample curves. Corset wearing was not only
detrimental to the health of Western women but also to their psychology.
In the cultural and social context, repressing women's bodies through
deformation denied their political, social, and physical powers. The ideal
Western woman was expected to be submissive, pious, domestic, and pure,
qualities that were strengthened by fashionable dress. Nineteenth-century
feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others called attention to
radical dress reform by introducing the Bloomer style, which consisted of
a shortened dress. They redefined traditional notions of femininity through
dress (Torrens, "Fashion" 79-81; Nelson 21-22; Workman 62-63).

With such a changing climate in the West, nineteenth-century
missionaries to China were highly critical of footbinding. Hong Fan, a
specialist on sports studies, is, to some extent, in line with the missionary
perspective on footbinding. Her book on footbinding and physical exercise
emphasizes certain devastating effects of footbinding on women's physical
and mental health, as well as the liberation of women's bodies through sports.
Hong's book may represent the "crushed bones" theory of footbinding, typical
of the view of Westerners at the time. She has argued that missionaries
concentrated initially on establishing female schools in China and then on
abolishing footbinding, whereas Chinese reformers adopted an opposite
strategy. Missionaries established their first school for Chinese girls in the
1840s, well before Chinese pioneers in the 1890s. Missionaries, however,
met the strongest resistance from exponents of the custom of footbinding.
Few Chinese girls could attend school with their bound feet, and few could
participate in sports (Hong, "The Female Body" 148; Hong, Footbinding
55).

To look for remedies, missionaries adopted various strategies in the hope
of eradicating the custom as swiftly as possible. Firstly, they tried to create
a sentiment against footbinding in young Chinese men's minds by forming
several natural feet societies. The regulations of some of these societies urged
Chinese men to marry wives with natural feet. As Mrs. Goodrich noted in
1899, the desire of young Chinese men for wives with natural feet created a
demand, and mothers could no longer make excuses to themselves for binding
their daughters' feet. Such anti-footbinding sentiment would cause a serious
blow to the traditional Chinese male fantasy of footbinding. Secondly, in
mission schools for girls, unbound feet were an essential entrance requirement
for female pupils. Mission schoolteachers encouraged their female pupils to
walk about freely, like Western girls. Thirdly, the introduction of sports such
as gymnastics, running, and swimming into the school curriculum made
girls strong and fit for learning. A woman missionary, Margaret Moninger, observed the lack of athletic competition in Chinese schooling. She therefore hoped to impart physical training in mission schools (Anon, "The T’ien" 557; Li and Zhang 843, 845, 857; Little, Intimate China 145, 148; Conradson 769; Lodwick 46-94). The aforementioned missionary strategies, to a large extent helped reform some aspects of Chinese culture. Whether such reform was, as Hong has described, a "cultural conquest" (Hong, Footbinding 6), or as Denise Gimpel has perceived, "undermining traditional Chinese values in favor of the saving Christian creed" (Gimpel 322), missionaries, with the Western perceptions of individuality, equality, and humanitarianism, found the Chinese custom of footbinding intolerable. The "crushed bones" theory of footbinding was more a harsh condemnation than a genuine appreciation of the custom.

**Chinese Women's Perspective: the Women's Art Theory of Footbinding**

When we look closely at women's perspectives on footbinding, a different picture emerges. Both Dorothy Ko and Wang Ping focus their research on footbinding as seen through the eyes of elite Chinese women themselves. Ko and Wang have consulted a rich array of interesting sources, fairly unacknowledged in previous works on the subject, including women's literary writings, vernacular plays, household almanacs, and items involved in shoe-making. According to Ko, most previous works on footbinding - which were largely based on missionary literature - adopted a "modern nationalist bias" (Ko, "The Body" 9). Such bias was a form of "excessive sympathy" (Ko, "Footbinding" 426) with women in China's past. Do we really know what and how elite Chinese women thought of footbinding? Why did the custom continue for a thousand years? Do missionary accounts alone sufficiently explain such perpetuity? Ko has alerted us to the pitfalls in missionary accounts which we should avoid. The term "women's art" refers to elite Chinese women's literary skills (texts, poems, songs) and manual skills (embroidery, sewing, weaving). Monographs by Ko and Wang may represent the women's art theory of footbinding typical of the view of elite Chinese women at the time.

Women's literary and manual skills were the necessary skills mothers imparted to their daughters at an early age. It has been noted that spinsterhood was highly unthinkable in Confucian China. Under Confucian cultural norms, it was the duty of a mother to groom her daughter for marriage.
Marriage in turn was a family-to-family affair, to be arranged by the parents of both parties. In Confucian thinking, a healthy and upright family was the key to a civilized and peaceful country (Ko, *Every Step...* 51-52). A mother who instructed her daughter well brought glory and prestige to the family. As Andrew Ng and Kaz Ross have noted, the quality of embroidered shoes was almost synonymous with bound feet. A pair of exemplary feet was a source of great pride (Ng 652; Ross 313). Therefore, a mother might not view binding her daughter's feet as being cruel, but rather as a form of parental affection towards her. The bound feet were for her prospective sons-in-law because elite Chinese men normally longed for lotus feet with elaborately embroidered shoes. One traditional saying was: "Bound-foot women became brides; the not-bound became bondservants" (qtd. in Gates 135). On the day of the daughter's footbinding, the mother presented her with a pair of elegant lotus shoes and began to teach her all the required skills to be a good wife, beginning with sewing and shoe-making.

According to Ko, lotus shoe-making was "women's work," one of the four womanly virtues in Confucian China. Women's work could mean sewing garments, spinning thread, embroidering, and making shoes. Shoe-making was an essential feminine quality in traditional China. In Confucian society, a woman was regarded highly if she worked diligently with her hands. The lotus shoes she made and the size of the feet she bound reflected her moral and economic worth. It is argued, for example, that bound feet represented a woman's being. Her artistic talent was reflected in the elegant embroidery; her personal cleanliness was reflected in the smell; and her obedience was reflected in the size of her feet. These traits were particularly valuable for her future family (Ko, *Every Step...* 77-79; Cassel 40). A mother in Confucian China expected to teach her daughter all the feminine skills prior to marriage. Some basic techniques of making lotus shoes included: (1) cutting the paper pattern; (2) selecting the fabric upper; (3) designing the embroidery; (4) embroidering; (5) affixing the lining; (6) making the sole and heel; (7) stitching the upper to the bottom; and (8) finishing. Embroidery, in Ko's words, was "both decorative art and 'high' art." The art of embroidery was among the manual skills that mothers transmitted to their daughters. It was also a sign of female culture passed from one generation to the next. For illiterate women, in particular, their lotus shoes spoke for them, unlike literate Chinese who could express their dreams and hopes by writing. The style, colour, size, and shape of lotus shoes all told stories about the way bound-foot women experienced their decorated bodies, their aspirations, and their local culture (Ko, *Every Step...* 81, 85-87, 97).
Some gentry women in China did learn how to read and write. This was particularly the case in the Jiangnan region, where women created their own distinctive local culture. These literate women at times used lotus feet and lotus shoes in their poetic exchanges within the female network of their class. Mothers from gentry families normally taught their daughters poems, songs, and classical texts. Tu Yaose and Shen Tiansun from the Jiangnan region, for example, used items involved in the manufacture of embroidered shoes as topics of their poems. Shen wrote to Tu: "[…] With scissors and ruler you defeat me, working at your embroidery; Every night in front of the lamp, I borrow your shoe patterns" (qtd. in Wang 148). Ye Xiaoluan, a renowned female poet from the gentry class, wrote about lotus feet: "They say lotus blossom as she moves her feet. But invisible underneath her skirt. Her jade toes tiny and slender. Imprinting her fragrant name where she stops […]" (qtd. in Wang 150) In Hunan Province of China, a secret script created, used, and known only by and among women for centuries is nü shu (female writing). Nü shu came directly out of Hunan women’s embroidery rooms, where they gathered regularly with their sworn sisters to chat, weave, and make lotus shoes. Having had their feet bound, they spent their spare time in embroidery rooms, discussing design patterns and colours of their embroidery and shoes, as well as singing and writing their stories in nü shu. Therefore, the embroidery rooms in Hunan created a space for social gatherings, lifelong bonding, and supportive networking (Wang 161-164, 172). Footbinding, from the perspective of the “women’s art” theory, was indeed conducive to the development of women’s artistic talents. It was a source of pride, beauty, and local women’s culture.

Bound-foot Women in Present-day China

In addition to its being a source of pride, beauty, and culture, there are other reasons contributing to the perpetuity of the custom hitherto, though it is not as common and widespread as it once was. Despite the fact that footbinding was outlawed in 1911, the practice was “still common” in the 1930s Yunnan Province of China. It was reported, for example, that the anti-footbinding propaganda launched by the Yunnan local government was far from satisfactory. This may possibly explain why there were some five to six hundred bound-foot women living in that province in the 1980s. As Lisa See has put it: “Imagine how you might feel if tomorrow the Government announced that you would no longer be allowed to follow a particular
tradition” (Yang, “Nanjing” 122, 126; Ko, Cinderella’s Sisters 224; See 12) For women in the bound-foot era, a pair of natural feet was a sign of great shame. They never exposed them to strangers, particularly men. More practically, the feet that were bound for years could not possibly be returned to their original shape and size; the bones were crushed; the skin was lifeless. Women would have great difficulty in walking about on so-called “liberated feet,” feet that had been bound and released intermittently (Yang, “Nanjing” 126; Yang, “Jindai” 99-100). How to obtain a new pair of suitable shoes and accessories for her “liberated feet” might be a cause of anxiety to a woman. “Liberated feet” were therefore often rebound even during the course of the anti-footbinding movement.

Howard Levy, in preparing for his classic on Chinese footbinding, interviewed eleven elderly women in Taiwan during the early 1960s. There are some notable features of the feedback of Levy’s informants. Firstly, six women reported that they still had their feet bound to conform to the aesthetic and cultural standards of a bygone era. These women could have faced tremendous physical and psychological pressure arising from their “liberated feet” during the climax of the anti-footbinding movement. Therefore, they bound, unbound, or rebound their feet intermittently. For example, one of these six women indicated that she unbound her feet during the Japanese occupation in Taiwan but later rebound them again (Levy 239, 244-245). Unbinding her feet certainly helped her to escape; rebinding them was possibly in order to overcome physical and psychological predicaments resulting from foot release. Secondly, one question for all the informants was whether it was painful to walk with bound feet; and most of them responded to the question in the positive (Levy 239-241). The question may have stemmed from a Westerner’s feeling of sympathy towards bound-foot women. Levy is a Westerner and a modernist. Does that mean the question reflects a “modernist bias” or an “excessive sympathy” towards bound-foot women, similar to the missionary perspective? Thirdly, all the informants were asked inadequately about the cultural and artistic aspects of their handiwork (Levy 241-244), a key factor leading to the perpetuity of the custom and the development of local women’s culture. Dorothy Ko has remedied this shortcoming by offering a revisionist perspective in her recently published monograph.

Ko has recalled the memories of some women survivors in Liu Yi village in Yunnan Province, though it is not the only village in which the surviving examples live. Liu Yi is known as “Footbinding Village,” the last bastion of the practice in China. The village is part of Tonghai county, where the powerful Mu family with its Han soldiers settled during the Ming dynasty. The soldiers defeated the indigenous Yi, Bai, Tai, and Hani peoples and established six villages near Lake Jilu. In the mid-1980s, statistics showed that there were
five to six hundred women with bound feet. One decade later, the figure had dropped from six hundred to approximately four hundred. Taking advantage of the surviving examples in Liuyi, author Yang Yang, whose mother has bound feet, interviewed hundreds of women with golden lotuses in that village. He published a book on footbinding in 2001 that was drawn partly from women survivors’ memories. In the years afterwards, there were about eighty women with golden lotuses in Liuyi village. Jane MacArtney has recently pointed out that the last surviving examples of bound-foot women in another village (Tuanhsan) in China numbered just six in 2008 (Ko, Cinderella’s Sisters 224; Yang, Xioaio 37; Yang, “Zuihou” 46; MacArtney 41). The statistics in both Liuyi and Tuanhsan demonstrate that the practice of footbinding is dying out gradually in China.

According to information given by the survivors, they could perform a series of tasks with their bound feet which would not usually have been thought possible. The first was defending themselves against enemies’ attacks. The traditional image of women with tiny feet gives the impression that they were so timid that they would have been unable to escape in case of an attack by enemies. One of Yang’s informants, Ms. Zhang, who practiced martial art, sat with her feet on the flat side of a big knife when bandits arrived in an attempt to kidnap people, ready to pick the knife up with her feet and throw it at them. She eventually scared off the bandits (Yang, Xioaio 148-149).

Another case was when the Nationalists ruled China and parents feared the Nationalist soldiers would rape their daughters. As Mrs. Wang recalled: “When the Nationalist soldiers came to Shennu, young girls [with bound feet] fled into the mountains, cut their hair and covered their faces with dirt.” (qtd. in Yardley A. 4) The second task was participating in mass mobilized campaigns during the Maoist rule along with men. Tradition informs us that a woman is supposed to be more physically unfit for heavy industry than a man. However, in the late 1950s, another Ms. Zhang, who had bound feet, was mobilized to take part in the iron-and-steel refining activities during the Great Leap Forward (Yang, Xioaio 181). The third task was doing farm work. Again, tradition suggests that only women with natural feet could work in the fields, a task that demanded heavy labour. Another informant of Yang’s, Ms. Pu, was required to work in the fields during the Great Leap Forward in spite of the inconvenience of her tiny feet. She could manage it even though her farm work was not as satisfactory as that of women with natural feet (Yang, Xioaio 178-180). The fourth task was doing physical exercises. As discussed in this article earlier, Hong Fan, drew attention to the need to unbind women’s feet in order for them to participate in sports.
Nevertheless, bound-foot women in Liuyi village gained fame by forming a disco-dancing troupe, which toured the region during the peak holiday season. In 1984, they organized a sports association, gaining an instant reputation when their croquet team beat a team of women with natural feet. Their sports and dances became a media sensation (Anon. "Painful Memories" 1; Ko, Cinderella’s Sisters 224).

Conclusion

Perhaps partly because of such media sensations, the footbinding issue has aroused scholarly attention in the past twenty years. An examination of some previous research on the issue demonstrates that scholars hold mainly three lines of argument, which are presented in this article as three theories of footbinding. The first line of argument approaches the footbinding issue from the aesthetic and sexual point of view - the sexual appeal theory of footbinding represented by elite Chinese men. Typical of this line is Howard Levy, who in the 1960s did some translations and interviews and perceived the issue from the perspective of elite Chinese men. For elite Chinese men, the bound feet and lotus shoes of elite women were sexually appealing and visually pleasing. A woman’s foot was so tiny and the binding was so painful that they aroused a man’s sense of love and pity. A widespread male fantasy of the time suggested that bound feet would lead to a better sex act. Therefore, “lotus lovers” yearned for “lotus feet” during marriage negotiations, and mothers of elite families helped enforce the practice.

The second line of argument approaches the footbinding issue from the physiological and medical point of view - the “crushed bones” theory of footbinding represented by Westerners, mostly missionaries. Typical of this line is Hong Fan, who in the 1990s consulted a wealth of missionary literature and linked the footbinding issue with sports. To missionaries and other Westerners, footbinding was painful, unnatural, uncivilized, and even barbarous. Their views on footbinding were devastatingly negative. They found that the Confucian gender model conflicted with the Christian model in many aspects. Therefore, they attempted to eradicate the custom of footbinding by, for example, forming several natural-feet societies, urging mission schoolgirls to unbind their feet, and introducing sports into the school curriculum.

The third line of argument approaches the footbinding issue from the artistic point of view - the women’s art theory of footbinding represented by elite Chinese women. Typical of this line are Dorothy Ko and Wang Ping
who, in the 2000s, accessed a range of previously unacknowledged materials. Both believed that the footbinding issue should be seen through the eyes of Chinese women themselves. For elite Chinese women, footbinding was a source of pride, beauty and culture. Binding their feet and making their own lotus shoes fostered the development of women's literary and manual skills. Positively speaking, footbinding was conducive to the advancement of women's artistic talents.

Historically speaking, footbinding became a national concern in the nineteenth century, due to a number of factors. The first factor was the opening of China to the West. The presence of Westerners in China brought some Western ideas and cultures to Chinese soil. As the cultures of the two civilizations were so different, clashes between China and the West were inevitable, leading to wars. The second factor was the constant defeat of China in the wars, thus leading to great humiliation of the country. This phenomenon did not exist in the pre-19th century, when Chinese society was relatively stable and the country was relatively peaceful. The third factor was the rise of a group of reform-minded Chinese and concerned Western missionaries, who were aware of the weaknesses of China. It was this kind of "national consciousness" that emerged in the nineteenth century, but not previously. The three factors altogether helped transform the footbinding issue from a societal and cultural concern into a national one. For reform-minded Chinese and concerned missionaries, China needed to be strengthened, and the prohibition of footbinding was imperative at the time. Their writings on anti-footbinding were not "bias" against the custom, but a necessity in order to awaken the Chinese and prepare them for change.

Legally speaking, did "barbaric consciousness" about Chinese footbinding exist in the pre-19th century? In other words, did the Chinese themselves view crushing the bones of the feet as barbaric? Indeed, the most cruel and heavy punishment, ling chi (the thousand cuts), existed in medieval China. The term ling chi meant a slow, gradual death and the maximum number of cuts on a human body was approximately 3,500. It was first recorded in the Five Dynasties (907-960) period. The Ming dynasty had the most cases of recorded ling chi executions. The punishment was legally banned in 1905 (Wang 137-140). Crushing the bones of the feet in private was seemingly insignificant compared to cutting a human body a thousand times in public. If footbinding was considered barbarous, then how about ling chi? Perhaps the Chinese of the pre-19th century did not have any consciousness of what constituted barbarity. When the Western idea of humanitarianism came to nineteenth-century China, the Qing ruling class was aware of the barbarity
of ling chi and pressed for legal reforms. On a par with ling chi, footbinding was subjected legally to abolition in 1911.

Economically speaking, footbinding may have stimulated the development of the shoe-making industry. The traditional image of bound-foot women was that they were economically unproductive because they stayed at home to fulfill their wifely or motherly obligations. People usually take it for granted that household chores yield no monetary returns; thus, they disregard the contributions of bound-foot women to the Chinese economy. While preparing for a new pair of lotus shoes, a woman would need to acquire a certain set of shoe-making accessories such as scissors, needles, small irons, and metal parts, as well as cotton, silk, and thread (Ko, *Every Step...* 82-83). Demand for scissors, needles, and small irons created a market for iron-and-steel industries. Similarly, demand for cotton, silk, and thread fostered the production of textiles. Bound-foot women actually advanced the development of shoe-making, textile, and iron-and-steel industries, in an indirect way.

Did Chinese and Western industrialists leave any historical evidence behind relating to lotus shoe-making industries? Research into this area is extremely scanty. Secondly, did elite Chinese or Westerners form a culture of lotus-shoe collection as a pastime? Would this pastime promote the development of museums in China and abroad? This may be another area for future investigation. Thirdly, were there any differences between Chinese and Western women in the quest for beauty as seen in footbinding and waistbinding? Were both fashions equally perceived as barbarous in the eyes of peoples from another culture? There is much room for future research concerning a comparison of footbinding and waistbinding. By and large, Chinese footbinding is still a fascinating research topic for cultural historians and scholars alike.

NOTES:

1 Many articles concerning the anti-footbinding movement in China are reprinted in the two thick volumes edited by Li Youning and Zhang Yufa. They are invaluable primary texts in Chinese on the issue of footbinding. See Li's and Zhang's edited volumes.

2 A publisher in Shanghai has produced a concise version of Yao Lingxi's four volumes on footbinding, which was presented as a collection of selected essays compiled by Yao. See the bibliography of this article.
The term "Western Powers" refers to the most powerful and influential Western countries in the nineteenth century.

For more information about Elizabeth Cady Stanton, other feminists, and the dress reform movement, see articles by Gayle Fischer, Lisa Strange, and Kathleen Torrens.

Anti-footbinders, whose ideas were anti-traditional, often portrayed bound-foot women as "economically unproductive." This was to call an end to the custom of footbinding. See article by Julie Broadwin.

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