John Robert Shepherd, ***Footbinding as Fashion: Ethnicity, Labor, and Status in Traditional China***

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The practice of footbinding women in China was one of many customs around the world inflicted on the female body. It involved binding the feet of small girls to prevent them from growing and aimed to keep them as small as possible, the "three-inch foot" being the desired standard. Although footbinding obviously inflicted great pain and made walking and standing more difficult than for those with normal-sized feet, it lasted to a greater or lesser degree from the tenth to the middle of the twentieth centuries. The practice's ramifications have been manifold, including economic, cultural, and social.

Footbinding has attracted significant attention over the years, especially since the 1990s, and this superb item is currently (as of September 2020) the most recent book-length account. It covers the period from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, focusing on "its heyday and not its decline in the twentieth century" (172). One of the unique features of this book is a case study of footbinding from Taiwan, especially during the period of Japanese colonialism from 1895 to 1945, with other case studies from mainland provinces such as Hebei, Beijing, and Liaoning.

The methodology involves various types of traditional literature and accounts of interviews with women whose feet were bound. What is special about the methodology here, however, is the use of data from censuses held in Taiwan under the Japanese in 1905 and 1915, which Shepherd describes as "the most detailed and comprehensive accounting of the practice before it declined" (7). In addition, there are also "less detailed surveys of North China, including Hebei and Liaoning in 1928" (7). This kind of methodology gives a sense of credibility not found to the same extent in other accounts. Footbinding was particularly widespread in Taiwan, though the Japanese issued laws trying to prevent it.

The documentation is both comprehensive and apt. Apart from being very rich, it includes items in English, Chinese, and Japanese, as well as Manchu sources in Japanese translation. The items are literary, historical, social, and cultural with a great deal of material not only on footbinding itself but also on its economic, social, and cultural background.

The structure and writing style are clear and effective. Each chapter has a summative conclusion, and the book an overall conclusion. The writing is scholarly but accessible, making the book easy to read. There are quite a few figures, tables, and illustrations, all adding to the book's interest and scholarly value.

The author is an anthropologist at the University of Virginia. He has previously published widely on Taiwanese society, demography, and history but also on the Qing dynasty as well. As an intensive area of research, footbinding is comparatively new for him.

What about John Shepherd's contribution to theory and ideas? The title of the book says clearly that footbinding was a "fashion." One of my very few criticisms of the book is that the author does not define this crucial term in as much detail as I would like. For me, a "fashion" is something that is not particularly deep within society and changes fairly readily. But it seems Shepherd's understanding is a bit more concrete. He states in the conclusion that the interviews of women from all over China and from a range of periods "repeat over and over again the desire to be respected, concern for beauty and the fear of ridicule" (167). Thus, fashion resides in these three very specific areas.

Then there are the very important ethnic and economic perspectives. "The case studies included here cast doubt on ethnic identity and labor compatibility theories about the spread of footbinding" (8); nor did footbinding intensify as a way to mark ethnic differences. In other words, the idea that footbinding was crucial for Han women to show they were not Manchu at a time when the Manchus formed the ruling dynasty is not corroborated by the evidence.

As for the economic aspect, we know that female labor in both agriculture and handicrafts was crucial to the Chinese economy during the heyday of footbinding. This impinged on both economic sectors, usually negatively, but female labor was not a reason for maintaining the practice.

An early major scholarly study of footbinding in China is Howard Levy's *Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom*, which was published in 1967. As its name implies, Levy sees the practice as essentially erotic, in other words, women's footbinding added to their sexual attractiveness to men. Shepherd mentions "fashion among dancers and courtesans" in the tenth century as a possible reason for the origin of footbinding (4) but follows Hill Gates and other recent researchers in debunking the idea that it was central during the heyday of footbinding.

As one who, in the early stages of doing a PhD on Chinese culture, got to know and admired Levy's book, I note that major interviewing by more recent researchers has confined itself to women, who could well have a different perspective from men. However, Shepherd dismisses even this when he comments that "there seems to be little evidence that the patriarchal or erotic urges of men (rather than their status anxieties) were directly responsible for the maintenance" of footbinding (98). I found Shepherd's more recent and thorough research against Levy's view persuasive. Still, I maintain my respect for Levy's work, a view Shepherd shares (211–12).

Overall, this is an excellent book and contributes greatly to the literature on footbinding. It is comprehensive in its scope and innovative in its methodology and style of analysis. Above all, it is creative and convincing in its approaches and conclusions and in contributing to theoretical understandings of this custom. I recommend it strongly not only for anthropologists but for a wider readership as well, including specialists and students on Taiwan and the Chinese mainland, and those interested in Chinese history, culture, and society.

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