

Footbinding, Sexuality and Transnational Feminism

Zhang Yuan

3204235

June, 2009

Contents

Introduction.....	1
I Footbinding in General.....	2
II Footbinding under Western and Eastern Eyes.....	12
(1) Western Interpretations of Footbinding	12
(2) Eastern Interpretations of Footbinding	16
III Footbinding and Sexuality.....	20
IV Can bound-feet women speak?.....	25
V Transnational Feminism.....	37
VI Conclusion.....	46
References and Bibliography	49

Introduction

Footbinding was a Chinese custom where women bound their feet with cloth to make them smaller. As a special culture, it has spread its influence deeply into various fields in Chinese social life (both female and male) during the past centuries, such as music, dance, painting, literature, costume, and so on. For instance, footbinding “had the regrettable consequence that it put a stop to the great old Chinese art of dancing” (Van Gulik, 1961) and thereby perhaps pushed females after the Song period to improve their skill in singing and playing musical instruments. Western authors find it easy to write about Chinese women’s hair, clothes, and makeup, but footbinding is a difficult subject for them. Over the centuries, Western authors keep struggling to find adequate ways to explain this phenomenon. (Ebrey, 1999) For most of them, footbinding is an extreme inhumanity for women. In the feminist academic field, footbinding, together with veils of Islamic women and Sati¹ in some Hindu communities, are regarded as typical patriarchy oppression in Eastern societies. Within Rich’s (1980) framework foot-binding is used twice as examples of two characteristics of male power: to control women or rob them of their children, and to confine them physically and prevent their movement.

In this thesis, I trace back the origin and evolution of footbinding, as well as the history of research and representation of footbinding. By comparing the Western and Eastern scholarship, I find that although the methodology and keystone in their studies are quite different, they both noticed the close relationship between footbinding and sexuality. Therefore I discuss to what sense that footbinding plays the crucial role in sexuality in ancient China. By raising an ignored example, an oral document of a bound-feet woman talking about her experiences of footbinding and sexual life, I rethink the process of footbinding studies from the feminist perspective.

¹ Satī was a funeral practice among some Hindu communities. The widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit word for the widow would be sati. The early colonial British transcribed it suttee. This practice is now very rare and outlawed in modern India. (See Spivak, 1993)

I Footbinding in General

Why were bound feet called a ‘golden lotus’? It is well known that the lotus is bigger than many flowers. To answer this question, our exploration starts from the origin of footbinding. Although Footbinding is a very common phenomenon and important issue in ancient China, its history, especially its origin, is difficult to retrospect. Until now, a great deal of folk tales and academic schools claim that footbinding originated from different times in Chinese history, for instance, Xia Dynasty (2070 B.C. – 1600B.C.), Shang Dynasty (1600 B.C. – 1046 B.C.), Warring States Period (472 BC—221 BC), Sui Dynasty (A.D. 581 – A.D. 618), Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618 – A.D. 907), and Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period (A.D. 907 – A.D. 960) (Gao 2007). The phenomenon that there are so many different opinions on footbinding’s origination has attracted significant coverage from some researchers. Van Gulik (1961) believes that it is because Ming writers (A.D. 1368 – A.D. 1644) gave forced explanations to old literary references to women’s feet, shoes and stockings, and thereby tried to prove that footbinding existed already in very early periods. He notes that these theories virtually have no foundation and must be disregarded. To this point, I agree with Van Gulik, for the reason that in Ming, footbinding arrived at its peak and was well appreciated by male literators. So it is possible that whereas previous Song (A.D. 960 – A.D. 1279) and Yuan (A.D. 1271 – A.D. 1368) writers took the correct historical view, during the Ming Dynasty the tendency to ascribe all existing customs to high antiquity influenced Ming opinion on the history of footbinding.

Basically, there are two most influential viewpoints: Some researchers consider that a Lord (around A.D.479 – A.D. 502) cut golden paper into lotus’ shape, spread it on the floor, and asked one of his concubines, Pan, to walk on the golden lotus with naked feet, so-called “every stride made a lotus” (See *The history of Nan Dynasty*, quoted by Gao, 2007).

Other scholars (Van Gulik, 1961; Gao, 1999; Xie and Zhang December, 2003; Ng 2004) believe that this custom started around A.D. 937 – A.D. 978 and it was Li Yu and Yao Niang who introduced the fashion. During the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period, there was a kingdom in South China, with the king named Li Yu, who was also a great and dissolute poet and artist in Chinese art history. According to historical materials, he had once constructed for one of his favorite concubines, Yaoniang, a large model of lotus flower of over six feet high, and made her compress her feet with white silk bands “so that her pointed tips looked like the points of a moon sickle, and then had her execute his favorite dance on that lotus flower”. (Van Gulik, 1961, p.216) Thus, Yaoniang, as explaining the origin of the custom, is represented in the act of winding the bands around her feet, just as shown in Figure 1. Yaoniang’s bound feet excited such a general admiration, that not only other women in the palace, but also all other ladies in China started to imitate her. Since then, ‘Lotus’ had been a metaphor of women’s feet.

Besides, some scholars argue that there are deeper cultural elements here behind the relationship between bound feet and lotus -- Buddhism statuary influences. Gao (2007) thinks that the body of Chinese traditional culture consists of the interactions among Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Because of the impact of Buddhism, the lotus has been regarded as the symbol of nobleness and chastity by Chinese people. Lotus grows in mud, but it does not accumulate any dust on its flowers and leaves. It is similar to women’s feet walking on the floor that are clean and beautiful. In Buddhism statuaries, Buddha² usually stands on the lotus with naked feet. Therefore, Chinese call women’s feet ‘Lotus’ to describe their goodliness.

² “Originally Buddha are males. But in China, many of them are regarded as females.” (Gao, 2007, p.52)



Figure 1

Yao Niang putting on the bands of her bound feet

(Van Gulik, 1961)



Figure 2

Buddhism statuary: Guan Yin Buddha standing on a lotus with naked feet³

It should be emphasized here that at the very beginning, the aim of footbinding was simply for better dancing performance. In ancient China, when women danced, they usually wore a sort of special shoes with sharp points. As an artist, what Li Yu did was just to replace dancing shoes with silk bands to make women's feet neater for dancing. (Gao, 1999)

The poem 'Pu Sa Man' written by the famous poet Su Shi in the Song Dynasty is seen as the first poem that eulogized bound feet. Therefore, it is well agreed that since the Song Dynasty, footbinding has become a common fashion in

³ See "33 Avatars of Guan Yin Buddha". On line: the website of Personal Library.
http://www.360doc.com/content/070626/14/9737_580360.html
Latest Check: 6th, October, 2009.

China. However, at this time, footbinding is just for *strait* feet rather than *smaller* feet. (Gao, 2007)

In the article ‘One More Comment on Women’s Footbinding in Feudal China’, Gao (1999) argues that the development of footbinding in Chinese female culture experienced three stages. Stage 1 (A.D. 930s – A.D. 1060s): Footbinding, as a sort of dancing costume, only prevailed in limited groups, such as the dancers in the palace or whorehouses. Unlike making feet hurt and smaller, women just tightened their feet so that they could dance without dancing shoes. Stage 2 (A.D.1060s – A.D.1260s): Footbinding was separated from dancing and became a decoration in daily life, which prevailed in the riches as an icon of upper classes. During this period, women began to seek much tighter and smaller feet, but they did not really damage their natural structure and they could choose if they wanted to bind their feet up or not. Stage 3 (A.D.1260s –A.D.19th century): footbinding was developed to its peak and spread from upper classes to the whole society. Women’s feet were bound to be excessively small and pointed. The aesthetic meaning in footbinding had weakened. It was not only a fashion and custom any more, but a crucial criterion for females, a very symbol of Chinese femininity. (Van Gulik, 1961) In contemporary academic fields of Gender Studies like female history and Sinology, the definition of ‘footbinding’ usually indicates footbinding in the third stage of its development.

Since the third stage, ‘Golden Lotus’ had no longer been the metaphor of women’s feet in poem and literature, but become an honor for the outstanding bound feet, which are no larger than three inches. ‘Golden’ in this term means ‘best’ or ‘perfect’. The bound feet that are three to four inches are called ‘Silver Lotus’. The bound feet bigger than four inches are called ‘Iron Lotus’ and would receive ridicule and despises. Unfortunately, golden lotus was just an ideal situation and it was very difficult to be realized. According to a document from the Qing Dynasty, one or two women in ten would die from footbinding, and seven to eight in ten would be injured. (see Gao, 2007, p.68)

Through the centuries there were numbers of unsuccessful attempts to stop the practice of footbinding. At the end of Qing Dynasty, namely the middle of 19th century, some Western countries as well as Japan invaded China. The empire fell into a half-feudal and half-colonized society. The conjuncture made Chinese realize that footbinding is a vulgar custom compared with other contemporary developed countries around the world. The government of the Qing Dynasty, Republic of China, and the People's Republic of China all issued decrees and ordinances to forbid footbinding and to loose bound feet. Finally, under the official laws and the non-official 'natural feet movement', around the 1950's, footbinding as a traditional custom disappeared all around China on the whole. At present, elderly women with bound feet can still be seen occasionally, but never younger women or girls. So it can be expected that no bound feet will remain within a few years.



Figure 3

The process of binding feet

(Yang, 2004)

By their mothers' (and/or their grandmothers') help and force, women started to bind their feet since they were 3 to 7 years old, when their bones were still soft and

unshaped. The feet are “compressed by winding round them tight bands, so that the big toe is bent back, and the four others folded against the sole of the foot. The pressure is gradually increased, till the dorsum pedis is bent in a sharp angle. [...] In this way the bulk of the foot was transferred to the ankle, and the small part left below could be encased into a diminutive shoe”. (Van Gulik, 1961, p.219-220)



Figure 4

A bound foot

(Yang, 2004)

In practice, there were different ways of binding feet and many styles of bound feet. For a perfect ‘golden lotus’, ‘small’ is just one of the seven strict standards, others including slim, sharp, curve, fragrant, soft and shapely. Thus there are also diverse styles of bound-feet shoes. Bound-feet shoes are also called ‘lotus

shoes' or 'bow shoes'. Its styles include high-heeled shoes, low-heeled shoes, warped-point shoes, boots and so on. Besides bound feet, bound-foot shoes also play an important role in the footbinding culture.



Figure 5

Various styles of lotus shoes

(Yang, 2004)

Footbinding is far from easy work. It usually takes several years and is one of the most crucial tasks for a female both during her girlhood and motherhood. The first lesson of footbinding for a little girl is to fear natural feet. Even before binding feet, the girls are taught by their parents some folk songs or children's songs, which jeer at

women with natural feet. By doing so, the adults transfer such an image to the little girls: the bound feet are 'natural' and beautiful, while the big feet (natural feet) are ugly and 'unnatural'. Thus, ever since their childhood, females are trained to fear, dislike and disdain natural feet. They regard natural feet women as monsters and dare not to get close to them. (Yang, 2004)

There is a period before binding feet called 'Chu Long' or 'Shi Chan', meaning "trying to bind". It lasts anywhere from several months to several years, in which mothers provide their daughters small and sharp pointy shoes to prevent their feet from growing naturally, thereby making them easier to bind later. The day that a girl starts to bind her feet is a big day. There are different customs, even a special rite to celebrate it according to different areas and times in China. Sometimes the girl is asked to bite the toe of pig's feet. Then her mother puts pig's feet on a plate, walks around their home by holding the plate on her head, and prays to the goddess of bound feet for providing her daughter a pair of golden lotus. (Yang, 2004) In other cases, mothers kill a hen and pour its warm blood on the girl's feet. (Feng, 2005; Gao, 2007) For the girls, this is the rite that bids farewell to their childhood and steps them into girlhood. The next period of binding feet would last several years. It is said that the girls have to endure extreme pain for about three years to shape their feet. After that they still need to rebind their feet once every three days to keep them shaped and small. (Ai-Lian, 1941)

Footbinding came from males' aesthetic demands upon females. Then its aims changed greatly. An essential question is why did this custom develop in the non-humanistic direction and continue for almost one thousand years? Some researchers think the developing progress of footbinding was synchronous with the lifting of male status and the falling of female status in Chinese history. (Gao, 1999) Others believe that it is synchronous with the progress that Chinese masculinity had gradually weakened. Hence, men had to make women more effeminate to keep them

under control.

Nevertheless, nearly all scholars agree that footbinding is the extreme result of patriarchal oppression. In terms of Foucault, footbinding is a 'discipline', which is a way of controlling the movement and operations of the body in a constant way. It is a type of power that coerces the body by regulating and dividing up its movement, and the space and time in which it moves. The disciplines are the methods by which this control became possible. (Foucault, 1999, quoted by (Deng, 2006)) In this sense, footbinding is such a discipline that was constituted and controlled by males but performed by females.



Figure 6

For this old bound-feet woman, the whole world is her house
(Yang, 2004)

II Footbinding under Western and Eastern Eyes

(1) Western Interpretations of Footbinding

As a special and unique phenomenon in oriental culture, footbinding has attracted Western scholars for a long time. Patrica Ebrey (Ebrey, 1999) regards the period from 1300 till 1890⁴ as the early years of Western studies on footbinding. In her article ‘Gender And Sinology: Shifting Western Interpretations Of Footbinding, 1300--1890’, she argues that the early studies about footbinding are often based on ‘travelers’ accounts’, for the reason that the features of male-female relations which are taken for granted in one country may seem noteworthy from elsewhere. She considers:

Western authors found it natural and easy to write about Chinese women’s hair, clothes, and makeup, but footbinding was a difficult subject. Over the centuries, Western authors kept struggling to find adequate ways to present and explain footbinding, in the process shifting the discourse rather markedly. Although new ways of interpreting footbinding were periodically introduced, old ones were rarely discarded altogether. [...] many authors would offer a variety of explanations of the origins or fictions of footbinding. Some offered no judgment, leaving to their readers the task of evaluating the different arguments. Nevertheless, a rough chronology can be discerned among the six most dominant ways of framing footbinding: fashion, seclusion, perversity, deformity, child abuse, and cultural immobility. The first of these contributions is mildly negative, the next mildly positive, and the subsequent ones all distinctly negative. Shifting Western interpretations of footbinding are largely shifts in the weight given to each of these possible ways of thinking about footbinding. (p.11)

⁴ By 1890, an active anti-footbinding movement had gained momentum in China and was rapidly changing both the practice of footbinding and the ways both Chinese and Westerners discussed the practice. (Ebrey, 1999)



Figure 7

Chinese Bound-feet woman, painted by William Alexander (1761-1816)

(Gao, 2007)

According to Ebrey's studies, two points should be noted here. First, contrary to male elites in ancient China who held positive attitudes on footbinding and enjoyed erotic passion from it, early Western scholars paid a negative attitude to this issue in general. Secondly, in Ebrey's term, Westerners were 'framing' footbinding, an oriental phenomenon, instead of 'discussing', 'researching' or 'studying' this issue. She points out that in the past, the great mass of Western writing on China was "outrageous, ignorant or ethnocentric". Ebrey stresses "Western authors, while creating interest in the West in the topic of Chinese women, were framing the topic certain ways and focusing attention on some issues to the exclusion or neglect of others". Even today, "the vocabulary and concepts established by these earlier generations are still in use." (p.2) To Ebrey, even for those so-called "most authoritative" Western researchers, the knowledge they spread on Chinese women by looking closely at footbinding is insufficient and/or unilateral. However, with this knowledge, they were seen as authorities, gained respect in their times, and had considerable impact on opinions among educated readers.

Ebrey provided the case of Jan- Baptiste Du Halde (1736) as an example. He was the author of a four-volume compendium of information on all aspects of Chinese history, culture and social customs:

Chinese women, Du Halde asserted, not only undergo the inconvenience of footbinding readily, but “they increase it, and endeavor to make their feet as little as possible, thinking it an extraordinary charm, and always affecting to show them as they walk.” The idea that Chinese women showed off their feet is another common error, undoubtedly a result of men like Du Halde drawing inferences from the way they understood fashion to work in the West. (p.12)

After the WWII, discussions about Chinese footbinding have been re-kindled in the West and entered into academia. Western interpretations of footbinding have moved towards the erotic dimension (Ebrey, 1999). This erotic dimension that Ebrey regards as a way very different from what some Western scholars had intended, is exactly the direction that Chinese researchers traditionally followed. Based on classical Chinese literature, Van Gulik published his famous book on Sinology -- *Sexual Life in Ancient China* in 1961. In this book, he described footbinding systematically and discussed it within the erotic context in ancient China. Soon, in 1966, Howard Levy wrote a monograph on footbinding, *The History of a Curious Erotic Custom*. His book drew upon translations from Yao Ling Xi's edited work, *Cai Fei Lu*, and remains the principal English-language source of historical materials on footbinding. (Blake 1994 spring) I will discuss Yao's work in detail in Chapter IV. Levy reaffirms the traditional notion that “footbinding was a feminine mystique designed to please men”. (quote from Blake, 1994). “To Levy, the erotic dimension of footbinding did not make it perverse, but fascinating, an example of human inventiveness in the arts of pleasure, and Levy wrote about the pleasure men took in bound feet with an undertone of envy worthy of Marco Polo” (quote from Ebrey, 1999, p.28). Later contributions in this dimension are more plentiful.

Compared with contemporary Chinese researchers who have focused more on the history of footbinding, Western scholars do their study more freely. On one side, they have developed this issue a step further by raising more and different research questions; on the other side, they broaden the methods, and apply various approaches in their studies. For instance, to answer the question: “What are consequences of footbinding among older women?” Cummings’ (1997) team built mathematical models and adopted the approach of empiricism to do their research. They collected data about bodies and health care directly from Beijing’s central districts. Additionally, Fred Black (1994) raises questions from a philosophical perspective and offers a historical analysis: What is the relationship between footbinding and Neo-Confucianism in China?

Accompanied by the second wave feminist movement, feminism has been involved in footbinding studies since the 1970s. The scholars either study footbinding issues from the perspective of feminist theory and methodology, e.g. Gate (Gates 2008) and Black (Blake, 1994), or they take footbinding as an example in their arguments, e.g. Rich (1980). Ebrey (1999) considers “there have been revisionist attempts to take a more positive view of footbinding, to see what it might have offered women in terms of gaining mastery over bodies or pride in their beauty. (p.28)”

However, although there are some positive attitudes, from my studies the dominant opinions on footbinding are still negative. In the feminist academic field, footbinding, together with veils of Islamic women and Sati in some Hindu communities, are regarded as typical patriarchy oppression in Eastern societies. In her influential essay ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, Rich (1980) summarizes eight characteristics of male power. Within this framework, footbinding is used twice as examples of two characteristics: to control women or rob them of their children, and to confine them physically and prevent their movement. Told by Agnes Smedley and Marjorie Topley, Rich thinks that some Chinese women who refused

footbinding also resisted compulsory heterosexual marriage as well as ‘male tyranny’ (p.651-652). Her understanding of footbinding represents the opinions of many feminist scholars.

(2) Eastern Interpretations of Footbinding

In the context of the ancient Chinese, where nearly all scholars or elites were males, it can be said that most Chinese scholars appreciated bound-feet women. They always chose to marry a woman with bound feet to prove that their families were in the upper classes⁵.

For most of male elites then, it is not appropriate to talk about footbinding in the public sphere or in their articles, for the reason that footbinding is seen as a practice in private life. Women’s bound feet, being regarded as the third sexual organ besides female’s breast and vulvae, play an essential role in sexuality. The popular imagination insists that footbinding is primarily motivated by eroticism. In other words, footbinding is thought to be maintained by its erotic attraction for Chinese men. That is one of the reasons why footbinding is documented and described mostly in the erotic arts (Gates, 2008). According to some ancient erotic literature, after long isolation and compression, women’s bound feet become soft and tender just like baby feet, and very sensitive. Literators wrote many articles to describe their pleasure when men played ‘Lotus’ during sexual life. They also argued that females with bound feet were able to gain more passion by the games of ‘Playing Lotus’ as well, and achieved orgasm easier and sooner. Therefore, they claim that the females also wanted footbinding and enjoyed their bound feet.

⁵ Sometimes, women from lower classes did not bind their feet, because as labors they needed to move freely.

Moreover, some intellectuals seek to theorize on footbinding. For instance, in the Qing Dynasty, a well-known intellectual named Fang Xu, who called himself ‘doctor of lotus’, wrote an article about footbinding, with the title of “Qualifying Aromatic Lotus” (Xiang-Lian-Pin-Zao). In this article, he created a series of theories about bound feet, and categorized various small feet within five patterns, nine designs and eighteen sorts. Therefore, if it is true that footbinding is a procedure to create a sexual idol to fulfill men’s erotic interests, then it can be said that most male scholars in the past are the creators of this procedure.

Nevertheless, the Chinese anti-footbinding movement that started from the end of the 19th century put things upside down. Under the historical context of internal disorder and foreign invasion, it took up the view of footbinding as imposed deformity and a national crisis. It was the (male) “leading intellectuals proposed the elimination of women’s bound feet and other changes in women’s dress and elevated the proposal to the level of strengthening the country and protecting the quality of Chinese race” (Deng, 2006, p.48). Indeed, because of the rooted patriarchal culture, the anti-footbinding movement is a “men’s movement” rather than a women’s movement. The males played the roles of sponsors, machinators and leaders in this movement. Figure 8 is a photograph of the ‘Natural Feet Society’, which was the leading organization of the anti-footbinding movement. From this picture we can see that all the main members of this group, including the chairman and sub-chairman, are males. Chinese women (as a group), as the followers, were at object status, which was enlightened and liberated, because they had not become an independent social power yet (Liu, 2005). Just as the women of a thousand years ago were compelled to bind their feet up, during this period women were compelled again to loose their feet, to break their self-identity based on footbinding. Women of the generation that abandoned footbinding perceived the process as one of liberation. This view remains dominant in China (Ebrey, 1999).



Figure 8

A photograph of the main members in “Natural Feet Society”

(Gao, 2007)

Only quite recently have academic scholars started to seriously study the issue of footbinding in China and the East. Scholars from different disciplines, especially history and costume studies, have made plenty of contributions to this common topic. (Gao, 1999; Guo, 2001; Pan, 2003; Xie and Zhang, 2003; Ng, 2004; Liu, 2005; Deng, 2006; Yuan, 2006)

Indeed, the contemporary Chinese scholar’s research on the issue of footbinding still rests on the first step: to describe some phenomena and to briefly discuss the reasons and the influences of these phenomena. The deeper and broader research on this issue is still lacking. Firstly, Chinese research on footbinding is simplistic. In general, they seek to revivify the ‘truth’ of footbinding in history by studying the material written in the past. As a result, the greatest contribution of their research is to describe the facts about footbinding, to track back the whole story of footbinding, including its origination, development and the anti-footbinding movement. Examples include ‘Rethinking the Origination of Footbinding of Han

Women' (Pan 2003); 'Anti-Footbinding Movement of Wuxu Period from the Culture of Man's Right' (Liu, 2005), as well as 'An Exploration on Footbinding and Anti-Footbinding of Chinese Women' (Xie and Zhang, 2003).

Additionally, the methods that Chinese scholars adopt are relatively simplistic as well. They have focused more on so-called the 'first hand materials', like the historical documentary. Most of these scholars' knowledge resulted from text study. In spite of the fact that literature study is a crucial method, all the texts they read, in this case, were written by male elites in ancient China. Although their opinions may partly represent the truth, they cannot replace the voice of women with bound feet. Just like the argument in Yuan Ke's (Yuan, 2006) article 'Sins of and Punishment on Perfect Feminine Figure':

Since the last decades, the mainstream evaluation on footbinding has been monotonous: to challenge and censure it from the perspective of patriarchal oppression. However, few people realize that since the very beginning women's experiences of their body were represented by the male's imagination and the male's discourse. Although accompanying by the anti-footbinding movement, more and more female's experiences were published, most descriptions of these experiences are the continuity of the previous interpretations from the males, or the substitutes from the contemporary well-educated women. Yet most bound-feet women have been forced to lose their right of speaking, because they degenerated into the social vulnerable group rapidly. Besides, being revalued by the modern standards, their images have been slid down rapidly from 'beauty' to 'ugly', and have generally became the group that are despised by others. (p.45)

III Footbinding and Sexuality

Generally speaking, both the Western and the Eastern researchers (the Chinese male researchers especially) have realized the close relationships between footbinding and sexuality. Women's bound feet have played such a special role in Chinese sexual life. In most academic literatures, a society-wide erotic fascination with bound feet is the received position. The popular imagination holds that footbinding was primarily motivated by eroticism. In other words, the reason why footbinding was maintained for such a long time is its erotic attraction for Chinese men. Ever since the Song Dynasty, excessively pointed and small feet have formed an indispensable attribute of a beautiful woman, and there gradually developed around them a special foot- and shoe-lore (Van Gulik, 1961). Indeed, not only the bound feet, but also their garnitures, the socks and the bound-feet shoes, play various important roles within different stages and aspects of sexuality (Gao, 2007).

Basing his understanding of footbinding on Chinese erotic painting and literature, Van Gulik (1961) finds:

Women's feet being the center of her sex-appeal, a man's touching those became the traditional preliminary to sexual intercourse. Nearly every Ming and later erotic novel describes the first advances in the same, uniform manner. When the prospective lover has succeeded in arranging a tête-à-tête with his lady, he never makes any attempt at physical contact for gauging her feelings, he is not even supposed to touch her sleeve—although there is no objection to suggestive speech. If he finds she reacts favorably to his verbal advances, he will let one of his chopsticks or a handkerchief drop to the floor, and when stooping to retrieve it, he will touch the lady's feet. This is the final test. If she does not get angry, the suit has been gained, and he can immediately proceed without restraint to all physical contact, clasping her in his arms, kissing her etc. While a man's touching a woman's breast or buttock may be explained and

accepted as an accidental mistake, no apology will be accepted for his touching her feet, and such a mistake invariably gives rise to the most serious complications. (p.218)



Figure 9

A Young man holding one of his lover's bound feet. This is a final test.
(Li, 2008)

Van Gulik claims that the problem of the relationship between footbinding and sexuality can only be solved by approaching it from the psycho-analytical perspective, perhaps along the lines of shoe-fetishism. Thus he leaves this task to experts in sexology. In her recent essay 'Bound Feet: How sexy were they', Hill Gates (2008) interprets the erotic significance of footbinding that "Chinese men were foot fetishists, people for whom bound feet and shoes had taken on agency" (p.60). Furthermore, she indicates fetishism within the context of sexuality in details:

An object is fetishized when it is imagined to act as if it had personhood [...]

In the realm of sexuality, fetishism implies a sexual focus on a body part—breast, hair, earlobes—or even inanimate objects—under-ware, rubber clothing, leather—associated with bodies. These parts or things are perceived by the fetishist as attracting through its own the agency with which human-like interaction is possible. The fetishist achieves sexual satisfaction not from the whole integral person but from a biologically irrelevant part or object to which history has given value.” (p.60-61)

I agree with Gates that “some Chinese men surely fetishized bound feet, which is to say that they took bound feet (or bound-foot shoes) as objects sufficiently arousing as to serve as a complete partner” (2008, p.61). However, I argue that besides the factor of fetishism, footbinding played at least two more crucial roles within sexual life in ancient China.

We know that the two central facts of footbinding are “that it caused prolonged agony and that at least half of the little girls forced to endure it had to be beaten into submission by their elders” (Gates, 2008, p.58) When little girls refused the torture and asked for the cause, they always got two main reasons: 1) it was for beauty and thus a better marriage; 2) it was not only for beauty, more importantly, bound feet made and reminded women not to jazz around outside. (Xie and Zhang, 2003; Liu, 2005; Deng, 2006) My analysis in this thesis is according to these two reasons, from public and private aspects respectively.

First, along with the development of footbinding, one of its essential and public aims is to separate the two genders and keep women within the private sphere. Actually, before the emergence of footbinding, there were many rules in the society to isolate the two genders. For example, even the men and women who were in one family could not use the same container to eat or drink, could not hang their clothes together in the same shelf, and could not touch the other’s hand. (Pan, 2003)

Footbinding made this isolation superlative, in that it directly brought radical difficulties to female's daily life and actions. It is said that in some cases the feet were bound too small to walk. "Customs with little cost easily endure – different haircuts for boys and girls, distinctive hats for ethnic groups – but footbinding carried huge costs" (Gates, 2008, p.69). It is clear that the value underlying these huge costs was more essential for the patriarchal society at that time, that is in order to ensure the blood relationship and hence confirm the inheritor, virtue and chastity had been regarded more and more importantly for females.

In his book, *The Reeling Souls: Visiting the Last Bound-feet Tribe in China*, Yang Yang (2004) documented a true story about the whole process in which a little girl had her feet bound by her mother. In this story, the mother and the daughter have never been more than one thousand meters from their home. Because of their bound feet, they were captive at home, their 'castle' for their whole lives. The mother always stayed at home, weaving cloth. The daughter was even locked in the back yard for more than nine months. All of her imagination about the world outside came from her father and brother's description. Her mother told her: "You can not go outside the village. There are a lot of bad men, who will beat you, kill you, rape you." On the day that her bound feet were done, her mother said: "You will definitely find a good husband, because your feet are the smallest, the most beautiful feet in the whole village." "As your mother, I own your everything related to eating, wearing, and sleeping. Now I have provided you a pair of bound feet, so I don't own you any more. I am very happy." (p.68) Indeed, footbinding was a terrific system to make the parents and husband much more confident of a woman's chastity before and after marriage. To this point, footbinding is just one of the procedures of constructing women as baby-making machines.

Secondly, from the private aspect, there was a 'public secret' held by Chinese males, at least in the upper classes, especially in the male intellectuals. Of course, this secret could not appear as an answer to the little girls from their parents. Maybe the

girls had never known it when they endured the pain from footbinding, until they became wives. This public secret is that footbinding is a procedure to artificially construct another sexual organ for a female besides her breasts and vulva. Ai Lian Sheng (1936) argues in his essay ‘The Principles of Pleasure within Footbinding’: “Women’s footbinding is quite cruel. It is well known that the reason for footbinding is because men philandered with women during the hierarchal period. However, people do not know that women themselves, after footbinding, would increase uncountable pleasure on their passion” (quote from Gao, 2007, p.114). Literators wrote a great deal of articles to describe their pleasure while playing ‘Lotus’ before making love. They also argued that females with bound feet can get more passion by the games of ‘Playing Lotus’ as well, and can achieve orgasm easier and sooner. Hence, the bound feet came to be considered as the most intimate part of their body and the most powerful centre of sex-appeal. (Van Gulik, 1961) To this point, footbinding is a procedure to create a sexual idol to fulfill men’s erotic interests.



Figure 10
An ancient erotic painting
(Li, 2008)

In fact, within Chinese ancient erotic representations, as showed in Figure 10, an ancient erotic painting, one can see “depict women stark naked with the vulva shown in all details”, but “never see or read about a picture that showed a woman’s uncovered bound feet. This part of female body is strictly taboo.” (Van Gulik, 1961) Because of this taboo, it is very possible that a man had never seen the women’s bound feet during his life: as a lover, he can only see women’s feet with bands or shoes, rather than their naked feet; as a father, he can not directly take part in the footbinding process of his daughter.

IV Can bound-feet women speak?

Taking ‘sati’, the widow sacrifice as an example, in which the Hindu widow ascends the pyre of her dead husband and immolates herself upon it, Spivak (1993) indicates: When the white generally understand the abolition of this rite by the British as a case of ‘White men saving brown women from brown men’, “the Indian nativist argue against a parody of the nostalgia for the lost origins: ‘the women actually wanted to die.’ ” (p.93) She asked, “Can subaltern speak?” “What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern?” (p.90) I would ask, “Can bound-feet women speak?” “Can bound-feet women be heard?” “Whether we listen to them?” “How do we recognize and deal with their voices?”

It seems that Chinese bound-feet women have themselves never spoken out on their experiences and opinions of footbinding. During the past centuries, when the male elites adopted the most magnificent flourish to praise women’s bound feet and to describe the passion of both males and females, women’s responses to these descriptions and opinions can hardly be found in the literature or in historical

documents. Women's voices and viewpoints were substituted by the male literators in the past, then by Chinese and Western feminists as well as the male elites.

Nevertheless, I did discover some materials in which bound-feet women describe their own experiences and feelings about their feet and their private lives. Although most of these documents are dictated by women and written by men, they are valuable first-hand materials for footbinding studies. According to these materials, some women show positive attitudes on footbinding, while others hold negative opinions. Unfortunately, the scholars generally do not fully utilize the knowledge and experiences offered by the females. On one hand, they pay more attention to the materials provided by the males. On the other hand, they only choose the negative women's voices as their examples to challenge footbinding, but ignored the existence of women's positive opinions.

The case of *Cai Fei Lu* provides a perfect example to this point. Published from 1920s to 1940s, *Cai Fei Lu* is the first series of Chinese books that studies footbinding systematically. This series edited by Yao Ling Xi includes 6 books. Every book consists of several articles about footbinding from various aspects written by different authors. Most of the authors are males, while a few females can also be found. This work contains a wide range of writing and pictures on footbinding that Yao collected and published during the period of the anti-footbinding movement, when the custom rapidly declined. *Cai Fei Lu*, as one of the most important resource for Footbinding studies, has been adopted and cited not only by numerous Chinese researchers and authors, such as Gao (2007) and Yang (2004). Howard Levy's book that remains the principal English-language source of historical materials on footbinding draws on translations from *Cai Fei Lu* as well. (Blake 1994 spring)

In the recent contemporary contribution to footbinding studies, *The history of*

Footbinding, the author Gao Hong Xing (2007) takes *Cai Fei Lu* as a crucial recourse of his studies. As I accounted, within Gao's 245-page book, there are 442 footnotes, 349 of which, almost eighty percent, are from *Cai Fei Lu*. In other words, Gao's book *The history of Footbinding* is founded on the series of *Cai Fei Lu*.

For the 349 footnotes in Gao's book from *Cai Fei Lu*, only 8 of them originated from women's works. Four of them are from the same article 'The Survey of Footbinding' (p.56, p.59, p.77). One is from 'The Styles of Bound-feet Band and Its Functions' (p.57). One is from 'The Recipe for Rebinding'. Another one is from 'The Changing of Bound-feet Shoes in the Modern History' (p.96). These seven recourses are all about the objective knowledge on footbinding, yet there is no concern for women's attitudes. The last of the eight is from the essay 'The Tear-stained History of Bound Feet' (p.60). This essay is written by a female author, Ai Qin, who holds mild negative attitude on the pain of footbinding. Yet here her essay is cited in Gao's book for describing a step of binding the toes. Besides the material from *Cai Fei Lu*, there are only two more footnotes in the whole book coming from women's work or dictation, neither of which have any relation with women's experiences. That is to say, none of the materials is cited to show women's *attitude* on bound feet from women's perspectives.

However, there is an important source from the women's perspective that is in the same book in the series as the essay 'The Survey of Footbinding', which was cited by Gao for four times in his book. It is the essay titled 'Re-binding Fragrant Lotus', which is an oral account by a lady Miao Lian (1941), and recorded by the editor. In this article, Miao Lian narrated her experiences before and after getting married, when she loosed and re-bound her feet for her husband. Especially, she described the pleasure that she got from her feet during sexuality and daily life.

The story started from two months before Miao Lian's wedding festival.

Although during that time the anti-footbinding movement had spread in China, she kept her beautiful 'golden lotus' that made her and her mother very proud among other relatives and friends. But her future husband, one of her cousins who just finished his medicine study in Europe and America, asked her mother if she is still bound-feet. It made the mother and daughter worried that influenced by Western ideas, her husband would dislike her bound feet. Under her mother's insistence, she finally decided to follow her husband's will:

The 16th, October: Last night, I was not able to sleep for a long time, because I was hesitated if I should loose my feet. Finally, concerning about my love, I decided to follow my husband's will: I would not bind my feet any more from this morning. Thinking that ten-year endeavor would be destroyed in a moment, I felt very sad and cried. Today, with silk stockings and big shoes, I can hardly move. I asked my maid to help me, but still feel very sore on my feet. Recently, people all claim to loose bound feet. Now I know that it is just to ask trouble and to befool of others. (p.174)

Her attempt to loose her feet was full of suffering. Her mother and sister Qin took care of her, and made many new shoes in middle sizes for her. Thus her feet were getting bigger little by little. She changed shoes frequently to fit her growing feet. Before her wedding, her feet were still not as large as natural ones, but had been big enough for wearing Western style high-heeled shoes. However, she still felt unhappy and faced troubles during her new marriage.

The 1st, November: Tomorrow is my wedding ceremony. I know mother loves me very much. Every clothes and decoration she prepared for me is so good and fashionable. But I still feel unhappy because it is her who forced me to loosen my feet and wear high heel shoes.

The 2nd, November: I got up very early. After making up, mother helped me to

decorate my feet. I was not interested in it, for I wore high-heeled shoes instead of bound-feet bands and shoes. Around one o'clock afternoon, I was picked up to my husband's home. Then we had the wedding ceremony. The guests all talked about my feet. Some of them said I followed the new fashion to loosen my feet. Yet more people regretted that my golden lotus have become so big. The ceremony was boring. I cannot have a rest until night. At mid-night, my husband looked at my feet and asked, have you already loosened your feet? I nodded. He asked, when? I answered that since we engaged. I thought he must be very happy. He was not, but looked very surprised.

The 3rd, November: I felt very tired because of wearing high-heeled shoes for a whole day yesterday. This morning, I changed to a pair of low-heeled shoes, which are about 5 inches long, very slim. My husband saw them and said that they are much better than the high-heeled shoes. I was very glad to know that he does not like those (high-heeled) shoes. We went to bed very early at night. It was the first time for us to have sex. I felt quite painful, although he was really gentle to me. Just one moment when he held my feet in hands, was comfortable for me. What a pity! It was just a moment.

The next day, according to Chinese custom, she had to visit her family. She felt quite itchy on her feet. Sister Qin told her it was because of chilblain. Bound feet would not get this disease. But if bound feet were loosened, they would catch chilblain during winter and spring every year. In some of the worst cases, the feet would even canker. Later she asked for a solution from her husband who used to study medicine abroad. He confirmed what sister Qin said and answered that nothing would heal her if she loosened her bound feet all along: "It is not difficult for you to find out the solution, since you have known exactly the origin of this disease."(p.179)

At this night, they had sex again. She still had pain much more than pleasure:

The happiest time is the moment that he held my feet. Perhaps, the reason why I feel painful is that my vagina is too dry and astringent. Being grasped by my husband, I felt it became wet and very comfortable. It's a pity that he loosed his hands immediately. It seems he dislike my feet. (p.178-179)

Miao Lian thought over and over her husband's words and actions yesterday. She decided that her husband implied she rebind her feet. So she decided to try to bind her feet again when her husband was not at home and see what would happen to him. Unsurprisingly her husband was very excited and satisfied with her bound feet. He played the lotus at once, pinching, smelling and fondling them for a long time. He told her that to ask her mother about her feet was not because he disliked bound feet. As her cousin, he had admired her golden lotus for many years, but he dared not tell her. When he studied abroad, observed the westerners' naked feet, he believed even more deeply that Chinese women's bound feet are the best around the world.

The 3rd, November: On the morning, Yun left home for an appointment with his friends. I stayed at home. I thought over his words last night. He should have spurned at women with bound feet. But according to our talk yesterday, it seemed that he was encouraging me to rebind. Since I do like bound feet, why don't I just try to bind my feet up, then see what will happen to him? So I sat on the bed, and bound my feet with my original stuff. [...] Almost the middle night, Yun returned home. His vision focused on my feet immediately, and he said: Did you rebind your feet today? I smiled but didn't answer him. Yun said: "Are you kidding me? Your feet would not be so beautiful if you did not bind them. Since you did not acknowledge, I check by myself!" Then he caught my feet, took off my shoes, and played my feet recklessly. "Aren't these binding cloth?" he asked, and held my feet for a long time, smelling and stroking them. I said angrily: "You hate bound feet, don't you? Then how come you do these to me?" He said: "Why do you say so?" Thereby I told him why and how I

loosened my feet. He said: “What a pity! What a pity! A big mistake was made because of a misunderstanding!” So he told me the reason under this misunderstanding: When I was eleven or twelve years old, my bound feet almost shaped. My feet were so wonderful that they are outstanding within all cousins. As my cousin, Yun came to visit my family with his mother frequently. Since then, he has appreciated my small feet. Although for fear of my blame, he dared not touch them, he stared at my bound feet just like a thief. During past several years, Yun studied abroad. By seeing clumsy women with nature feet, he even more believes that Chinese women with bound feet are graceful and beautiful. But because nowadays more and more Chinese people have admired and mimicked Europe-style natural feet, he worried that I also follow this fashion. So he went to ask my mother as soon as he returned to China whether I loosened my feet. He was wild with joy when he heard that I still kept my bound feet. But he has never known that his requirement caused my mother to force me to loosen my feet. Yun also told me that he was very disappointed when he saw my big feet during our wedding ceremony. For the first time we had sex, he could not help to hold my feet. He supposed that it would stimulates his sexual desire, but catching my big feet, he felt so upset that his penis became soft at once. When he was trying to persuade me to rebind my feet, he found that I have done so by myself. He encouraged me that although my feet are bigger than before, as long as I make efforts, they would turn back to golden lotus within two to three months. I asked him: “Today, footbinding is being forbidden. There are many cases that the husband who used to study in the West divorced with his wife because of her bound feet. The reason is that being influenced by the western cultures, these people appreciate natural feet. Why are you so special that you still keep the tradition?” He said: “Women in Europe and America prefer small feet as well. They also seek to make their feet smaller, but they don’t know the good method of binding feet with cloth. In general, it is universal that women’s feet should be small. For getting smaller feet, there is no other ingenious method or

shortcut, but footbinding. I have seen all kinds of feet around the world. Now I can say that there is no other styles that are better than Chinese bound feet. Thereby, my fondness of golden lotus in the past was because I followed custom and tradition blindly. But now, it comes from my own experiences and knowledge.” (p.179-181)

Since then, the misunderstanding was clear. Their sexual life became much better and longer, in which both of the couple enjoyed the passion and pleasure:

(On the next day.) Before getting sleep, I bound my feet very tight. I was mettlesome, even it caused slight sore. Laying on the bed, I felt terribly itchy in the center but I could not scratch. My husband came to hug me. I was not shy any more like previous nights, but happy to respond to him. He looked quite excited and acquitted himself more powerful. He put my feet on his shoulders. With this pose, we had a perfect sex this time. He told me that it was impossible for him to hold this pose if I was a nature-feet woman, because the legs were too heavy. (p.183)

At the end, Miao Lian’s feet were rebound to three inches again. During this period of rebinding, she also gained another sort of pleasure from her husband in daily life, who took care of her, encouraged her, soothed her pain, caressed her feet and helped her make a pair of costly and perfect lotus shoes. It made all her sisters admire her and follow her to rebind their feet as well.

In this case, the progress of loosening and rebinding feet is described in detail. Especially the part of sexual life as well as the female’s feelings about it is recorded bravely. Miao Lian shows strong positive attitude on bound feet and negative attitude on loosening feet, from her own experiences on footbinding and sexual live. Although loosening and re-binding her feet were both done for pleasing her husband, she gained

pleasure and satisfaction at the physical and psychological level during her sexual life and daily life.

By comparing the sexual life before and after Miao Lian re-bound her feet, it is shown that footbinding could help her to sooth her tense mood. Her description that “I felt terribly itchy in the center” is not very clear. It can be understood that she felt itchy in the center of her feet. But if it is her feet, why does she note, “can not scratch”? Hence, it can also be understood that she felt itchy in her vagina, or in her heart, so she can not scratch. In other words, after rebinding her feet, she had sexual desire herself. Hence she was not shy and strained any more, but warmly responded her husband. Thus, it may also verify the pervious important detail, which proves her pleasure at the physical level: The reason why Miao Lian felt painful during sex is that her vagina is too dry and astringent, but being grasped by her husband, she felt it became wet and very comfortable.

As Henry Havelock Ellis ([1933], 2006) indicates in his work *Psychology of Sex*, humanity’s sexual excitement is a requirement that the males and females contact each other psychologically and physically, which includes two stages: accumulating passion and relieving passion. He argues that the sense of touch is the most convenient and powerful way in the process of courting. Especially for the females, it is beyond any other sense. The byproduct of touch is the sense of itch, or the fear of itch. Itching has a close relationship with sex. For instance, fearing an itch is to accumulate passion, while laughing is to relieve passion. There is sexual stimulation in the sense of itch. If the sexual desire is unable to be satisfied under a certain situation, it may be relieved through laughing. This phenomenon is especially obvious for young girls, who fear an itch, but at the same time long for being tickled, because tickling may greatly increase the accumulation passion for females. Therefore it can be said that itching is a replacement for passion, while passion is a ‘terminator’ of an itch. Itch is like a guard, whose task is to prevent others from getting into the gate. Nevertheless, in some cases, it changes to a contactor or waiter, who welcomes the

guests at the gate. (see Ellis [1933] 2003, p.40-42; Hu 2002, p.323-348) To this point, it is a key that Miao Lian felt her vagina itchy and then wet because of the stimulation of her bound feet. The stimulation from both psychological and physical level brought her great pleasure during sexual life. Meanwhile, her bound feet also pleased her husband, so that he looked more exiting and prolonged the intercourse. This result might bring more pleasure for her.

During their daily life, Miao Lian gained the psychological satisfaction from her husband's pity and care. For this new couple, the bound feet are like a bridge of their marriagehood. The husband, Yun, chooses to marry her because she still keeps her bound feet during the anti-footbinding movement. Within their marriage life, many of their common activities were focused on footbinding. For example, Yun spends a lot of time every day to help Miao Lian clean her feet with his surgical operation equipments. Then he plays with his wife's small feet until they fall asleep. Sometimes when Miao Lian feels sore because of tight binding, Yun shows his dignity as a husband: He firmly forbade her to loosen the band even a little bit, but massaged her feet gently. At this time, Miao Lian would forget her pain. As a Chinese traditional wife, she found her satisfaction in being restrained and loved simultaneously by a powerful man. (see p.182)

Furthermore, she also indicates in her story that at the physical level, bound feet are healthy and graceful during daily life. At first she had chilblain after loosening her bound feet. But after she re-bound her feet, her chilblain disappeared. Besides, as a bound-feet woman, she had been used to her small feet, so she believed that bound feet are more convenient than natural feet. "Although I am a bound-feet woman, I walk very fast. I have never felt sore when I walk." (p.183) At the beginning of loosening her feet, without lotus shoes and bands, she was almost unable to move by herself. In order to make her feet return to the golden lotus, her husband brought her a great idea. He bound her feet up, then danced with her for two hours. Thus she would find the bands were loose. At this moment she bound her feet tighter, they

would become smaller a little bit than before. By doing this practice several times, she owned a pair of golden lotus in a shorter time. (p.183) Another result of this practice is her performance on a later party at the New Year's Eve, when one of the guests suggested them to dance:

He looked at my feet and said: "Bound-feet woman, please sit aside." I smiled but did not answer. Changed another lotus shoes, I danced with Yun. At the beginning, all the guests were surprised. Then they applauded and cheered at me. They said my elegant dancing was much better than the women with high-heel shoes. And they all wanted to dance with me. (p.184)

If this story can be seen as the voice from bound-feet women, why has it never been noticed and adopted? If it is true, then why do the feminist researchers ignore it as a counterexample? If it is not true and merely a fabrication by the editor, then why are other essays in the same book about male's stories or written by males used in scholarship as truths? For me, I used to doubt if this story is real as well. But then I rethought about my reasons.

On one side, there are some reasons to question this material. Above all, it is isolated from the other material. As a bound-feet woman, it is quite brave for Miao Lian to speak out about her private sexual experience. At least in my research, her dictation is the only one thus there is no other material that can prove or disprove it. In other words, even if Miao Lian's story is true; it is not sure whether her positive attitude on footbinding and her experience during her sexual life is just a special case or a common situation. It also brings researchers more questions that can not be answered by the story itself: What is the proportion of bound-feet women who get pleasure during sexual life? Is it the practice of *rebinding* the feet that makes sense in Miao Lian's case, while the women who keep their feet bound all along would never get pleasure? What would happen next: Perhaps Miao Lian got pleasure not from her

bound feet, but because she was a young girl and newly married at the time? Is there any harm for the bound-feet women as they get older?

On the other side, this material is too typical. By comparing the situations of loosening and rebinding feet, the benefit of footbinding is obvious in this story. Binding her feet again, Miao Lian got and only got positive influences: she was able to move and dance freely; her chilblain on feet was healed; she regained love and passion from her husband, she was not shy and suffered during sexual life any more but experienced satisfying sex. In addition, her husband Yun's situation is also typical. His major was medicine, which provided him a professional status when he explained the reason of foot chilblain, cleaned his wife's bound feet with surgical tools and finding the shortcut of footbinding. Furthermore, his background of studying in the West improved his professional status up to an authoritative one. Thus his words became a kind of standard viewpoint that it is universal that women seek smaller feet; Chinese bound feet are the best all around the world; and footbinding is a perfect method for producing small feet.

From both sides, it can be said that Miao Lian's story is a valuable but dubious resource. In this sense, I raise her case while I cannot confirm this recourse is 100% real and reliable. As we know, many historical materials also share the characteristics of being both valuable and doubtful. Meanwhile, I do not want to overthrow the viewpoint that footbinding is a patriarchal oppression for women by proving that women may also gain benefits at the psychological and physical levels. On one hand, one isolated case (even if true) cannot represent different situations. On the other hand, even bound-feet women may feel pleasure and hold positive attitudes on their bound feet. Considering the price of pain and disability, footbinding is still a kind of 'male tyranny'. Nevertheless, what I want to argue here is that Miao Lian's story, as a female's experiences and attitudes about a female's body and life, especially sexual life, are a valuable women's voice. This voice is so sonorous in the historical science of women. Unfortunately this voice is still unable to avoid being

neglected. Therefore I argue that as a valuable resource, it needs to be recognized by more researchers; while as a doubtful resource, it asks for further and deeper studies.



Figure 11

A bound-feet girl in the early 20th Century

(Gao, 2007)

V Transnational Feminism

In my opinion, introducing feminism theory and viewpoints to footbinding studies brings this old issue a new tinge. I especially believe that feminist standpoint theory is crucial and helpful for this issue. Standpoint theory, emerging in the 1970s and 1980s in the West, is a feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power. (Harding 2004) It claims that objective knowledge in the traditional sense of the term is not objective, because traditional knowledge is based on the workings of *male* supremacy and its interaction with the social

relationship of capitalism. There is a “blindness that from ignoring the most basic activities and knowledge that sustain our world”, for instance, “the devaluated work of ‘care’ done mainly by women in most cultural context” (i.e. reproduction, care for the young, the elderly and the sick). (Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa, 2007, Chapter 3, p.4) Feminist standpoint theories argue that objectivity or ‘better’ knowledge are associated to the accountable inclusion of situated subjectivities and oppositional consciousness, rather than with their presumed value-free exclusion.

According to Sandra Harding’s viewpoints, women’s experiences are important for providing knowledge of women. Especially, women’s suffering, desire, pleasure and feeling are crucial for sexuality studies. In her famous book, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* Harding (Harding 1991) argues that “Feminist standpoint theories focus on gender differences, on differences between women’s and men’s situations”, which “have been claimed to provide valuable resources for feminist research”. (p.120-121) To Harding, one of the main benefits of feminist standpoint theory is that feminists can call on it defending the greater objectivity attainable by starting research *from women’s lives*: “Women’s different lives have been erroneously devalued and neglected as starting points for scientific research and as the generators of evidence for or against knowledge claims.” (p.121) In her article ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity’’, Harding (2004) stresses the ‘grounds for Knowledge Claims’:

Standpoint theories argue for “starting off thought” from the lives of marginalized peoples; beginning in those determinate, objective locations in any social order will generate illumination critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives. Starting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order. Women’s lives and experiences provide the “grounds” for this knowledge, though these

clearly do not provide foundations for knowledge in the conventional philosophical sense. These grounds are the site, the activities, from which scientific questions arise. (p,129)

Harding's arguments make people rethink and revalue the neglected case of Miao Lian, a female's life and experience. I believe that there must be more women's voices about footbinding hiding in historical materials, paintings, music, folktales, even women's handcrafts and needlework, which are waiting for discovery and research that provide ground for knowledge claims.

Feminist standpoint theories remind and assist people in understanding some obstacles within studies on footbinding in both the East and the West. Firstly, because of gender proprieties, most researchers concentrated their studies from men's perspectives by reading earlier literature written by men. Secondly, for a long time, some Western scholars have sought to provide more objective knowledge about Chinese footbinding by interviewing Chinese. However, at least until the mid-nineteenth century, most researchers chose to consult Chinese men only. Almost none of the authors (basically, there were only male authors at that time) admit to talking to Chinese women about this issue. It is possible that in the past Chinese women were reluctant to talk about it with their fathers, brothers or sons, not to say foreign men. (Ebrey, 1999) Thirdly, in recent research, some scholars, especially some female scholars, pay more attention to women's voice on this issue and try to interview Chinese women. Simultaneously it is easy for them to ignore the men's voice and overemphasize and misjudge the information they collect from their interviewees.

Studies of footbinding motivate ones to rethink feminist standpoint theories and raise further questions as well. Since feminists stress "women's different lives" in producing knowledge, then which women's lives is it here? Does it refer to the

experiences of the female researchers' lives, or the women's lives of their study objects, which may be in a quite different position of race, class, cultural or religion? Can these women who come from different standpoints communicate effectively and completely understand each other? Thinking of the dimension of time, is it possible that the contemporary researchers fully comprehend their study objects' lives *in the past times*, even though both of them are female and come from the same or similar position? Is it possible that male scholars provide knowledge from female standpoint? How should we deal with 'men's different lives' then?



Figure 12

An old bound-feet woman working in the field

(Yang, 2004)

Firstly, what is tacitly taken as the starting point for developing the feminist standpoint, are the lives of Western, white, middle class, heterosexual women. This is a typical 'female experience' that standpoint theorists claim excludes the experience of many women. (Prins, 1997) Miao Lian's case as female's voice is neglected by most researchers, but it is true that her story is recorded and collected by male elite. Contrary to Miao Lian who comes from the upper-class, most normal Chinese bound-feet women have been bereaved of their voice. Their lives and experiences

may be quite different. For instance, some poor rural bound-feet women are also agricultural labors or physical worker. Figure 12 shows, an old bound-feet woman who is working in the field. She sits on the ground and puts her feet on a basket to make them a little higher. Because of her bound feet which are too weak to hold her body, it is very difficult for her to squat or stoop down. So she has to keep this pose to do her work for a long time. Without the romantic dancing that Miao Lian experiences, maybe she suffers a hard life and holds only a negative attitude on footbinding.

No matter what classes they come from, bound-feet women have never provided their knowledge from their different lives. In Harding's (Harding 2004) words: "Of course individual women have often managed to 'speak' in public. The issue here is a different and controversial one: whether women as culturally diverse collectivities could produce knowledge that answered *their* questions about nature and social relations. The implied 'speaker' of scientific (sociological, economic, philosophic, etc.) sentences was never women. It was supposed to be humanity in general." (p.4) Women's voices are heard only when they are found by agencies, which are either Chinese elites, for instance Yang (2004) records the stories from his mother and other bound-feet women in his hometown, or Western feminists and researchers, for example Gates (2008) interviews rural bound-feet women in North China. Until now there is no researcher on footbinding studies who is a bound-feet woman, who is able to provide knowledge from her own experiences, her different life. As Donna Haraway points out, "the subject of knowledge claims was to be an idealized agent who performed the 'God trick' of speaking authoritatively about everything in the world from no particular location or human perspective at all." (quote from Harding, 2004, p.4)

Secondly, women are not the only group excluded from the traditional scientific point of view, the other 'others' holds the same situation. Examples include black men, homosexuals, and working class people. In the case of footbinding, the particular groups of males are excluded as "others" in footbinding studies. Under

certain situations, some young males from the upper class also bound their feet. Instead of breaking the bones, they just make them very straight and smaller than normal. Some actors also practiced or mimicked footbinding with special tools. Since the 19th century, Peking Opera has become one of the most popular art forms in China. At that time, because of the gender isolation, all the actors were males, So the male actors who played females usually bound small wooden fake shoes under their own feet to mimic the figures of bound-feet women. It was a taboo for anybody to look at their practicing, which is called ‘Cai Qiao’. It is said that Cai Qiao is very difficult to practice and causes terrible sores. These male actors were seen as the lowest class in society at that time. However, together with those bound-feet men coming from upper class, their voices are completely lacking in footbinding studies. There are no written recourses left that are from their point of view and about their experience on the feet. They are neglected by most researchers in the long run.



Figure 13

The famous Peking Opera actor, Xun Hui Sheng, playing a young lady
(Gao, 2007)

Harding (1991) introduces the concept of ‘strong objectivity’ to argue for a feminist epistemology, which “challenges the traditional assumption that objectivity and neutrality are inextricably bound up with each other”. (Prins, 1997) She claims that ‘strong objectivity’ requires ‘strong reflexivity’, which asks researchers to “look beyond the micro-level of the effects of, for instance, gender, race, or class. More over if *all* knowledge is socially situated, observer and subject matter are to be put on the same causal plane”. As Harding indicates: “I always see through my communities eyes, and begin thought with its assumptions”, therefore, “in an important sense, my eyes are not my own”. Indeed, strong reflexivity is the capability to look at oneself through the eyes of other. But here the ‘self’ and ‘other’ are not isolated individuals. “Both the subject and the object of knowledge are members of particular social groups, cultures, communities”. ‘Strong reflexivity’ exceeds the boundaries and involves the development of a sociological and political perspective as well. “It enables the knower to take account of, for instance, the Eurocentrism of prevailing views of knowledge and science, and to make science a more universal, that is a truly multicultural project.” (see Harding 1994, quoted from Prins, 1997, p.69)

By now, I have discussed the interpretation of footbinding under Eastern and Western eyes, and by the help of feminist standpoint theories, I raise and analyze a neglected material and rethink the studies of footbinding. Here, I would also like to locate my position and standpoint. I present myself as a Chinese young woman, a wife, who studies in the West, and deeply influenced by both Chinese traditional Confucianism and contemporary Western Feminism. Seeing through the eyes of my particular communities, it is easier for me to recognize and understand the different interpretations from the East and West as well as their interactions. In my own studies, I keep trying to find a standpoint that I can analyze Chinese phenomena by adopting Western feminist ideas. I use the term ‘feminist ideas’ instead of ‘feminist theories’, because I also keep trying to avoid such a problem as taking all feminist theories in existence mainly produced in the context of the Western world as universal. However

it is only very recently that I have started to involve myself in my studies and papers. I now understand what provides the basis for feminist standpoint epistemology is ‘the politics of the location’. (Davis, 2007)

“Born of an engagement between feminist theory and multiculturalism, cultural studies and postcolonial theory, the politics of location recognizes the importance of locations as the ground from which one speaks and as shaping one’s identity, knowledge of the world, and possibilities for political action.” (Davis, 2007)

The politics of location introduces geography as essential for understanding the history of women and the histories of feminist struggle. As Kathy Davies (2007) claims, U.S. feminism had tended to valorize history by stressing the retrieval of the ‘lost’ voice of women and making women’s accomplishments visible. This emphasis on the *history and the temporal* led many U.S. feminists to overlook such a fact: feminism emerges in different forms in different places. The politics of location recognizes that the historical social production takes place in a particular geographical location. It raises a new emphasis on *location*, which is focused on how feminism “emerges, takes root, changes, travels, translates, and transplants in different spacio/temporal contexts”. (Ahmed 2000, quoted from Davis, 2007, p.8)

The politics of location also has consequences for theorizing feminism as ‘an epistemological project’:

Initially, feminist epistemology employed a notion of location that referred to how an individual’s (or group’s) material position shaped her experiences, perceptions, and interactions with others. This particular conception of location provided the basis for feminist standpoint epistemology, which assumed that women use their material location not only as a recourse for knowing what it means to be embodied as a woman in a particular social and cultural context but also as a place from which to construct a critical feminist subjectivity and

perspective for social change. Feminist standpoint has since generated considerable critical debate, most notably about the problems involved in privileging one aspect of women's experience – gender - while ignoring the ways in which race, class and other categories of difference intersect in multiple and contradictory ways in women's everyday lives. The issue of how to theorize intersecting identities along with the implications this has for feminist epistemology, has been one of the most productive and highly developed areas of contemporary feminist scholarship. An important outcome has been a shift from viewing location in terms of identity to viewing it as a context in which complex and shifting relationships are constituted within a dynamic field of historical and geopolitical force (Mani 1989). Under influence of postcolonial theory, this contextual understanding of location has been used to understand international exchanges of knowledge in a global-local nexus. Feminists have become increasingly concerned not only with the – often selective – reception of feminist texts in the United States (King 1994) but also with how feminist knowledge circulates through translation and dissemination of feminist texts across the globe (Spivak 1988, 1985; Kaplan 1996). Feminism – both as theory and practice – is now viable as a kind of “traveling theory” (Said 1983) that circulates globally and is rearticulated and transformed in the course of its replication from place to place. (Davis 2007)

Within this context, I regard footbinding studies in the East and West, especially the contemporary scholarships influenced by feminism, as a kind of ‘transnational feminism practice’. Transnational feminism is a dream of a new version of international feminist solidarity, which assumes that while feminist alliances are necessary and desirable, differences rather than similarities among women should be emphasized as an occasion for global dialogues about common issues and common struggles (Davis 2007).

VI Conclusion

Footbinding in China has been a highly-charged topic in the past few centuries. Intellectuals from the East and West have made respective contributions, although their research approaches and points of view are different. The feminist theories bring new air to footbinding studies. It not only provides powerful approaches and theories to challenge footbinding as a patriarchal oppression in China, more importantly, it pushes people to rethink the process of studying footbinding. Thanks to feminist standpoint theories, some stereotypes and obstacles within our studies have become visible. Women's voices, especially the experiences and the subjective attitudes of the bound-feet women themselves are still being neglected or misused in some cases. Thereby I raise an ignored resource that a bound-feet woman talked about her pleasure from her bound feet within and outside sexuality, which provides significant grounds for investigating the close relationship between footbinding and sexuality. With this case study, I do not want to overthrow the viewpoint that footbinding is a patriarchal oppression for women, but to rethink footbinding studies itself.

Being aside with Kathy Davis (2007), in the discourse that feminism as theory and practice is now viable as a kind of 'traveling theory', I see contemporary footbinding studies influenced by feminism in the global context as a kind of transnational feminism practice. Knowledge travels. Not only does feminism travel to China, but also Sinology travels to the Western world. And their encounter has caused dynamic interactions. Hereby, I argue that there is no single correct way to explain footbinding so that it is necessary to make a global dialogue about the common issue. The dialogue means it is possible and necessary for researchers to *root* on their own standpoint and *share* the experiences and knowledge from others simultaneously to build up a multi-direction communication network.

As a Chinese researcher, I claim that after studying the theories of feminism, it seems the spirit of feminism is quite helpful for the Chinese people and needs to be

utilized more often. This spirit is, in the words from Davis (2007), “an epistemological project” “that can generate knowledge and knowledge practices aimed at enhancing women’s individual and collective empowerment” (p.8).

Turning back to the case of footbinding studies, I would provide two suggestions: One is: nowadays, scholars need to collect data, especially the ones from women’s and other marginalized groups’ experiences and perspectives, and provide their knowledge on this hot issue. By doing so, I think they can rescue some important information before it disappears, and offer this data as well as their argument based on this information to later researchers.

My other suggestion is to prevent the misfortune of women losing their voices in the future. It is an unchangeable fact that in ancient China, most women were illiterate, and women’s social status was much lower than today. For these reasons, women did not leave us written documentary evidence, and thus lost their voice in main-stream ‘(his)tory’. As a generation, the bound-feet women together with their ‘voices’ will disappear soon in our future. Footbinding will change from a social issue into a totally historical issue. Many materials and documents may have no chance to be approved throughout the bound-feet women’s experiences. The ‘golden lotus’ may become a secret. But the practical significance of our studies is that this socially constructed aphasia for women should be avoided in the future by ‘women empowering women’, which is the spirit of feminism. Today, in some of the poorest areas in China, when compared with boys, girls still have fewer chances to go to school and get a basic education. In general, Chinese women’s social status is still lower than men. I argue that making Chinese women speak their voices is not about showing the powers of some elites, but actually empowering women as a whole, arming them with science and knowledge, and raising their awareness to ask for their rights.



Figure 14

A rural bound-feet woman in a supermarket in big city
Nowadays, natural-feet women see her as a monster⁶

⁶ This picture is originally from the news on *Channel City*, 13th, October, 2006. On Line: see the website of Net East, www. 163.com. (<http://news.163.com/06/1013/05/2T9PNCPU00011229.html>) Latest check: 6th, October, 2009.

References and Bibliography

- Ai-Lian (1941). The Generality of Footbinding. The New Version of *Cai Fei*. L. X. Yao. Tianjin, Tianjin Shu Ju.
- Apostolides, M. (Sep/Oct 1999). 'The Pleasure of the Pain.' Psychology Today, 00333107, vol. 32, issue 5.
- Blake, C. F. (1994 spring). "Foot-Binding in New Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor." Signs Vol.19, No.1: p.676-712.
- Bracke, S. and Puig de la Bellacasa, M. 'Knowledge as a Battle Ground: Antigone and Feminist Standpoint Theory', in R. Buikema and I. Van Der Tuin, eds (forthcoming). Gender in Media, Art and Culture, translated from the Dutch version (2007) Gender in Media, Kunst en Cultuur, Bussum: Coutinho.
- Cummings, S. R.; Xu, L. and Stone, K. (October, 1997). 'Consequence of Foot Binding among Older Women in Beijing, China.' American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 87, No. 10: 1677-1679
- Davis, K. (2007). The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels across Borders. Durhan and London, Duke Univeristy press.
- Deng, R. B. (September, 2006). "Changes in Women's Dress in the Late Qing: Women's Body and the State and the Fashion-Starting from "Unbinding the Feet"." Collection of Women's Studies No. 5, Ser. No. 75: p.48-54.
- Ebrey, P. (December 1999). "Gender and Sinology: Shifting Western Interpretations of

- Footbinding, 1300-1890." Late Imperial China Vol.20, No.2: p.1-34.
- Ellis, H. H. ([1933] 2003). Psychology of Sex. Chongqing, Chong Qing Press.
- Feng, J. C. (2005). Three-inch Golden Lotus. Beijing, Xin Xing Press.
- Gao, H. X. (2007). The History of Footbinding. Shanghai, Shanghai Wen Yi Press.
- Gao, S. Y. (1999). "One More Comment on Women's Footbinding in Feudal China." Journal of Historical Science 2: p.20-24.
- Gates, H. (2008). "Bound feet: How sexy were they?" History of Family 13: 58-70.
- Gulik, R. H. V. (1961). Sexual Life in Ancient China. Leiden, E. J. Brill.
- Guo, P. (2001) 'Foot-binding of the Ancient Chinese Women in its Initial and Prime Stage', Journal of Zi Gong High Normal College, No. 55, Vol.16
- Harding, S. (1991). Feminist Standpoint Epistemology. Whose Science, Whoes Knowledge. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press.
- Harding, S. (2004). Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate. The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies. S. Harding. New York, Routledge: p.1-p.20.
- Hu, Q. (2002). Psychology of Sex. The Summery of the Famous Works on Western Sexology. Y. H. Li. Nan Chang, Jiang Xi Ren Min Press: p.323-348.
- Li, Z. J. "Comparative Studies of Eastern and Western Sex Culture within Erotic Paintings." E-sociology Journal No.72

On line: <http://www.nhu.edu.tw/~society/e-j/72/72/72-09.htm>

Latest check: 6th, October, 2009.

Liu, J. F. (2005). "The Unbinding Movement of Wuxu Period: an Exploration from the Perspective of the Culture of Man's Right." Journal of Yantai College of Education Vol.11, No.1 (Sum No. 26): p.13-15.

Ng, A. H. S. (2004). "Footbinding and Masochism: A Psychoanalytical Exploration." Women's Studies 33: 651-676.

Pan, H. G. (2003). "The New Explanation on the Origin of Footbinding within Han's Women." Jiangnan Tribune Vol. 10: p.44-48.

Rich, A. (1980). "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Signs 5, No.4, Women: Sex and Sexuality (Summer, 1980), : p.631-660.

Xie, F. H. and X. W. Zhang (December, 2003). "The Exploration of Footbinding and Unbinding Movement of Chinese Women." Tribune of Social Sciences: p.46-48.

Yang, Y. (2004). The Wavering souls: Exploring the Last Small Feet Tribe in China. Shang Hai, Xue Lin Press.

Yuan, K. (2006). "Sins of and Punishment on Perfect Feminine Figure-On the Corset." Decoration No.4: 45-46.