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World

Painful Memories for China's Footbinding Survivors

by Louisa Lim



Louisa Lim, NPR

Zhou Guizhen, 86, says she regrets binding her feet. "But at the time, if you didn't bind your feet, no one would marry you," she says.

From Status Symbol to Subjugation

Legend has it that footbinding began during the Shang dynasty (1700-1027 B.C.), ordered by an empress who had a clubfoot. But historical records date the practice to a later dynasty: An emperor was captivated by a concubine, a talented dancer who bound her feet to suggest the shape of a new moon and performed a "lotus dance."

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Morning Edition, March 19, 2007 · Suffering for beauty is a concept familiar to most women, who have dyed, plucked or shaved their hair, squeezed their feet into uncomfortable high heels or even surgically enhanced parts of their anatomy. Millions of Chinese women went even further — binding their feet to turn them into the prized "three-inch golden lotuses."

Footbinding was first banned in 1912, but some continued binding their feet in secret. Some of the last survivors of this barbaric practice are still living in Liuyicun, a village in Southern China's Yunnan province.

Wang Lifan was just 7 years old when her mother started binding her feet: breaking her toes and binding them underneath the sole of the foot with bandages. After her mother died, Wang carried on, breaking the arch of her own foot to force her toes and heel ever closer. Now 79, Wang no longer remembers the pain.

'Young Bones Are Soft'

"Because I bound my own feet, I could manipulate them more gently until the bones were broken. Young bones are soft, and break more easily," she says.

At that time, bound feet were a status symbol, the only way for a woman to marry into money. In Wang's case, her in-laws had demanded the matchmaker find their son a wife with tiny feet. It was only after the wedding, when she finally met her husband for the first time, that she discovered he was an opium addict. With a life encompassing bound feet and an opium-addict husband, she's a remnant from another age. That's how author Yang Yang, who's written a book about them, sees these women.

"These women were shunned by two eras," Yang says. "When they were young, footbinding was already forbidden, so they bound their feet in secret. When the Communist era came, production methods changed. They had to do farming work, and again they were shunned."

A Dwindling Few

Outside the temple in Liuyicun, old women sit chatting, some resting their shrunken feet in the sunlight. Seven years ago, there were still 300 women with bound feet in this village. But many have since died. The village's former prosperity, from its thriving textile business, was the reason every family bound their daughters' feet. And they carried on long after footbinding was outlawed in 1912.



Louisa Lim, NPR

Seventy-nine-year-old Wang Lifen baby-sits her neighbors' toddler. Wang's mother started binding her feet when she was just 7 years old.



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Wang Lifen no longer remembers the pain of breaking her bones, but admits that sometimes her feet still hurt so much she can't even put them down on the ground.

Zhou Guizhen remembers tricking the government inspectors.

"When people came to inspect our feet, my mother bandaged my feet, then put big shoes on them," Zhou says. "When the inspectors came, we fooled them into thinking I had big feet."

Zhou is now a fragile 86-year-old with a rueful chuckle. Tottering along in her blue silk shoes embroidered with phoenixes, she marvels at how the world has changed. Born into a rich family and married into fabulous wealth, all her possessions were confiscated by the Communists.

A Regretful Decision

Now she opens the door to her dark, decrepit one-room hut with earthen floors and paper-lattice windows through which the cold wind whistles. Values have been turned upside down since her childhood. Then, she says, bound feet were seen as a mark of class. Now, they stand for female subjugation.

"I regret binding my feet," Zhou says. "I can't dance, I can't move properly. I regret it a lot. But at the time, if you didn't bind your feet, no one would marry you."

These "golden lotuses" were proof of a foot fetish on a national scale, with hobbled feet acting as another erogenous zone, the most forbidden of them all. But for author Yang Yang, whose mother had bound feet, the reality was far more prosaic.

"The bandages that women used for footbinding were about 10 feet long, so it was difficult for them to wash their feet," Yang says. "They only washed once every two weeks, so it was very, very stinky. But when I was young I was very free, because when I was naughty my mother couldn't run fast enough with her bound feet to catch me and beat me."

Despite their self-inflicted disabilities, these women are survivors. Wang often baby-sits her neighbors' toddler, carrying the plump 20-pound child on her back as she goes about her daily chores. As Wang surveys her tiny shoes, cocking her head from side to side, it's clear she's proud of her little feet.

Lingering Pride

"There's not a single other woman in Liuyicun who could fit their feet into my shoes," she says. "When my generation dies, people won't be able to see bound feet, even if they want to."

These women even gained fame of a sort, forming a bound-feet disco dancing troupe which toured the region. Zhou was once the star of the troupe, but now she's too old to dance.

Such public display is a far cry from their youth, when their bound feet restricted their freedom, keeping them close to their homes. But the local press criticized the dance troupe, talking of exploitation and freak shows. These women yet again are victims of history in a society that finds their plight an embarrassing reminder of its own recent brutality towards women.

Footbinding: From Status Symbol to Subjugation

by Louisa Lim



Wealthy Chinese women with bound feet pose for a photo, circa 1900-1920. Underwood & Underwood/Corbis

Legend has it that the origins of footbinding go back as far as the Shang dynasty (1700-1027 B.C.). The Shang Empress had a clubfoot, so she demanded that footbinding be made compulsory in the court.

But historical records from the Song dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) date footbinding as beginning during the reign of Li Yu, who ruled over one region of China between 961-975. It is said his heart was captured by a concubine, Yao Niang, a talented dancer who bound her feet to suggest the shape of a new moon and performed a "lotus dance."

During subsequent dynasties, footbinding became more popular and spread from court circles to the wealthy. Eventually,

it moved from the cities to the countryside, where young girls realized that binding their feet could be their passport to social mobility and increased wealth.

When the Manchu nobility came to power in 1644, they tried to ban the practice, but with little success. The first anti-footbinding committee was formed in Shanghai by a British priest in 1874.

But the practice wasn't outlawed until 1912, when the Qing dynasty had already been toppled by a revolution. Beginning in 1915, government inspectors could levy fines on those who continued to bind their feet. But despite these measures, footbinding still continued in various parts of the country.

A year after the Communists came to power in 1949, they too issued their own ban on footbinding. According to the American author William Rossi, who wrote *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe*, 40 percent to 50 percent of Chinese women had bound feet in the 19th century. For the upper classes, the figure was almost 100 percent.

Some estimate that as many as 2 billion Chinese women broke and bound their feet to attain this agonizing ideal of physical perfection. Author Yang Yang says that women with tiny feet were a status symbol who would bring honor upon the entire clan by their appearance.

"Some married women with bound feet would even get up in the

middle of the night to start their toilette, just to ensure they would look good in daytime," he says.

In Liuyicun, the practice persisted so long because of the village's economic prosperity — and its inhabitants' desire for obvious wealth signifiers, like daughters with bound feet.

Some scholars say footbinding deepened female subjugation by making women more dependent on their men folk, restricting their movements and enforcing their chastity, since women with bound feet were physically incapable of venturing far from their homes.

Certainly the "three-inch golden lotuses" were seen as the ultimate erogenous zone, with Qing dynasty pornographic books listing 48 different ways of playing with women's bound feet.

For those unfortunate women who paid the ultimate price for beauty, there was little choice involved.

Liuyicun resident Wang Lifan, 79, describes her own attitude as a child, saying, "I didn't want to bind my feet, but the whole village told me that I had to. So I did."

And 86-year-old Zhou Guizhen says, "At that time everybody had bound feet. If you didn't, you'd only be able to marry a tribesman from an ethnic minority."

These women disfigured their feet to guarantee their own future, but according to Yang Yang, this act ultimately consigned them to tragic lives. Most of Liuyicun's bound-feet women were forced to perform hard physical labor in the late 1950s, digging reservoirs, for example — work which was punishing enough for ordinary women, but agonizing for those with tiny, misshapen feet.

Their families also suffered food shortages as they were often unable to fulfill their production quotas at work, or walk into the mountains to pick vegetables and fruit like other mothers.

"Their tiny feet sealed their tragic fates," Yang says.

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