



Sex, machismo and footbinding

By Tian Tian, Shanghai Star. 2000-11-28



Yang Shaorong introduces golden lotus shoes for women with bound feet in his Bai Lu Tang (a hall with hundreds of shoes).

Collector's 800 pairs of shoes reveal torture of Chinese women throughout history

BEAUTIFUL shoes of different sizes that fill department store shelves might look like "gunboats" to the women who had their feet bound according to the custom of old China.

The tiny bound foot - known as the "golden lotus" - was in fashion in China for centuries. The term is also used to refer to the embroidered shoes these women wore.

Modern women can hardly imagine the idea of binding their feet with cloth to reduce them to only three or four inches in length. But in remote villages of China, there are still old women tottering around on feet that were broken and bound in their youth, ensconced in these tiny shoes.

"The old women with bound feet in a village in Yunnan Province can dance disco beautifully," said Yang Shaorong, a collector of the golden lotus shoes. In the past 20 years, Yang has collected over 800 pairs of embroidered shoes and over 1,000 articles such as the footbinding tools related to the golden lotus.

"It is no shame talking about the past, it is a part of Chinese history" said the 63-year-old retired Shanghai resident. "Surely it is improper to judge it with modern eyes."

Yang said he has been proposing in vain to hold a forum on this part of history when the whole nation viewed foot-binding women the most attractive.

He said many foreigners, contrary to the indifferent natives, showed great interest and have invited him to hold shoe exhibitions in their countries. And many foreigners, collectors, scholars and even statesmen, have visited his small room, which is packed with a fantastic array of golden lotus shoes.

He will take dozens of embroidered shoes and other articles related to footbinding to Singapore on January 18 next year.

"It is a fact of the past and we have to face it with the right attitude, no matter whether it is a glory or humiliation," he said.

Pulling up the curtains in front of the glass cases which held shelves of embroidered shoes with different sizes, colours and designs, excitement lit up his wrinkled face and he began to tell stories about this Chinese peculiarity.

Footbinding lasted in China for more than 1,000 years through shifting dynasties and could not be eradicated until the founding of new China in 1949.

There are different stories about the origin of golden lotus shoes. One is about Yao Niang, a favourite concubine of Li Yu, the last emperor of the Nantang Dynasty (the year of 936) who lost his sovereignty due to his addiction to literature, music and other forms of entertainment.

Yao Niang was a pretty and skillful dancer. Li had a stage shaped like a golden lotus especially molded for her to dance on. He also asked Yao Niang to wrap her feet tightly with silk so as to look more graceful and seductive.

Li was charmed, and so were many women in the palace who began to follow Yao Niang by binding their feet. Later the fashion was spread among the ordinary women and encouraged by men.

As usual, throughout history fashion has come at great cost to women. The fashion of tiny waists in the Western countries was accompanied by broken ribs and damaged internal organs that had been compressed by corsets.

But to ancient Chinese women, Yang said, having their feet bound became more than just a fashion but a necessity to achieve a good life and even a good afterlife.

Women of all social standings, whether court ladies or prostitutes, bound their feet. The countryside women also bound their feet, only in a looser fashion so that they could achieve the upper-class look but still work in the fields.

"Men would even bind their feet," Yang said. "Some boys bound their feet out of curiosity and some male actors bound their feet to please their audiences."

Yang said when a girl turned six or seven, or even at the age of three or four, she would have to endure the torturous process of breaking the arch and curling the toes under so that the feet would fit the ideal golden lotus shoes.

Usually the mother would consult the lunar calendar to make certain it was an auspicious day for her daughter's feet to be bound so as to be less painful and achieve the desired shape.

The date was mostly in autumn so that the cold wind would numb the foot during the painful formation period.

"I cried most of the time in the early days when my mother had my feet bound at six," said Xu Laolao aged 72 in Hebei Province. "But I was told I would be more beautiful and could find a rich husband when growing up."

Xu said that in those tortuous days, she could only move her body inch by inch. Later she got used to wobbling around on her heels. But eventually she married an ordinary farmer and when doing farm work, she had to kneel because her small feet could not support her for long.

Yang said in old times, women were dominated by men, spiritually and physically because they had no economic status. The popularity and longevity of the golden lotus was mainly derived from sexual attraction by men.

"Men then liked the weak female, limping on bound feet," Yang said. The swaying walk and a curvaceous body developed due to the intense exercise required of the buttock muscles were quite seductive in the eyes of the men at that time.

Yang said the Chinese female was concealed from men for most of her youth, hidden in the house. So seeing or feeling the hidden feet, which were thought to possess all the sexual characteristics of a woman, always stimulated men's desire toward sex.

"It was common to play with the feet, kissing, sucking or chewing," he said. "Men even drank from the cup placed in the shoes of the female, most of whom were prostitutes."

He said even when they were making love, the female would quite likely wear the embroidered shoes which were, unlike walking shoes, more delicate and softer.

Yang said on the wedding day, the female would take with her a cabinet of embroidered shoes to her new home.

"Some shoes were specifically made by her mother containing embroidered sexual pictures, graphs or small articles," Yang said. "The ancient people were comparatively more open than the modern generation in this aspect."

"My desire to collect them was triggered at the first sight of such shoes," Yang said.

"If we do not preserve them, they will vanish from our history," he said. "Then our descendants will have to go to Britain or the United States to have a look at them."

Yang said many foreign collectors have rich collections of the embroidered shoes. And after 20 years, Yang himself has acquired over 800 pairs in his small room named Bai Lu Tang (a hall with hundreds of shoes).

To collect more shoes with obvious historic and regional characteristics, Yang travelled a lot. In the past, he has spent nearly 200,000 yuan (\$24,096) on his costly and eccentric hobby.

"I am dealing in antiques," he said. "Every penny I get goes to the shoes."

Actually each shoe Yang collected has a story.

Yang roughly divides the shoes into the southern type and the northern type.

"The southern ones are more delicate, rich in fine pictures," he said.

But the ordinary women, especially in Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), could not choose freely the material and colour.

"They were forbidden to use golden silk, pearls, cloth in yellow, golden yellow or green," he said. "These were particularly reserved for the royal families."

Yang said the designs on the shoes usually expressed the women's longing and desire for happiness, wealth or social status.

Pomegranate refers to more descendants; copper cash refers to richness; peach to longevity; peony to elegance; magpie for wedding and happiness.

But the single women could not embroider the Mandarin ducks which symbolize marriage, Yang said.

Yang said the footbinding women seemed fragile but some of them were good at tightrope walking. Sometimes women would protect their delicate feet by putting thin sheets of iron in their shoes under the embroidered cloth.

"Fashionable women in Guangzhou in the late Qing Dynasty embroidered English letters on their shoes," Yang said.

Holding a shoe with a picture on which two boys were playing with a football, he said China, not other countries might be the inventor of football.

The deceased usually wore the shoes on which embroidered the lotus, bats and usually a ladder upon which the deceased would climb up to heaven.

"I plan to write a book in proper time to record my collection," Yang said. "And I hope more people will offer me enlightening ideas on how to treat this part of history."

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