



Aching for Beauty

Footbinding in China



"Wang Ping writes with
passion and an under-
standing strengthened by
the female experience.
This is a rich, necessary,
and invaluable book."

—Ha Jin, author of *Waiting*

W A N G P I N G

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Frontispiece (on page viii). This lily slipper measures three inches, heel to toe. The heel is covered in green silk, and the upper part of the slipper is covered in pink and red silk. Gold couching is used for the embellished design. The rose fabric originally met at the back and was stitched together; later, the heel lift was installed to accommodate ankle thickness. Although this may have begun as an altar shoe, it was eventually worn, evidenced by wear on the sole. Courtesy of the Historic Costume Collection of the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR), University of Hawaii at Manoa. Photograph by Linda B. Arthur, curator, CTAHR Historic Costume Collection.

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Preface

To be born woman is to know—
Although they do not speak of it at school—
Women must labor to be beautiful.

—W. B. Yeats

Tell me the story
of all these things.
Beginning where you wish, tell even us.

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

AT THE AGE OF NINE she began to bind her feet on her own. She did not know the elaborate method of the traditional footbinding, which, briefly speaking, was to bend the toes completely under the sole to make a pointed front and to pull the whole front as close as possible to the heel—to arch the foot like a small hook about three inches long. She invented her own method of binding, wrapping her feet tightly with layers of elastic bands to prevent her feet from growing longer and wider. Though she did not bend her toes under her soles or break her bones, it still hurt. Her bandaged feet were on fire day and night. Each step felt as though she were walking on broken glass barefooted. But she bore the pain silently, and with much pride. She was determined to keep her feet from growing. She wanted her mother and sisters to stop mocking her. At the age of nine, her feet had already grown to size six, a pair of “steamboats,” a sign, according to the theory of Chinese fortune telling, that she was born to be a maid or a peasant.

That was 1966, the year Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution to fight against the remaining powers of feudalism, capitalism, and

revisionism in China. And the practice of footbinding—the symbol of feudal oppression of women in the eyes of revolutionaries—had been eliminated for almost half a century. When I started binding my feet, I had never heard of or seen a real pair of bound feet—golden lotuses—except my paternal grandma’s “liberated feet,” which she had bound into a size as tiny as a child’s, kept in bandages as an adult, then loosened in her forties when Mao took over China in 1949. Deformed and smelly, they symbolized anything but beauty and elegance. It is still a mystery how the urge and determination to bind my feet came to me. Is beauty innate or cultural? Is it socially imposed (since I was tired of being teased as a “peasant” for my big feet)? Why did I think that small feet looked better than naturally big feet and voluntarily suppressed them during a period when anything beautiful, natural or artificial, was considered dangerous and bad and, therefore, outlawed? If the concept of beauty is innate, then why did I choose to work on feet instead of other parts of my body, which were also targets for laughter: my small eyes; my dark, blotchy complexion; and my coarse hands. Whatever it was, my motivation was strong and clear: I would do anything at any cost to have a pair of feet as small and shameful as my mother’s and sisters’ so that I could be included in the class of the noble, civilized, and fortunate.

In 1986, I saw a pair of lotus shoes in my American friends’ apartment in Brooklyn. The size and shape shocked me. I had always thought the “three-inch golden lotus” was merely a metaphor. But the red shoes I saw through the glass cover couldn’t have been longer than my palm, and the front was big enough only for a toe. Its delicateness and elegance were beyond my imagination. I turned to my friends. They guessed what I was thinking and swore to me that these were not toys. They had bought the shoes in a market in Yunnan in 1983, and they witnessed a middle-aged woman with bound feet. In fact, her feet were so tiny, they said, she had to be carried on the back of her husband’s bike. I gazed at the twin little hooks through the glass, thinking of my grandma’s deformed feet, which I had once called “pig feet” behind her back when I was angry. She claimed she used to be known for her tiny feet, which were only three and a half inches long. How could anyone have possibly put her feet into those toy shoes? What did she have to do to her feet to make them so small and pointed? How did she walk? What pain did she have to go through? And for what?

I looked down at my own feet, which had been stunted at size six since I was nine, and recalled the constant burning pain during the six-month binding I had secretly inflicted on myself. The binding did stop the feet from growing for a while; but once the elastic band was lifted, the feet grew

wide, leaving my two big toes pointing permanently upward. I held the tiny shoes in my hand and stared at the exquisite patterns of the embroidery. My palm burned with the pain and desire of my female ancestors for the past thousand years, the pain and desire that had been silenced, that had then been sewn stitch by stitch into the three-inch-long and less-than-one-inch-wide space.

Taboo has always been part of the history of footbinding. When the practice reached its peak as a national fashion and cultural fixation in late imperial China, lotus feet became the synonym for femininity, beauty, hierarchy, and eroticism. In other words, feet were the place of honor, identity, and means of livelihood for many women. They guarded their feet fervently, forbidding men other than their husbands or lovers to touch their feet or shoes. After it finally faded out through the national propaganda launched by Chinese intellectuals and Western missionary organizations, and through brutal force and punishments upon the female body, footbinding was rarely talked or written about because it became a symbol of national shame.

But it is high time to lift the taboo, to decipher the mystery of footbinding that had been for a millennium the emblem of femininity, its beauty and eroticism so tightly integrated with pain, violence, and death. And finally it is time to understand this female heritage that was transmitted only through codes of silence, a silence that was only a masquerade. Underneath and behind it was a roaring ocean current of female language and culture that integrated writing and binding with weaving, talking, and female bonding. This was the heritage of my female ancestors, which is now mine.

Although footbinding was unique to females of late imperial China, the concept and practice of enduring violence and pain, mutilation and self-mutilation in the name of beauty can be found in almost every culture and civilization. The study of footbinding, therefore, requires cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives.¹ An examination of the practice in the context of history, literature, linguistics, and psychoanalysis is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of this cultural fetish. In *Aching for Beauty*, I employ poetry, novels, plays, essays, and oral accounts on and related to footbinding by male and female writers from the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911) to the present.² I also employ Western linguistic, literary, and psychoanalytic theories as tools and metaphors to enter and examine the ancient Chinese texts. My goal is to build a bridge across the past and present, East and West, history and literature, theory and practice, imagination and reality.