FOOT BINDING IN CHINA

Name

Asian Civilizations

Month Date, Year

Outline

I. Thesis: While marital and sexual incentives may have played some role in furthering Chinese foot binding, past research has overemphasized this role, and a greater understanding of the economic motivations as well as the Western bias that helped shape views on the practice can provide a fuller understanding of foot binding.

II. Historical/Cultural Context: Foot binding, the practice of binding girls' feet to limit growth to an ideal of three inches, was an accepted part of Han women's lives throughout China for roughly one thousand years, peaking during the Qing dynasty.

III. Categories of Research on Foot Binding in China:

   a. Many scholars have centered their research on the idea of higher sexual appeal and thus better marriage prospects as the main reason that foot binding prospered in China for so long, recently evaluating the extent to which this is true.

   b. One angle that historians have pursued as either a coinciding or alternative factor to sexual or marital appeal is that foot binding arose from economic motivations.

   c. Recent research has diverged from an exploration of causes into a critique of how the interpretation of the role of foot binding in Chinese society has been largely influenced by western perspectives and ideas.

IV. Conclusion: Most women underwent foot binding voluntarily, although there were certain societal pressures (including economic incentives) involved. Although there has been an abundance of research on the topic, recent work suggests that a western bias may have skewed some of the initial inferences as to the causes of the practice, including an overemphasis on the idea that women were foot bound in order to be more sexually appealing or marriageable.

The practice of foot binding persisted in China for roughly a thousand years, but it is not considered simply a historical practice - it has deep cultural roots in the context of its history. Many scholars have attempted to deconstruct and expose these roots and causes along with their implications for history. However, recent research calls for a more overarching view of foot binding in order to understand the nuanced and varied causes of a practice that was so widespread that no one factor could have been the sole determinant for its progression in every region. While marital and sexual incentives may have played some role in furthering Chinese foot binding, past research has overemphasized this role, and a greater understanding of the economic motivations as well as the Western bias that helped shape views on the practice can provide a fuller understanding of foot binding.

Foot binding was an accepted practice throughout China for roughly one thousand years, with its peak during the Qing dynasty (from 1644 to 1912). [1] Most Han women had their toes bound underneath the bottoms of their feet by the age of six, and some had theirs bound as early as the age of three or four. [2] Often, the mother would perform the task of stretching and securing damp cloth tightly around their daughters' feet such that the girls' toes were forced underneath their soles. [3] The bandages were then progressively tightened until the end of their period of growth in order to inhibit feet from growing beyond the ideal length of three inches. [4] Many theories have emerged as to the reasons that foot binding was popular and wide spread throughout all classes of women during its most prevalent periods, including that it made women more sexually appealing and thus increased their marriage prospects. [5] Another theory is that

1. *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, s.v. "Footbinding"
2. *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, s.v. "Footbinding"
3. *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, s.v. "Footbinding"
4. *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, s.v. "Footbinding"
5. *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, s.v. "Footbinding"

women's feet were bound to keep them immobile, thus signaling to others a high economic status which could afford to support a woman unable to do most work. [6] However, this idea is contested due to the fact that foot binding was widespread even amongst poorer rural families. [7] Most historians agree that at its height, foot binding was a sign of high social status and feminine beauty; however, by the time the Qing dynasty banned it in 1902, foot binding was recognized by many as a practice for limiting the freedom and mobility of women.[8]

Many scholars, including Laurel Bossen, Hill Gates, Dorothy Ko, Melissa J. Brown, Damian Satterthwaite-Phillips, Birendra Rai, and Kunal Sengupta, have centered their research on the idea of higher sexual appeal and thus better marriage prospects as the main reason that foot binding prospered in China for so long, recently evaluating the extent to which this is true. The work of Birendra Rai and Kunal Sengupta explores the fact that, throughout the world, there are cultures in which parents use varying methods of discipline to instill "feminine virtues" in their daughters in order to improve their marital prospects. [9] This process, referred to as pre-marital confinement, often involves the imposition of restrictions on women's behavior, movement, and social interaction. [10] Rai and Sengupta's framework for pre-marital confinement suggests that foot binding falls under this categorization and exists because of a valuation of the produced characteristics by men in the marriage market.[11] However, there has been a progression and divergence from earlier explanations for foot binding involving sexual and marital appeal.

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6. *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, s.v. "Footbinding"
7. *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, s.v. "Footbinding"
8. *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, s.v. "Footbinding"
9. Birendra Rai and Kunal Sengupta, "Pre-Marital Confinement of Women: A Signaling and Matching Approach," *Journal of Development Economics* 105 (November 2013): 48–63.
10. Rai and Sengupta, "Pre-Marital Confinement of Women: A Signaling and Matching Approach," 53.
11. Rai and Sengupta, "Pre-Marital Confinement of Women: A Signaling and Matching Approach," 61.

Earlier explanations include Freud's theory of fetishism, Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, and Laurel Bossen and Hill Gates's development of a Marxist-feminist view of the "mystification of female labor." [12] The widespread perception that women bound their feet mainly for the sake of upward mobility in seeking a good marriage, along with previous explanations have helped bring light to the custom of foot binding; however, Dorothy Ko's examination of the topic in *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* suggests that they all rely on the false assumption that foot binding was a "single uniform custom with a single uniform cause."[13] Research by Melissa J. Brown, Laurel Bossen, Hill Gates, and Damian Satterthwaite-Phillips furthers this claim by undermining the long-standing general view that (before 1949) most Chinese women married up the social hierarchy with the assistance of foot binding and the appeal it created of foot-bound women. In a sample of 7,314 rural women living in Sichuan, Northern, Central, and Southwestern China in the first half of the twentieth century, they found that two-thirds of women did not marry up. [14] In fact, 22 percent of all women, across regions, married down. [15] Furthermore, the study found that although in most regions more women married up than down, in all regions, the majority did not marry into a higher social status. [16] To add to this finding, there was no statistically significant difference between the economic success of marital prospects for footbound versus non-bound girls in most regions, which contradicts a long held cultural belief that foot binding improved girls' marital

12. Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 109 – 111.
13. Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, 109.
14. Melissa J. Brown et al., "Marriage Mobility and Footbinding in Pre-1949 Rural China: A Reconsideration of Gender, Economics, and Meaning in Social Causation," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, no. 4 (2012): 1035.
15. Brown et al., "Marriage Mobility and Footbinding in Pre-1949 Rural China: A Reconsideration of Gender, Economics, and Meaning in Social Causation," 1056.
16. Brown et al., "Marriage Mobility and Footbinding in Pre-1949 Rural China: A Reconsideration of Gender, Economics, and Meaning in Social Causation," 1057.

prospects.[17] There was, however, variation by region, and Sichuan had a significant association between foot binding and marital mobility. [18] Regardless, this evidence of rural women's marital economic circumstances supports the idea that most women married within their own economic bracket, even in regions with higher associations between foot binding and marital mobility, such as Sichuan.[19]

Brown, Bossen, Gates, and Satterthwaite-Phillips's findings provide more recent evidential support for Ko's evaluation that not every region can be grouped under a single causality for the practice. In fact, much of the recent research into causes for the prevalence of foot binding have undermined initial and long-held theories of sexual appeal. Interviews conducted by Hill Gates with hundreds of village and small-town women who were footbound in their childhood provide incite that sexual appeal may not have held a major role in sustaining the practice. [20] Hills' work, as summarized in his article, "Bound Feet: How Sexy Were They?", centers around the fact that classical erotic novels show little sexual attention or interest in bound feet and shoes, even among the literate. [21] He also argues that since parents arranged most commoner marriages, and Chinese mothers-in-law were unlikely to want their sons to be distracted by sexually appealing brides, there is little indication of more than minimal importance of foot binding to most marriages, even if Chinese culture produced some people with a fetish for bound feet. [22] The removal of marital prospects from the list of potential driving factors for

17. Brown et al., "Marriage Mobility and Footbinding in Pre-1949 Rural China: A Reconsideration of Gender, Economics, and Meaning in Social Causation," 1057- 1058.
18. Brown et al., "Marriage Mobility and Footbinding in Pre-1949 Rural China: A Reconsideration of Gender, Economics, and Meaning in Social Causation," 1058.
19. Brown et al., "Marriage Mobility and Footbinding in Pre-1949 Rural China: A Reconsideration of Gender, Economics, and Meaning in Social Causation," 1062.
20. Hill Gates, "Bound Feet: How Sexy Were They?" in *The History of the Family* 13 (January 1, 2008): 68–70.
21. Gates, "Bound Feet: How Sexy Were They," 58–59.

22. Gates, "Bound Feet: How Sexy Were They," 68–69.

foot binding has pushed scholars to search for other, possibly better, explanations for the endurance of the custom of foot binding. [23]

One angle that historians, including Laurel Bossen, Hill Gates, Melissa J. Brown, Wang Xurui, and Damian Satterthwaite-Phillips, have pursued as either a coinciding or alternative factor to sexual or marital appeal is that foot binding arose from economic motivations. Foot binding was common in China until the early twentieth century, when most Chinese were family farmers. [24] Even through periods of great unrest, such as the nineteenth century which was wrought with rebellions and wars (including the Opium War and Taiping Rebellion), foot binding continued as a practice throughout China. [25] From an economic standpoint (considered at length by Laurel Bossen and Hill Gates), the common perception that foot binding was a status or sexual symbol fails to account for the financial motivations of the Chinese during the time. [26] The economic argument Bossen and Hill develop is that it was "an undeniably effective way to get even very young girls to sit still and work with their hands." [27] This claim works in conjunction with the idea that mothers bound their daughters' feet in order to control the aim of their labor; their daughters would have to do handiwork with the mother inside instead of assisting their male relatives with farming. [28] Furthermore, their lack of mobility made them less costly to feed while not hindering their ability to contribute through "hand-worked tasks," such as embroidery. [29]

23. Gates, "Bound Feet: How Sexy Were They," 70.
24. Laurel Bossen and Hill Gates, *Bound Feet, Young Hands: Tracking the Demise of Footbinding in Village China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 11 – 12.
25. Bossen and Gates, *Bound Feet, Young Hands*, 11 – 12.
26. Bossen and Gates, *Bound Feet, Young Hands*, 12 – 14.
27. Bossen and Gates, *Bound Feet, Young Hands*, 19 – 20.
28. Bossen and Gates, *Bound Feet, Young Hands*, 17 – 18.

29. Bossen and Gates, *Bound Feet, Young Hands*, 17 – 18.

Later research by Melissa J. Brown and Damian Satterthwaite-Phillips also undermines the wide-spread assumption that footbound women created more of an economic burden on their families than those never bound, and asserts that Chinese daughters, regardless of whether or not they had bound feet, made important economic contributions to their households, particularly in rural areas. [30] Hill Gates' research, "Footloose in Fujian: Economic Correlates of Footbinding," also suggests that the economic contributions Chinese women made to their households as well as the complexity of labor divisions provide a basis for the economic incentives for foot binding women in the Sichuan Fujian provinces.[31] Hill argues that Chinese women are often believed to have made little economic contribution to their families simply because the evaluation is often based on wage contributions which women could not make. [32] However, women made up as much as half of the manual labor force in pre-revolution China. [33] They aided with "food processing, the making of everyday cotton cloth for clothing and bedding, and the creation of labor-extravagant luxury commodities such as silk, grasscloth, hemp gauze, tea, opium, white wax," and they performed chores around the house. [34] While Hill understands that women's contributions have been largely unrecognized due to many factors, including that most historical accounts record the lives of elite women who were much less likely to work, individual contributions are hard to discern when resources were often pooled, and work was often characterized as merely "obedience of the subordinate," his research is indicative of a trend to

30. Melissa J. Brown and Damian Satterthwaite-Phillips, "Economic Correlates of Footbinding: Implications for the Importance of Chinese Daughters' Labor," *PLoS ONE* 13, no. 9 (September 20, 2018): 1.
31. Hill Gates, "Footloose in Fujian: Economic Correlates of Footbinding," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 1 (2001): 130-131.
32. Gates, "Footloose in Fujian: Economic Correlates of Footbinding," 130-131.
33. Gates, "Footloose in Fujian: Economic Correlates of Footbinding," 132.
34. Gates, "Footloose in Fujian: Economic Correlates of Footbinding," 137.

uncover these contributions as well as the implications for the association between foot binding and labor.[35]

Further research by Laurel Bossen, Wang Xurui, Melissa J. Brown, and Hill Gates' suggests that for rural women, if not all Chinese women, foot binding should be understood within the context of rural economic conditions, specifically in relation to changes in textile production. [36] Focusing on two counties in Shaanxi province with historical sources and interview data from rural women who grew up during a period when foot binding was still common, evidence emerges that transformations in textile production helped undermine the custom of foot binding and contributed to its rapid demise since it offered women a new independent source of income, free from some of the physical and social constrictions of dependence on the family.[37] Thus, a large body of research has transitioned from an emphasis on sexual and marital causes to a concentration on the potential economic correlates to foot binding that contributed to its spread and stronghold in China.

Recent research done by scholars, such as John Haddad, Hagar Kotef, Kaz Ross, and Angela Zito, has diverged from an exploration of causes into a critique of how the interpretation of the role of foot binding in Chinese society has been largely influenced by Western perspectives and ideas. John Haddad's research examines the life of Afong Moy, the Chinese Lady. [38] The Chinese Lady drew crowds in America for many reasons, but one of the largest was the fact that she had tiny feet as a result of years of foot binding. [39] Her life was

35. Gates, "Footloose in Fujian: Economic Correlates of Footbinding," 146.
36. Laurel Bossen et al., "Feet and Fabrication: Footbinding and Early Twentieth-Century Rural Women's Labor in Shaanxi," *Modern China* 37, no. 4 (July 2011): 347–348.
37. Bossen et al., "Feet and Fabrication: Footbinding and Early Twentieth-Century Rural Women's Labor in Shaanxi," 381-383.
38. John Haddad, "The Chinese Lady and China for the Ladies," *Chinese America: History & Perspectives* (January 2011): 5.

39. Haddad, "The Chinese Lady and China for the Ladies," 5–6.

characterized by Western male writers, and thus is portrayed from a skewed perspective, which although fascinated with her feet, regarded them as the product of a harsh and foreign system. [40] This Western view, according to Haddad, fails to account for the Chinese perspective or attempt to understand the cultural reasons for the practice. [41] However, it prevailed as a source of knowledge about Chinese culture and foot binding.[42] The influence of writings, such as those on Afong Moy, has contributed to the rise of many interpretations of Chinese foot binding in Western political thought. [43] Hagar Kotef emphasizes that Westerners have used the practice as "a contrast to European freedom or as a mirror reflecting its own limitations." [44] Kotef argues that bound feet came to be seen as an illustration of a "lack of freedom via disabled mobility." [45] Kotef introduces the idea that Western thought also viewed freedom within "global (imperial) and gendered frameworks" in order to critique that bound feet became a marker of both a "gendered and an imperial divide" between those with the "freedom of mobility," and thus are seen as able to rule, and those who cannot be seen as fit to rule because they lack basic mobility.[46] While Kotef's article, "Little Chinese Feet Encased in Iron Shoes: Freedom, Movement, Gender, and Empire in Western Political Thought," concludes with an assertion that this division was lessened by interaction with the East and West,[47] Kaz Ross' work in '"(Hand)Made in China': The Curious Return of the Footbinding Shoe" examines how increased

40. Haddad, "The Chinese Lady and China for the Ladies," 11.
41. Haddad, "The Chinese Lady and China for the Ladies," 16-17.
42. Haddad, "The Chinese Lady and China for the Ladies," 18–19.
43. Haddad, "The Chinese Lady and China for the Ladies," 19.
44. Hagar Kotef, "Little Chinese Feet Encased in Iron Shoes: Freedom, Movement, Gender, and Empire in Western Political Thought," *Political Theory* 43, no. 3 (2015): 334.
45. Kotef, "Little Chinese Feet Encased in Iron Shoes: Freedom, Movement, Gender, and Empire in Western Political Thought," 334-335.
46. Kotef, "Little Chinese Feet Encased in Iron Shoes: Freedom, Movement, Gender, and Empire in Western Political Thought," 338-339.
47. Kotef, "Little Chinese Feet Encased in Iron Shoes: Freedom, Movement, Gender, and Empire in Western Political Thought," 354-355.

interaction provided more opportunities for "outsiders" to critique the practice with a double standard. [48]

In particular, Ross' research delves into the double standard concerning the perception of "outsiders'" versus Chinese fascination with the lotus shoes worn by foot-bound women.[49] When the Chinese appear to be fascinated by foot binding and its products, such as the lotus shoes, there is often an assumption that this fascination comes from a fetishized view of it; whereas, "outsiders'" fascination is often regarded as objective (even historical or cultural) fascination.[50] Thus, Ross alongside many scholars, criticizes the lens through which non-Chinese people have viewed the practice of foot binding. The depiction of the treatment of women in China has also been largely dependent on the lens through which it is viewed. Often, foot binding has been seen as an "otherness" marker that separates nonmodern from modern China. [51] Angela Zito urges that the way that "outsiders" have viewed foot binding in the context of the nineteenth century offers a basis from which to delve into the difference between perspectives and the actuality of the treatment. [52] Furthermore, Zito argues that the fetishist and feminist view of foot binding examine merely one aspect of the practice and conflate it to represent the whole custom, even making assumptions based on the conflation. [53] For example, Zito highlights that the pain of foot binding instilled the idea that the practice is barbaric, which then turned into an assumption that the Chinese who practiced it must also be barbaric.[54]

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48. Kaz Ross, "'(Hand) Made in China': The Curious Return of the Footbinding Shoe," *Postcolonial Studies* 4, no. 3 (November 2001): 311–314.
49. Ross, "'(Hand) Made in China': The Curious Return of the Footbinding Shoe," 311–312.
50. Ross, "'(Hand)Made in China': The Curious Return of the Footbinding Shoe," 331-332.
51. Angela Zito, *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures*, ed. Martin Fran and Heinrich Larissa (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 21.
52. Zito, *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures*, 21 – 22.
53. Zito, *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures*, 23– 25.

54. Zito, *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures*, 34.

Overall, criticisms of Western interpretation of the practice are not new; however, there has been a new emphasis on the need to highlight the potential bias of past writing on the topic of foot binding in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of what the custom meant during its height and why it lasted for over a thousand years in China.

While past trends placed a large emphasis on sexual or marital reasons for foot binding Chinese girls, the recent deconstruction of this reason as well as the emergence of evidence for economic motivations and of distorted perceptions of the practice provide a more objective foundation to delve into the complex cultural and historical incentives for the long persistence of the practice. Furthermore, although there is still some bias in the study of such a controversial and deep-rooted cultural practice, the recognition of such bias (that many scholars now have) may help mitigate the influence it has on future research. The current trend in research is favorable largely because it accounts for the potential bias of any research, while not shying from in-depth consideration of the different potential explanations of causality as well as the interactions amongst such reasons.

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