

# Perspectives on Foot-binding

Dorothy Ko  
Barnard College

*Editors' Note:* Dorothy Ko was one of the keynote speakers at the 2007 ASIANetwork Conference in Lisle, Illinois. The following article is Professor Ko's edited version of that keynote address. We thank Professor Ko for translating her engaging visual presentation into written form for publication.

## Introduction:

In the field of Chinese studies, three approaches to the study of women's history were developed from the 1970s to the present: political history, social history, and cultural history. Each was a reaction to or a revision of the one before, and each has merits and shortcomings. I'd like to use the case study of foot-binding to illustrate the insights that these approaches can yield.<sup>1</sup>

Foot-binding is the *most* incendiary and the *least* controversial subject in modern Chinese history. I know of no other subject on which scholars from the Communist, Nationalist, and Western feminist perspectives are in complete agreement. What ideological and historical forces were powerful enough to produce such a consensus?

## Foot-binding: A Political History Approach

The answer has much to do with China's political predicament in the colonial age of the nineteenth century. The overwhelming consensus on foot-binding as national shame was borne of China's search for wealth and power. Reformer Kang Youwei, in his passionate 1898 memorial to the Guangxu emperor urging him to ban foot-binding, explained that: "Foreigners have long taken photographs of [our vices] and laughed at us, calling us barbaric. And the most laughable matter that brings us the worse humiliation is foot-binding; your servant is deeply shamed by this/ashamed of it." The denouncement of

foot-binding was rooted in the sense of embarrassment that individual *male* reformers felt deep in their bones as China

came under the gaze of the white men. This emotional or shame factor dictates that the history of foot-binding has only been written as the history of denouncement—as the history of *anti*-foot-binding—and that the latter has been essential to the imagination of the modern Chinese nation.

Political history has taught us a great deal about the anti-foot-binding movement. The first anti-foot-binding association was formed by Rev. MacGowan of the London Missionary Society, in 1875 in Xiamen (Amoy). But most if not all Chinese scholars have argued that indigenous male reformers played an equally important role, especially in the late 1890s to 1910s, in spreading the anti-foot-binding movement to provincial capitals and eventually to the interior. By the establishment of the first republic in 1912, the custom was no longer fashionable in the coastal cities and the modernized sector of the population.

Interior provinces such as Shanxi and Yunnan, however, experienced a different cycle of development that was out of sync with the modern half of China. In Shanxi, warlord Yan Xishan was the first to use the power of the state to try to stamp out foot-binding, sending feet-inspectors to the villages and imposing fines on the patriarchs of the offending families. The move-

---

*The denouncement of foot-binding was rooted in the sense of embarrassment that individual male reformers felt deep in their bones as China came under the gaze of the white men.*

---

ment was hijacked by the conservative local gentry, who staffed the local anti-foot-binding societies and lined their own pockets with the fines.

When the campaign fizzled out in the 1920s, many women switched to a less extreme form of binding, but the number of



Dorothy Ko during her 2007 Conference keynote address. (Photo by Bob Eng)

women with small feet remained as high as the pre-campaign level.

The last case of (anti)foot-binding was reported in Yunnan, in 1957, when the People's Liberation Army set up road blocks to force young girls to unwrap their binding cloth. The death of foot-binding has been the most cherished goal of the modern Chinese nation; it represents the triumph of the Enlightenment project and its values of science and rationality over "superstition" and "feudal practices," values still shared by the majority of scholars today.

This consensus in sentiments and historiography has produced a powerful icon—women-as-victim—that has served a positive and productive function. Without her we could not have imagined what modern China was to be like. Chinese modernity was defined as the rejection of the woman with bound feet and the feudal Tradition she personifies. I'm not saying that this negation is wrong—it is a historical

(continued on next page)

fact—nor am I trying to defend foot-binding. But foot-binding is dead, and so are most of the women who once had their feet bound. It is time to revisit the issue by examining the historical experiences that this nationalistic history has obscured. The methods of social and cultural history articulate a new set of questions that places

between the boudoir and the fields, as well as between “domestic” and “public” spaces.

Small shoemaking tools and sewing implements suggest that shoemaking was an extension of needlework. A third group of objects concerns the implements needed for binding feet; some are the same sewing

embroidered satin upper belonged to a woman from a more refined household than shoes made from homespun cotton cloth.

Instead, we need to ask: What material components of a pair of shoes were produced within the women’s chambers, and what were brought from the market? The more former elements, the higher would be the value according to Confucian ideals and the rules of today’s antique market. I began to classify the shoes, looking for patterns in the composition of their various components—uppers, soles, heels—and methods of construction. I was startled to discover that most shoes extant today are in fact generic—put together according to some formula—and **modular**—made of interchangeable parts. Art historian Lothar Ledderose has reminded us that this kind of modular manufacturing, the most fundamental grammar of Chinese culture, allows for mass production with creativity, resulting in “ten thousand things” of one generic mode with endless variations.<sup>2</sup>

We can distinguish between two kinds of shoe components: those that can be, at least in theory, produced in the household by the women; and those that had to be procured from the market or itinerant vendors, which include things made of wood (heels, soles) or metal (nails). Shoe collectors and antique dealers have often contended that lotus shoes are **unadulterated** expressions of the artistic genius of boudoir women. The generic quality of these components suggests that this romantic image

is misleading. A large proportion of extant shoes were produced at least partially in workshops by professional needle workers, many of whom were male. Often the housewife bought pre-decorated uppers, cut them out to size, sewed on the lining, and attached the soles. We have a fascinating description of this process in the late Ming novel, *Jinpingmei*, suggesting that the time-saving practice of purchasing pre-embroidered uppers was in operation as early as the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup>

To return to the issue of hierarchy in women’s work, we have arrived at a paradox—the cruder is a pair of shoes in fabric and stitching, the more likely it is made by the women themselves in the boudoir. The more refined in silk fabric and

---

*[F]oot-binding is dead, and so are most of the women who once had their feet bound. It is time to revisit the issue by examining the historical experiences that this nationalistic history has obscured. The methods of social and cultural history articulate a new set of questions that places the women with bound feet at the center of their worlds and as the subject of history.*

---

the women with bound feet at the center of their worlds and as the subject of history.

### Foot-binding: A Social-cum-Cultural History Approach

A rich archive for the history of foot-binding consists of the shoes that women bought, made, gave away as gifts, wore, repaired, and were buried with. The use of material artifacts is productive because the written archive, produced by and large by male and female reformers who agitated for the end of foot-binding, is silent on the issue of the women’s own views on the matter.

Historians generally are trained to read and analyze texts, not visual and material data. Fortunately, cultural and visual anthropologists, art historians, and above all archaeologists, have developed a methodology of analyzing objects. Two analytic approaches—**close-looking** and **classification**—can yield rich insights on three themes: **women’s labor and material production, communal rituals, and regional cultures.**

The first group of objects that deserves close-looking is the considerable number of tiny shoes for outdoor wear—wait, isn’t foot-binding supposed to keep women cloistered at home? Outdoor shoes give clues to women’s mobility and work life. Some are made of lacquered leather or oiled cloth to render them water resistant. Others are made of silk and more refined stitches, with stacked cotton soles suggesting indoor use. Whatever the fabric, the idea of stepping into nested shoes in order to step out is clear: women with bound feet were not immobilized. They moved back and forth in transitional space

implements—scissors, needle and thread—which women kept in a rattan basket or in a drawer in a cabinet placed on the *kang*-platform bed. The most essential item is the binding cloth. It was always woven on a special small loom by the women at home and was seldom machine-woven or purchased. In the Hexi area of Yunnan, competition from imported factory-woven cloth forced the workshops to cease production of the famous Hexi homespun cloth (*Hexi tubu*) in the 1930s-40s. The binding cloth was the last piece of textile taken off the home loom.

Foot-binding is thus intimately related to women’s handiwork; *it is* women’s handiwork. The Confucian virtue of “womanly work” (*nü gong*) teaches that all women had to work with their hands. Regardless of class, a woman’s moral worth was actualized by manual labor. But in practice, women from different classes, regions, and social stations performed vastly different kinds of handwork.

### The Social Economy of Shoe-Making

Susan Mann has proposed a hierarchy of women’s work—embroidery vs. spinning; silk vs. cotton—to call attention to the important fact that the form and worth of female labor are correlated to social hierarchy. The scheme is useful in describing the gradation on the level of households, but does not help in classifying the objects themselves. It would be hasty, for example, to infer that shoes with

---

*Foot-binding is thus intimately related to women’s handiwork; it is women’s handiwork.*

---



Dorothy Ko binding the foot of audience member, Kyle Westgard. (Photo by Irv Epstein)

stitches, the more likely it is to be workshop-produced. Anthropologist Laurel Bossen, who studied the correlation between the spread of foot-binding and the spread of imported yarns and fabric in Yunnan, has hypothesized that foot-binding spread to peasant households at a time when imported yarns became cheap enough to encourage home-weaving—in other words, when it became advantageous to keep daughters at home. Foot-binding stopped in those areas, in turn, when imported cloth became cheap enough to drive home-weaving out of competition.<sup>4</sup>

### Communal Ritual and Regional Culture

Besides the economy of shoe-making, a second theme that material culture opens up is communal rituals. There is a group of miniature shoes (no more than 7-8 cm) all of which are clearly too small to be worn. Some have suggested that they are doll shoes, but the dolls would have to be quite large. The enigma was solved when I visited a shrine dedicated to the Water Mother (*shuimu*) in Taiyuan, Shanxi. There, at the feet of the Water Mother was a tiny pair of votive (or prayer) shoes. In documentary sources, there are references to mothers making an offering of shoes to the Bodhisattva Guanyin before the binding

of their daughters' feet was to start. My accidental ethnographic "discovery" suggests that an offering of shoes was also believed to be efficacious for those praying for sons. In addition, women also presented handmade shoes to their in-laws at weddings and to sisters or friends as birthday presents.

Not only were shoes important intermediaries in the making of women's culture and networks, they also figured in the making of regional culture, our third theme. The classification of the shoes on the basis of stylistic and design elements reveals striking regional differences absent in other parts of the female (or male) attire.<sup>5</sup>

### Different Perspectives, Different Conclusions

In sum, in contrast to the image of woman-as-victim perpetuated by political history and the May Fourth Movement, a social and cultural history perspective suggests that first, women were productive members of their households (in fact, if Laurel Bossen is right, *foot-binding* was a privilege for those daughters when it became economically advantageous for them to work with their *hands*.) Second, women had access to physical and ritualistic spaces outside the domestic sphere; they were not cloistered beings leading wasted lives. Third, the shoes they made and wore helped to articulate local cultures and regional differences at a time of nascent nationalism.

The approaches of political and cultural history have led to these different conclusions in part because the former uses textual evidences exclusively whereas the latter enlarges the archive to include non-verbal sources. There are also deeper differences in philosophical assumptions about the nature of time and historical knowledge. Political history presupposes a linear, progressive timeline; the history of women in modern China has been construed as a purposeful march toward liberation—it was essentially a history of the winners. Social and cultural history presupposes a different concept of time by breaking up the linear timeline into

moments; each moment constitutes its own reality. Furthermore, people who are *not* progressive, who are left behind, are also worthy of study.

But the most fundamental difference between the political (and social) history approach and cultural history concerns the place of the scholar-researcher and the nature of knowledge she produces. Scholarship represents an exercise of power. Cultural history requires the scholar to place herself in the middle of her own discourse; she cannot stand back in a detached, objective manner. She is challenged to constantly assess and re-assess the values and assumptions she brings to her analysis—to be self-reflexive—instead of standing in a fixed place. For this reason, it is difficult to define what "cultural history" is, just as it is difficult to articulate the essential traits of "feminism." For the same reason, feminist



Different elements and styles of shoe construction for bound feet. (Photo by Irv Epstein)

scholarship remains a powerful intellectual tool with which to change the world.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> In the interest of space I consider social-cum-cultural history as one approach in this talk.
- <sup>2</sup> Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton, 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> Chapter 29, *The Plum in the Golden Vase, Or, Chin Ping Mei*. Vol. 2: The Rivals, tr. David T. Roy (Princeton, 2001).
- <sup>4</sup> Laurel Bossen, *Chinese Women and Rural Development: Sixty Years of Change in Lu Village*, Yunnan (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).
- <sup>5</sup> See my *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes for Bound Feet* (California, 2001).