

Three-Inch Golden Lotus: Achieving Beauty through Violence

The witch tells the Little Mermaid: "Your tail will part and shrink into what humans call nice legs but it will hurt just as if a sharp sword were passing through you. Every step you take will be like treading on a knife sharp enough to cause your blood to flow." When the Little Mermaid finally stands face to face with her beloved prince, her new feet, which she has traded with her lovely voice, bleed. The prince does not notice it, and she does not complain.

—Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid"

A pair of tiny feet,
two jugs of tears.

—Chinese ditty

A PAIR OF PERFECTLY BOUND FEET must meet seven qualifications—small, slim, pointed, arched, fragrant, soft, and straight—in order to become a piece of art, an object of erotic desire. Such beauty is created, however, through sheer violence. For about two or three years, little girls go through the inferno of torture: the flesh of her feet, which are tightly bound with layers of bandages day and night, is slowly putrefied, her toes crushed under the soles, and the insteps arched to the degree where the toes and heels meet. Loving mothers suddenly turn into monsters that beat their sobbing girls with sticks or brooms, forcing them to hop around to speed up the rotting of flesh and make sure the bones are broken properly. When the feet are finally shrunk to the size of a baby's—three inches long, half an inch wide in the front—they are completely deformed. Naked, they look like the hoofs of an animal or female genitals. Adorned with shoes, they resemble male genitals, or vegetables like hot peppers and water chestnuts, or things like hooks, bows, writing brushes. The violent mutilation of the feet eliminates boundaries between human and beast, organic and

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inorganic. It sweeps away barriers that usually divide mortals: wealth, age, sex, and so on. Violence renders the feet sacred. Naked, they become taboo for men. Women guard them as if guarding their lives. It also gives them the power for healing and cursing. All the tears and pus, all the decay and broken bones are hidden under the elaborate adornment of the shoes, which are never taken off, not even in bed. Yet violence is traceable everywhere: the odor of dead flesh seeping through the bandages, the tiny appendages that barely support the frail body. It is the prohibition, the mystery, and the traces of violence that stir up men's desire, a desire derived from fear, pity, and awe. Through the passage of violence, bound feet—a combination of human, beast, vegetable, and object—enter the realm of eroticism and symbolize the ideal of an androgynous body, the body of an immortal or a god.

In this chapter I will explore the links between beauty and violence, mutilation and language, taboo and transgression, the links that characterize footbinding. Bound feet become the emblem of femininity and eroticism through physical and linguistic violence. Sealing decay and death beneath its beautiful surface (wrapping and shoe as masks), footbinding promises immortality; yet at the same time, the odor, shape, and euphemism of the bound foot constantly reminds the fetish lovers of carnality, animality, death, and violence. Footbinding speaks multiple languages. It murmurs about seduction, eroticism, virtue, discipline, and sacrifice. It also teaches little girls about pain, about coming of age, about her place in this world, about her permanent bonding with her mother and female ancestors.

Here are the steps for the initial binding:

1. Place one end of the bandage, about two inches wide and ten feet long, on the inside of the instep and from there carry it over the four small toes and wrap them once.
2. From the inside of the foot, pull the binding toward the front point and turn it tightly around the big toe.
3. Wrap the heel from the outer side of the foot, and pull the binding toward the front point so that the heel and toes are drawn together as closely as possible. Wrap the front except for the big toe.
4. Wrap over the instep, go around the ankle, and return to the instep.
5. Turn toward the heel and wrap the binding from the inner side of the foot to the front point.
6. Wrap from the inner side and over the instep to the outer side. Wrap around the heel and pull the binding back toward the part of the binding cloth on the instep.

7. Repeat the process from the beginning until the entire bandage is used, then sew the end to prevent the binding from coming loose.¹

Such a binding soon makes the feet inflamed and the flesh deteriorated. Each act of rebinding and washing the feet is accompanied by bleeding and peeling of the rotten flesh. Mothers call this the breaking process, which lasts about two years. The more flesh is deteriorated, the more bones broken, the more slender the feet will become.

In the 1930s, Yao Lingxi, a self-claimed "lotus addict," collected poems, stories, anecdotes, and articles about footbinding, and accounts by women who talked about their pain and sexual enhancement from this practice. He published them in four volumes, titled *Records of Gathering Fragrance* (*Cai fei lu*). These works record many accounts of the pain and suffering during the initial binding period, including this oral history:

Born into an old-fashioned family at P'ing-hsi, I was inflicted with the pain of footbinding when I was seven years old. . . . It was in the first lunar month of my seventh year that my ears were pierced and fitted with gold earrings. I was told that a girl had to suffer twice, through ear piercing and footbinding. Binding started in the second lunar month; mother consulted references in order to select an auspicious day for it. I wept and hid in a neighbor's home, but mother found me, scolded me, and dragged me home. She shut the bedroom door, boiled water, and from a box withdrew binding, shoes, knife, needle, and thread. I begged for a one-day postponement, but mother refused: "Today is a lucky day," she said. "If bound today, your feet will never hurt; if bound tomorrow, they will." She washed and placed alum on my feet and cut the toenails. She then bent my toes toward the plantar with a binding cloth ten feet long and two inches wide, doing the right foot first and then the left. She finished binding and ordered me to walk, but when I did the pain proved unbearable.

That night, mother wouldn't let me remove the shoes. My feet felt on fire and I couldn't sleep; mother struck me for crying. On the following days, I tried to hide but was forced to walk. Mother hit me on my hands and feet for resisting. Beatings and curses were my lot for covertly loosening the wrappings. The feet were washed and rebound after three or four days, with alum added. After several months, all toes but the big one were pressed against the inner surface. Whenever I ate fish or freshly killed meat, my feet would swell, and the pus would drip. Mother criticized me for placing pressure on the heel in walking, saying that my feet would never assume a pretty shape. Mother would remove the bindings and wipe the blood and pus which dripped from my feet. She told me that only with

removal of the flesh could my feet become slender. If I mistakenly punctured a sore, the blood gushed like a stream. My somewhat-fleshy big toes were bound with small pieces of cloth and forced upwards, to assume a new moon shape.

Every two weeks, I changed to new shoes. Each new pair was one-to-two-tenths of an inch smaller than the previous one. The shoes were unyielding, and it took pressure to get into them. Though I wanted to sit passively by the *kang*, Mother forced me to move around. After changing more than ten pairs of shoes, my feet were reduced to a little over four inches. I had been binding for a month when my younger sister started; when no one was around, we would weep together. In summer, my feet smelled offensively because of pus and blood; in winter, my feet felt cold because of lack of circulation and hurt if they got too near the *kang* and were struck by warm air currents. Four of the toes were curled in like so many dead caterpillars; no outsider would ever have believed that they belonged to a human being. It took two years to achieve the three-inch model. (*Cai fei lu*, vol. 3, quoted in Levy 1992, 26–28)

Little girls were initiated into the binding between the ages of five and seven, when their bones were still flexible, their *qi* (primary life force) started flourishing in their bodies,² and their minds mature enough (*dongshi*) to understand the importance of this bodily discipline to undergo a long period of intense physical pain. The trauma radically changed her sense of the body in space and her sense of being in general. By having to relearn how to place her reduced feet on the ground and relearn how to walk through a long period of intense pain, the little girl was forced into a speedy maturation—physically, mentally, and socially. Ironically, it was her reduced feet that helped her to find a foothold in a male-dominated world: “Through the bending, twisting, and compressing of the feet, a girl’s sense of managing space was radically modified and a mother delivered her daughter into a world where ‘becoming one’s body’ led to moral and spiritual self-improvement” (Blake 1994, 681). And it was through pain that she began to bond with her mother.

In the account above, every movement the narrator makes, every emotional experience she has—be it painful, hateful, or helpless—is related to her mother, who, through her own earlier experience of similar pain, can also relate to her daughter’s agony. During the two years of the binding process, the mother has imprinted her secret knowledge of female survival onto the flesh of her daughter. This secret knowledge is best carried out by the Chinese character *teng*, which means hurting and loving (caring,



Figure 1. Chinese child with bound feet. Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.



Figure 2. Yao Niang binds her feet. Drawing from *Cai fei lu*.

treasuring) separately or simultaneously. Mother inflicts the horrible pain on her daughter, beats and curses her to keep her walking, washes and changes her binding, makes shoes for her, and cleans the pus and blood off her putrefying feet. *Teng* is embedded in each gesture the mother makes toward the girl. The pain of footbinding, so intense that it is beyond words, forces the little girl to relearn language, a language more preverbal, transmitted from mother to daughter and shared among women. It partly explains why women barely talked about their practice, and why footbinding was mostly recorded by and represented in the male voice. From the few oral accounts of footbound women (recorded by men at the end of the practice), the unanimous description of the pain seems limited to "burning," "on fire," "sleepless," "loss of appetite." Elaine Scarry describes this scarcity of words for such experience: "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language" (1985, 4).

The speaker of the above excerpt uses an interesting metaphor about her binding experience: "Four of the toes were curled in like so many dead caterpillars." The process used to make a pair of three-inch feet resemble the different stages of an insect, like the caterpillar spinning thread and wrapping itself in a cocoon, then coming out of it, transformed from a crawling creature into a butterfly, or like a cicada shedding its skin from time to time to grow. The difference is that in the case of the insects the goal is to grow bigger while the aim of footbinding is to reduce feet to the degree that they almost disappear. When the foot is forced to arch like a bow, it gives the *illusion* of being part of the leg. Thus, with the help of high-heeled lotus shoes, what remains of the original foot becomes the extension of the erect leg. It is quite similar to the effect created by high-heeled shoes. Those stilt-like shoes and boots with heels as high as five to seven inches raise the body dramatically, creating the illusion of lengthened and thinned legs as well as shortened feet. More important, the raised heel alters the sudden break of the line of the leg, making the body appear taller and straighter, away from the dirt, from gravity.

The illusion of overcoming gravity and flying up to the sky is what the tiny-footed ladies aimed to achieve. When Yao Niang, the legendary first footbinder, dances on the golden lotus, she looks as if she were whirling on a cloud. Floating on clouds or water becomes a clichéd metaphor for describing the walk of bound feet in Chinese literature. Goddesses, female immortals, and girls with special talents in paintings of those periods all show this flying movement and highly aestheticized expression of idealized femininity. Their faces and upper bodies were depicted in detail, whereas



Figure 3. Stiletto-heeled shoes.

their lower bodies, especially their feet, were veiled in clouds or fabrics. Their airy weightlessness, embodied in the darting, floating movement of their bodies on the lotus feet that are both there and not there, is the emblem of a femininity purged of earthly dross and carnality.

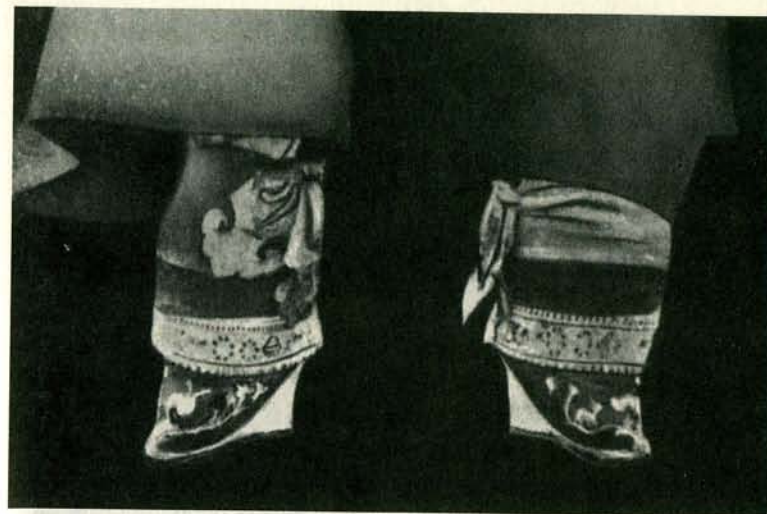


Figure 4. Lotus feet on heels, shoes, and pants embroidered in the patterns of flowers and clouds. Both high heels and lotus shoes have the effect of lifting the feet away from the ground.

However, the opposite also holds in assessing beauty, as Georges Bataille speculates:

The image of the desirable woman as first imagined would be insipid and unprovocative if it did not at the same time also promise or reveal a mysterious animal aspect, more momentarily suggestive. The beauty of the desirable woman suggests her private parts, the hairy ones, to be precise, the animal ones. . . . But above and beyond the sexual instinct, erotic desire has other components. Beauty that denies the animal and awakes desire finishes up by exasperating desire and exalting the animal parts. (1986, 142)

In the eye of the beholder, bound feet represent a true celestial being for the reason that they never have to touch the dirt, being wrapped in bandages and covered with embroidered shoes even during sleep. Yet at the same time, such a foot resembles the hoof of an animal, not the hoof of a cow or a horse, but the foot of a fox or hoof of a deer, which is associated with the myth of footbinding. The *golden lotus*, a euphonious term for bound feet, was originally a special apparatus made of gilded gold in the shape of lotus petals on which palace dancers walked and danced. The tradition was begun by an emperor of the northern Qi, Xiao Baojuan (reign, 498–501), who had his Consort Pan walk on top of the golden