



Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China

By Wang Ping

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Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China By Wang Ping

Asian Studies/Women's Studies

A fascinating and haunting exploration of the bound foot in Chinese culture.

Why did so many Chinese women over a thousand-year period bind their feet, enduring rotting flesh, throbbing pain, and hampered mobility throughout their lives? What compelled mothers to bind the feet of their young daughters, forcing the girls to walk about on their doubled-over limbs to achieve the breakage of bones requisite for three-inch feet? Why did Chinese men find women's "golden lotuses"-stench and all-so arousing, inspiring beauty contests for feet, thousands of poems, and erotica in which bound, silk-slipped feet were fetishized and lusted after?

As a child growing up during the Cultural Revolution, Wang Ping fantasized about binding her own feet and tried to restrict their growth by wrapping them in elastic bandages. Even though footbinding was not practiced by every woman in late Imperial China, the aesthetic, financial, and erotic advantages of footbinding permeated all aspects of language, ranging from erotic poetry, novels, and performances to food writing, myths, folk songs and ditties, and secret women's writing, some of it hidden in embroidery. In *Aching for Beauty*, Wang interprets the mystery of footbinding as part of a womanly heritage-"a roaring ocean current of female language and culture."

She also shows that footbinding should not be viewed merely as a function of men's oppression of women, but rather as a phenomenon of male and female desire deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Written in an elegant and powerful style, and filled with personal, intriguing, and sometimes paradoxical insights, *Aching for Beauty* builds bridges from the past to the present, East to West, history to literature, imagination to reality.

Wang Ping, born in Shanghai, came to the United States in 1985. Her books include short stories, *American Visa* (1994); a novel, *Foreign Devil* (1996); and poetry, *Of Flesh and Spirit* (1998). She also edited and cotranslated *New Generation: Poems from China Today* (1999). She has a Ph.D. in comparative literature from New York University and teaches creative writing at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The earliest mention of foot binding in Chinese history may date to the 21st century B.C., when the founder of the Xia dynasty was said to have married a "fox fairy with tiny feet." Practiced by royal women and their courtiers since approximately the 11th century A.D., foot binding was eventually taken up by commoners as well, with all classes striving to achieve three-inch "lotus feet." The "breaking process" began for girls between the ages of five and seven, "when their bones were still flexible" and they were "mature enough" to comprehend the importance of the practice. Novelist (*Foreign Devil*), short story writer (*American Visa*) and poet (*Of Flesh and Spirit*), Ping illustrates that the two-year rite of passage not only introduced young girls to pain (it involved breaking bones and "peeling... rotten flesh") but also initiated them into a "permanent bonding with [their] mother[s] and female ancestors," shaped in part by the difficulty of communicating pain through words. Ping, who has a Ph.D. in comparative literature, looks to language and literature in examining the deep cultural and power structures involved in this agonizing tradition. Referencing such heavy-hitting theorists as Derrida, Lacan and Foucault, Ping's prolific source notes also attest to an intriguing variety of sources. From Eve Ensler's hip and contemporary *The Vagina Monologues* to the remote Ming History of 1739. Although her language can be rather stiff and academic, Ping's spirited study should appeal to those intrigued by the mysterious link between violence and beauty. Photos. (Oct.)

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From Library Journal

This book describes the chilling and tragic history of beauty via footbinding in China that began around the 11th century, flourished in the Ming Dynasty, and was eclipsed in the Qing Dynasty in 1911. The author, whose impulse as a child in China was to bind her own feet, first wrote a doctoral dissertation at New York University on the subject of footbinding as represented in Chinese literature. Parts of this book are for the general reader interested in this subject, but substantial portions read like a doctoral dissertation and can only be appreciated by the literary scholar or women's studies specialist. The thesis of the book—that beauty in China is created through sheer violence—has great representation in China's historic erotic literature, including Li Yu's *The Carnal Prayer Mat* and Han Daguo's *The Golden Lotus*. The book is a stark contrast to *Notable Women of China* (LJ 5/1/00), which barely mentions footbinding, but complements *The Sextants of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History* (LJ 2/15/99), which discusses footbinding as a symbol of a China overrun by economic and sexual extravagance. Recommended primarily for university libraries with specialized collections in Chinese literature and women's studies.

Peggy Spitzer Christoff, *Oak Park, IL*

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Review

"Wang Ping writes with passion and an understanding strengthened by the female experience. This is a rich, necessary, and invaluable book."—Ha Jin, author of *Waiting*

"Impeccable.... [A] house of Chinese wonders.... Wang takes on a giant storehouse of subject matter and glides through its labyrinthine corridors in fluid, often intuitive moves.... Fascinating."—*San Francisco Bay Guardian*

"Eloquently and thoroughly documents a custom that for 1,000 years symbolized not only attractiveness, but gentility, virtue and high status.... [Wang Ping] peels back the layers of fear, desire and social climbing...like so many lotus petals."—*Star Tribune* (Minneapolis)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Natalie White:

Spent a free time and energy to be fun activity to accomplish! A lot of people spent their free time with their family, or their particular friends. Usually they doing activity like watching television, going to beach, or picnic inside park. They actually doing ditto every week. Do you feel it? Would you like to something different to fill your personal free time/ holiday? Could be reading a book may be option to fill your totally free time/ holiday. The first thing that you'll ask may be what kinds of reserve that you should read. If you want to try out look for book, may be the reserve untitled Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China can be very good book to read. May be it is usually best activity to you.

Jon Pittenger:

Your reading sixth sense will not betray you actually, why because this Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China book written by well-known writer we are excited for well how to make book that could be understand by anyone who all read the book. Written within good manner for you, leaking every ideas and producing skill only for eliminate your personal hunger then you still skepticism Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China as good book not just by the cover but also by content. This is one guide that can break don't evaluate book by its cover, so do you still needing another sixth sense to pick this kind of!? Oh come on your reading sixth sense already alerted you so why you have to listening to one more sixth sense.

Jewell Brundage:

Are you kind of stressful person, only have 10 or perhaps 15 minute in your day time to upgrading your mind ability or thinking skill actually analytical thinking? Then you are receiving problem with the book than can satisfy your small amount of time to read it because this all time you only find book that need more time to be read. Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China can be your answer because it can be read by a person who have those short time problems.

Jo Jordan:

That publication can make you to feel relax. This specific book Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China was colourful and of course has pictures on the website. As we know that book Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China has many kinds or type. Start from kids until teens. For example Naruto or Private eye Conan you can read and think that you are the character on there. So , not at all of book are generally make you bored, any it can make you feel happy, fun and loosen up. Try to choose the best book for you and try to like reading that will.

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