
Well-written and expertly researched, this book presents us with what the title promises: a revisionist history of footbinding, which is a big promise. Dorothy Ko delivers on it, or at least thoroughly throws down the gauntlet. Footbinding is a topic that has long awaited re-evaluation. As Ko shows, it is something that the modern era had to abandon, but abandoning it was not an easy and natural process. Both symbolically and materially, it dominated emotions, thoughts, and bodies for many decades after the first moves to abolish it. Its last survivors still live proudly today. Ko’s revision is to say that we need to move beyond regarding footbinding as just an ugly and perverse remnant of the feudal past. Under that monolith, the mutilated foot was revolting to the eye; it violated the aesthetic of the modern human body; it was one of the most concrete signs of male domination; and so forth.

In reviewing the history of the anti-footbinding movement of the late Qing, Ko emphasizes the mundane reality of footbinding prior to its decline and fall. It was a “customary practice” (p. 4). Women managed the binding of their daughters’ feet. The daughter’s marriage prospects depended on her having well-bound feet. As something women were in charge of, bound feet were a sign of women’s control over women’s bodies. The shoes women made for bound feet were notable in variety, style, and artistic input, the fashions of shoe design changing over time, up to the very end of the custom. The way feet were bound had a history as well in that the sought-after shape changed over time and was never entirely uniform at any one time. What footbinding meant on a socially-symbolic level, and why people did it and thought it necessary, yield no easy explanations. What we used to think, that is, that footbinding was a result of the man’s erotic fascination with tiny feet, is just one of many ways of explaining it. Ko repeatedly emphasizes that no “blanket statement” can be made about the practice (p. 132).

Ko begins the book with an account of the first prohibition movements in the late Qing, which invented new terms such as *tianzu* 天足 (natural feet), coined by a foreigner in 1875, and *fangzu* 放足 (letting feet out). Liberating women’s feet, however, was a gigantic notion that tended to ignore the “concerns and rhythms” of actual women (p. 68), especially when anti-footbinding campaigns such as that of the warlord Yan Xishan 謀錫山 (1883-1960) entered villages and houses to force women to unbind their feet. Once binding was far along it was not only impossible to return feet to their original state, but in fact painful to remove the bindings. Liberating bound feet became an item of the Nationalist agenda, in which the liberated woman was at the center of the promotion of social equality. But the methods for eradicating the custom included criminalization, while misogyny entered the picture as prohibitionists characterized bound-footed women as social parasites and femmes fatales.
Although an always increasing number of women ceased binding their daughters’ feet, hundreds of thousands of bound-footed women continued their lives in an era in which what used to be an unquestioned feature of their appearance was now antiquated if not anathema.

One of the most interesting facets of the book is the history of footbinding, which combines legend, scholarly writing, and archaeology. The sixteenth century saw a surge in literati interest, as scholars traced the origins of the custom (all discourse on footbinding prior to the nineteenth century was centered on origins), and detailed desirable features of feet and shoes, including precise measurements. Approval was by no means universal, many men all along expressing distaste and outright condemnation. Although a common modern perception has been that the intention behind footbinding was to immobilize women and thereby enforce sexual segregation, philological discussions in general drew no link between footbinding and the guarding of female chastity. The sixteenth century also saw the method of binding undergo a major change in which the four toes, not including the big toe, were now folded under. Footwear and excavations from the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) periods indicate that the goal in earlier times was to make the foot narrower and the toes pointed, but that the arch was not broken as it would be in the later phase. Originally “a flat sole was the norm” (p. 191). The cleavage formed by the broken arch was the site of erotic fascination, hence the beginning of the so-called “cult of the golden lotus.” Along with the “three-inch golden lotus” came the advent of high heels, the fashion that readers have long noted in the novel Jin Ping Mei (The plum in the golden vase). Although the old way of leaving the sole flat never completely disappeared, the new way became fashionable first among the elite, then downward along the social ladder. Ko makes the interesting point that “footbinding as a ladder of success for women thus mirrored the fate of the civil service exam, a similar vehicle for men” (p. 195).

Although it will never be possible to know the per cent of bound-footed women at a given time before the abolition movement, it appears that at some time during the eighteenth century footbinding went from being a “high urban fashion” to something that was “expected of the average woman” (p. 132). Ko notes that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it became a “craze especially in the north” (p. 139), that is, Hebei, Shanxi, Shandong, and Shaanxi. According to one eighteenth-nineteenth century commentator, unbound feet were more common in the south, especially Jiangnan where feet were supposedly the biggest because mothers “had too much sympathy for their daughters’ pain” (p. 139). He also wrote that “not all daughters from elite families have bound feet” in provinces such as “Guangdong, Guangxi, Hunan, Hubei, Yunnan, and Guizhou” (p. 139).

As to the beginning of the custom, the historical and textual evidence cited for centuries mainly referred to a favorite Consort Pan of a duke of the Southern Qi 齊 (479-502), the consort Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719-756) of the Tang emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (reigned 712-56), or the dancer Yaoniang 燦娘 in the court of