Film Review / Revue de Film

Footbinding: Search for the Three Inch Golden Lotus. Directed and produced by Yue-Qing Yang. 47: 45 minutes. 2004. ©East-West Film Enterprise. Moving Images Distribution, 402 West Pender Street, Ste 606, Vancouver, BC V6B 1T6, telephone: (604) 684-3014 or (800) 684-3014, url: www.movingimages.ca

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Footbinding was practised in China for centuries until it was finally discontinued in the first half of the 20th century. In China today there still survive dwindling numbers of elderly women who had their feet bound. This permanent bodily transformation, a physical compression and containment of the feet of small girls, fascinates people for different reasons. Some marvel at the artistry of the tiny foot and the extreme efforts to achieve this particular beauty ideal, while others struggle to understand how and why a society could permanently hobble girls' and women's ability to stand on firm feet, to walk briskly, to run or to jump. Born and raised in China, Canadian filmmaker, Yue-Qing Yang returns to China to understand both the how and the why of footbinding. She finds this is a subject that few in China want to discuss.

Yang draws upon her own family resources and in so doing reveals some of the dynamics of Chinese families. She has two mothers because, when she was born in China, her birth mother wanted to have another child, a boy. She thus gave Yang to her sister to raise as a daughter. Only later did Yang discover that the mother who raised her was biologically her aunt. Both Yang's mothers and her sister are a tremendous help to her in making the film. They are loyal and supportive, but also dubious that Yang's desire to make a film about foot-bound women and to show the naked foot unbound is a good thing politically or culturally. Conflicted by their desire to help her—which they certainly do, their ambivalence is very moving. We see incredible tenderness and warmth in these relations, giving us a sense of the strong but unspoken love that ties these women together. This film reveals various sides of Chinese family relationships linking women: mother, aunt, and sisters. Surely footbinding is a subject that requires women's participation and voices.

The story takes the form of a personal quest to learn what it meant to Chinese women to have bound feet and why they did it. Yang is troubled by the thought that she might have been bound as a child if she had been born a generation earlier. She wants to understand what the women of her family, her mother and aunt, and Chinese women more generally, went through as children to make their feet small, and why binding was deemed necessary. She looks far and wide to find and interview surviving elderly women who had feet that were close to the ideal small foot, called the "three-inch golden lotus." Yang's narration throughout this journey is soft-spoken, calm, understated and emotionally compelling.

Yang's quest takes her back "home" to China where the state and the culture both exert pressures to deny this "shameful" past. People are reluctant to talk about a custom that once embarrassed China before other cultures, even though the custom was firmly opposed and suppressed by the Communist government, as well as the Nationalist government before it. This denial is, then, more a question of national pride, and a concern with the "face" of traditional Chinese culture. It reflects a fear that foreigners might ridicule traditional Chinese culture. The Communist state taught people to see foreigners as colonialists or antagonists looking for ways to deride Chinese culture. This makes it difficult for Yang and her crew to film this sensitive topic, particularly when she leaves her circle of kinswomen. Yang shows several women turn away and refuse to be filmed or interviewed in the presence of a foreign film crew (despite the fact that Yang is Chinese). It would have been interesting to have a glimpse of her camera crew to see what it was that made people nervous. In such situations, long-term anthropological research methods might have opened more doors, but of course they would have required much more time in remote locations.

Yang's search for the three-inch ideal takes her beyond her immediate family and friends in Jiangsu and Shandong provinces in eastern China to distance places in the west such as Shaanxi province, the city of Datong in northwest Shanxi, and Yunnan province in the southwest. She seeks out places where women's small feet were famous, or where footbinding persisted to a relatively late date. We see Yang carrying her gear, travelling by train, trekking up hillsides, and finally, suffering the pain and irony of being hobbled herself after breaking her ankle. She carries on, with cast and crutches, perhaps more motivated than ever to understand the history of Chinese women's disabled feet.

Woven into this story of women's pain and beauty are interesting but uncommented scenes and dialogues that give us a glimpse of women's work in the past. Her elderly mother and aunt, who both had their feet bound, sit together upon the bed to show her how they used to sew the beautiful cotton shoes. The women deftly cut, paste, and sew, working with cloth, scissors, needle and thread. Without Yang mentioning their mastery of traditional techniques, the observant viewer can see that they have been working with cloth most of their lives. One of them recalls how they used to make all the clothes and shoes for the family, and that she once made seventeen pairs of shoes consecutively.

In other scenes, elderly women show precisely how they bound and cared for their own feet, dealing with infected feet as the flesh rotted, soaking them, rebinding them. They demonstrate these techniques upon the tender feet of a small Chinese girl about five or six years old, a haunting, shadowy child in black-and-white, who represents the past, the girl that Yang might have been. This technique allows us to imagine how parents would bind the feet of a girl child, how she would resist, how she would try to walk leaning against a wall. Yang juxtaposes this small unsteady girl trying to walk, leaning

against the wall, with a scene of a boy who was told to study hard for the imperial exams. An even more memorable contrast is a contemporary scene, in colour, of a boy leaping and dancing in the street, expressing with his flying feet the innocent joy and energy of unfettered youth, denied to millions of footbound girls.

In painstaking detail, old women describe how they began the binding, how they wound the cloth to fold the toes under the foot, anchored the cloth at the heel, and gradually broke the arch. They showed the differences following the unbinding of feet. One sister simply stopped wearing the bindings and her foot remained deformed although unbound. The other tied small strings to each toe to pull them back out from under her feet and thus achieved more normal looking feet, although she was still unable to walk on the balls of her feet. Yang slowly demonstrates that although most women had bound feet, few mothers had the expertise to create a foot of the desired form. There were different degrees of skill in this process. Much as if teeth straightening were performed by each mother rather than by an orthodontist, footbinding produced a great range of effects, some far from the ideal. Yang reveals the unfortunate experience of one bitter woman whose feet were improperly bound. Because they did not take the ideal shape she had the handicap of deformity yet none of the advantages associated with small-footed beauty.

Seeking explanations, Yang interviewed Columbia University historian Dorothy Ko (2001), curator of an exhibit of bound-foot shoes at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto in 2000. Ko emphasizes the pride and beauty that women felt about their feet and their shoes, and believes that enduring the pain was somewhat like a rite of passage to womanhood.

Yang also interviewed Beverly Jackson, Asian art collector and expert on footbinding (1997), about the theory that footbinding was invented by men to control women. Jackson notes that it was not simply men who imposed and perpetuated the custom; women as mothers and grandmothers actually carried out the binding and inflicted it on small girls, telling them it would help them get a husband. No one ever mentions men binding women's feet.

Elderly men expressed their admiration of the small, bound foot and how the size of bride's feet was evaluated: small was beautiful, big was ugly. Boys were told to obey or they would get a big-footed wife. Girls were taught they couldn't get married unless their feet were small. Older rural men fondly recall the peculiar way that women swayed from side to side when they walked on their heels as attractive, but they did not mention sexual fantasies about the feet.

Yang interviewed Doctor Chi-Sheng Ko, surgeon at a hospital in Taiwan. Dr. Ko is an avid "lotus shoe" collector and foot fetishist who makes some rather remarkable claims about the sexual properties of the bound foot. His ardent admiration for tiny shoes and tiny feet are a testimony to the human's ability to create sexual fantasies and sexual theories about any part of the body, as well as the tendency of society's gender norms to infuse the symbols of the opposite sex with sexual desire.

Dr. Ko's belief that the main motivation for the spread of this custom across China was male sexual fantasy, inspired, according to legend, by an early imperial concubine, is not very credible despite the evidence that some male writers and artists portrayed the bound foot as sex symbol. Yue-Qing Yang skillfully juxtaposes his views with those of her mother. When she asked her mother whether any sexual purpose was associated with the bound foot, her mother said, "No," and then turned the question around, noting that today women don't have bound feet, yet people still have sex. As a good reporter, Yang notes that most elderly Chinese women do not feel comfortable talking about sex at all.

Yang explores each of these theories about beauty, eroticism, marriage, but does not seem fully satisfied with any at the end of her quest. The aesthetic and erotic explanations both fall short, leaving a gap between expressed ideals and the realities of women's lives. In one of the most powerful scenes in the film, following Dorothy Ko's claim that women with bound feet could walk with few problems, despite popular perceptions, Yang inserts documentary footage of a woman crawling on her hands and knees while everyone else is running to escape the Japanese invasion of China. The woman had lost her shoes, and she could not walk upon her feet without the support of the shoe. Elderly women also explain how they went hungry in times of famine because they could not walk very far to find food. One tearfully recalled how with bound feet she could not get enough food and so her baby girl died in her arms. Another related that her own grandmother burnt to death at the stove when some loose straw ignited and she could not get up on her feet quickly enough to get away. It may be that in the normal course of everyday slow-paced and sedentary life, footbinding did not completely immobilize women as people often believe. But Yang's images speak more than words when she shows us an elderly woman, wobbling, unstable, holding her cane, and having great difficulty taking a step. This image recalled for me my interviews with several footbound women near Datong in May 2004. One old woman with bound feet had lent her cane to her friend, and thus she herself could barely walk unaided across the courtyard. Even with a cane, these women were unable to walk very much and seemed most comfortable seated on the *kang*, a heated bed.

Much as I love this film, there are questions about footbinding that Yang does not explore. Specifically what kinds of work did footbound women do? For some reason, it has been common for the focus on bound feet and beauty to push out of sight all other aspects of women's lives, such as their daily work. The research by Hill Gates (1997, 2001) on footbinding in Fujian (2001), and my own research in Yunnan (2002) suggest that footbinding was not as divorced from economic interests as usually believed. Girls and women with bound feet worked with their hands, as illustrated by many of the women Yang interviewed.

This film is an extremely useful introduction to the subject of footbinding and its significance in contemporary China where elderly women with bound feet have been kept in the

background. Footbinding was not just as a curious cultural custom. It was a widespread social practice and an everyday technology that still needs to be investigated as an integral part of Chinese social and economic history. Witnessing Yang's travels across a visually stunning landscape, we are reminded how far and widely this practice had traveled across China. Still, Yang's dialogues with women and her exploration of the current theories regarding beauty, eroticism, or male dominance as explanations for the practice leaves many questions yet to be asked and answered. The film concludes with images of contemporary women wearing high, spike-heeled shoes and points to cross-cultural parallels in the quest for female beauty. This is a wonderful film for introducing audiences to the history of Chinese women, and for courses in anthropology, women's studies, gender, China, or East Asian studies.

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