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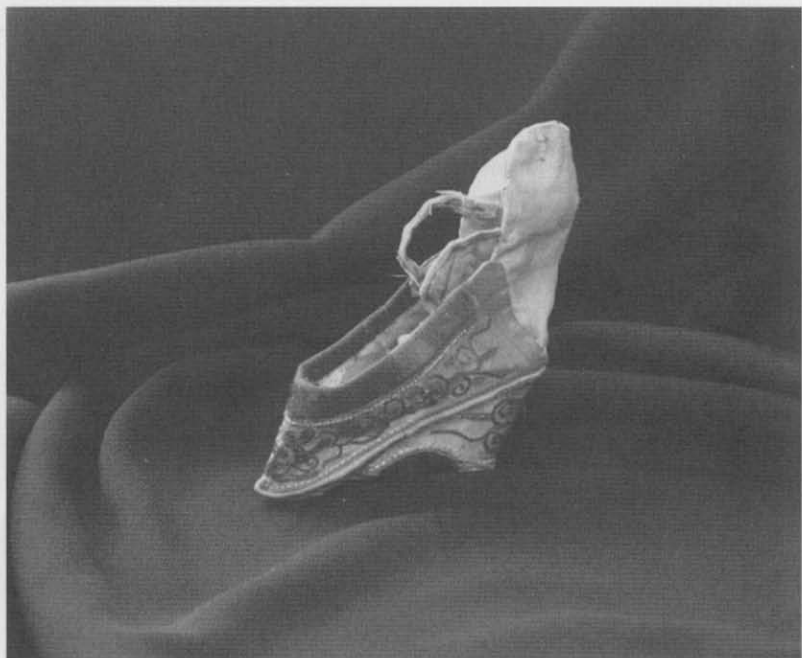
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Preface

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, Dictée*

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.

Three-Inch Golden Lotuses: 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

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 *k'ang*, 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 *k'ang* 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.

宵娘纏腳



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

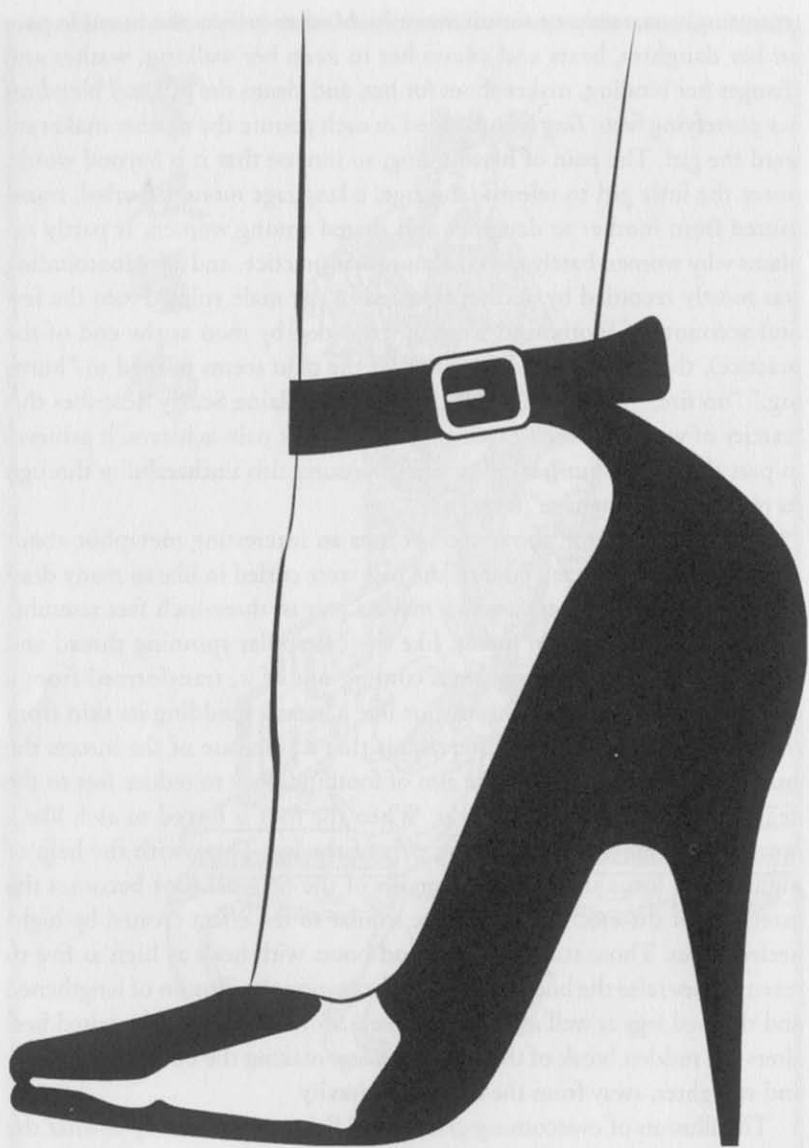


Figure 3. Stiletto-heeled shoes.

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.