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Stepping into the history books

The last of China's foot-bound women



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Honour

Foot-binding may seem abhorrent today but the resulting deformity once conveyed privilege and status, recall some of the few surviving Yunnan women to have undergone the practice. Words and pictures by **Gary Jones**.

Bundled up against the spring chill in a man's voluminous jacket and knitted woollen hat, Yang Zhaoshi perches on a rattan chair in the courtyard of her family's ramshackle ancestral home. Hunched and increasingly deaf with her advancing years, she leans forward unsteadily to hear a question that is never easy to ask of a lady.

"I can't really remember how old I am," Yang responds slowly. "But I know I was born in the Year of the Ox."

"Mother will be 100 in a week or two, I think," says Yang's ruddy, weather-beaten eldest son, who is a none-too-sprightly 83 himself.

It is not Yang's longevity that is surprising, however. What makes the nonagenarian unusual is her tiny feet, which measure just over 10cm in length. Yang is one of the few remaining women left in China with bound feet.

Yang's mother began tightly binding her feet with strips of cloth when she was just six years old, forcibly folding the youngster's four smallest toes under the soles and deliberately, over time, breaking delicate bones to mould each foot into the shape of a so-called "golden lotus", revered for centuries as the epitome of feminine beauty, refinement, even sexual attractiveness. Further squeezed and sculpted by hand to create a high arch and a hoof-like appearance, Yang's shattered feet would set that way, and remain deformed for life.

"It was so painful, but my mother said that if I didn't do it I would never find a husband, nobody would have me," says the widowed mother of four, and grandmother, great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother of more descendants than she can immediately recall.

Yang is matriarch of five generations of a clan residing in Liuyi, a nondescript, agriculture-driven village of 2,000 or so people in Yunnan province.

"It wasn't a strange thing to do in those days - many girls in Liuyi had small feet. The tradition was strong here. If your feet were small, you were admired, you were special."

Yang says that, though mothers or other female relatives traditionally initiated the daily foot-binding process, young girls were expected to take over the agonising, self-crippling ritual within months, perhaps even weeks.

"It would hurt so much, but others would laugh if you couldn't manage it, so I forced myself," Yang says. Today, however, she requires a helping hand with her feet. "I'm old now and it isn't easy to bend, so my second son's wife does it," Yang says, nodding towards her seventy-something daughter-in-law.

"It only takes a minute or two," the woman offers, stepping forward, crouching at Yang's side and smiling broadly. "Would you like to see?"

Without waiting for an answer, she snatches Yang's right leg, crosses it over the older woman's left leg and removes her black felt shoe, which is ornately embroidered with colourful flowers and songbirds. She whips off Yang's sock and deftly unwraps the faded blue-canvas binding, quickly revealing a gnarled, scaly and slightly pungent foot. Yang's smallest toes have been crushed almost flat and a shockingly deep cleft - the result of unnaturally forcing the arch upward, thereby reducing the foot's length - runs between the heel and the ball of Yang's foot.

There is no conclusive historical evidence for when the custom began in Yunnan, or in China as a whole, says Dorothy Ko, a professor of history at Columbia University's affiliated Barnard College in New York, in the United States, and author of the book *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*.

"One may say the ideal of dainty feet was concocted by male poets in the Tang dynasty, and taken up as an actual practice by women in elite families by the 12th and 13th centuries," says Ko. "The missing step - one that I can only conjecture - is that when the Tang court fell in 907, palace dancers were dispersed to courtesan houses in the south, introducing a mild form of binding - like a ballerina's pointes."

Yang was born the year after foot-binding was officially banned, in 1912, after the fall of the imperial Qing dynasty and the establishment of a republic. The practice, viewed by the new Nationalist regime as backward and shameful, continued furtively in remote areas, however.

Largely isolated from the authorities, the area around Liuyi was one of the last places to abandon the ritual, and girls' feet were still being bound here as late as the early 1950s - even after the communists had come to power in 1949 and Mao Zedong had famously extolled gender equality by declaring that women "hold up half the sky".

By the late 90s, in fact, there were still more than 200 women living with bound feet in and around Liuyi. Today, there are less than 20.

"The mountains are high and the emperor is far away," says Yang's eldest child, employing an ancient saying to explain how foot-binding persisted. >>



bound

The bound feet of Yang
Zhaoshi, of Liuyi village,
Yunnan province.



From left: Xiong Xiufeng relaxes in the sunshine as her neighbours shell peas in Tuanshan; Xiong's home-made shoes.

women remaining in Tuanshan. "Head down towards the lake. Ask for Madam Zhu."

Zhu Shaoqiong is soon found wiling away the sun-drenched afternoon in the small convenience store owned by her third son (she has four, and three daughters). She is elegantly decked out in a traditional blue smock, pressed grey-blue trousers and peach socks, and her feet are encased in dainty black-leather lace-up shoes not much longer than a cigarette lighter. (The last factory making such shoes closed in the late 90s; towards the end, the Harbin-based operation was producing just 300 pairs a year.)

Dwarfed by translator Sally's size-36 Adidas trainers, Zhu's shrunken feet cannot be longer than 10cm. She totters with the help of a wooden cane topped by the carved head of a dragon.

"Oh, I'm so old; I'm not looking good," the 96-year-old says when asked if she can be photographed, soon relenting. "My eyes don't look beautiful anymore."

Zhu says her mother passed away when she was five years old and she was cared for by her maternal grandmother, who bound her feet when she was six.

"I couldn't understand why they were hurting me and I screamed

"It was like my feet were on fire ... I couldn't even eat, I was in so much pain"

for my mother," Zhu says. "They said I had to have my feet made small or I would disgrace the family. Afterwards, I couldn't move. It was like my feet were on fire. Relatives brought food to my bed but I couldn't even eat, I was in so much pain."

Shaoqiong claims to be of the noble Zhu family (the main attraction in the nearby town of Jianshui is the Zhu Family Garden, a 20,000-square-metre complex of more than 40 residences, gardens and fish ponds that served as home to the clan, which made a fortune in tin and opium). Although she vividly recalls the suffering of having her feet crippled for life, she bears no resentment.

In fact, Zhu says, her grandmother was being kind to her: "It was thought that only girls with small feet were pretty and had value. Only girls with small feet would find a husband from a good family, so it was the right thing to do."

Says Ko, "We have to remember that before the 20th century, foot-

binding was not an imposition or torture that women would shriek from. On the contrary, it was a privilege that they would embrace – if they were privileged enough to do so. Not all women could afford to have their feet bound, only those who could find an alternative means of livelihood indoors. In Yunnan, this means those who had the skills and means – a loom, for example – to weave cloth at home."

Like Yang, Zhu was kept hidden when authorities came snooping.

"When inspectors were sent here to make sure [foot-binding] wasn't happening anymore, our families would hide us away," Zhu says.

At the ornate wooden entrance to a residential courtyard, Zhu's 95-year-old friend Xiong Xiufeng relaxes in the shade while a gathering of her middle-aged neighbours shell peas at her dainty feet. Like Zhu, Xiong has clearly made an effort with her appearance – she wears a similar blue smock and velvety black trousers. Her doll-like shoes, no bigger than an infant's slippers, are crafted from star-spangled aubergine corduroy.

Xiong's mother began binding her feet when she was six.

"I couldn't even move, it was so painful," says Xiong, who came from a middle-class family of salt traders but whose father died young, leaving eight children behind. "They wouldn't let me take the binding away no matter how great the pain. It was sewn on tight, so I couldn't get it off, and my mother would beat me if I tried. At that time, if your feet were large, no man would marry you; no other family would have you."

At the age of 14, Xiong married a tin miner from a respectable family, which, she says, may never have happened if her feet had not been bound. The couple had six children, but when asked if she had ever thought of binding her own daughters' feet, she answers immediately and emphatically.

"Absolutely not," Xiong bellows. "This is something from the old society. Those days are gone, and good riddance."

Xiong is clearly proud, however, of her strikingly unusual shoes, which she made herself, and she twists and turns to show them off from every angle.

"I used to enjoy making shoes very much," Xiong says, "but my eyes just can't cope any more."

Asked how many pairs of shoes she has, Xiong's eyes brighten, her reedy voice rises and she snatches at Sally's hand. Suddenly, it becomes apparent that, although she was born in a very different era, some things – for a certain type of lady – were the same back then as they are today.

"Oh, I have so many shoes, but not as many as when I was younger," Xiong enthuses. "I have more than 20 pairs, I think – I have a big box full of them. I've always liked shoes." ■



Above: Zhu Shaoqiong, of Tuanshan village. **Right:** Zhu's feet are dwarfed by Sally the translator's size 36 trainers.

Dressed in a blue Mao jacket and cloth cap, he looks every bit as out of time – in a modern China of cloud-busting skyscrapers, superfast bullet trains and glitzy shopping malls – as his mother.

"[Foot-binding] was kept secret," he says. "If government officials came, the village girls would be locked away. Once the officials had gone, life would carry on as normal."

A short stroll from Yang's home, Pu Guifeng is exchanging village gossip at a shop selling seeds and fertilizer. The 77-year-old is willing to chat but she waves away the camera like a seasoned movie star dealing with bothersome paparazzi.

"No photos," Pu barks, grinning.

Pu has, in fact, enjoyed a certain level of fame. In the early 90s, she and an energetic sorority of Liuyi's other remaining women with bound feet formed an unlikely dance troupe, performing as far away as the provincial capital, Kunming, a three-hour drive to the north.

"We danced some disco, we did traditional tai chi moves with fans and scarves," says Pu. "We were very popular; quite famous, in fact. Even recently, just two weeks ago, some television people came down from Beijing, wanting us to dance for them."

Pu says that, although she is viewed by many as an oddity nowadays, once upon a time the opposite was true.

"Back then, if you didn't have small feet you would be shamed for being different – you didn't fit in, you were considered weird," she says.

And although the dance troupe was at best a novelty, and at worst something of a modern-day freak show, she relished her brief period in the spotlight.

"It's a shame we don't dance anymore," Pu says. "I'm still quite nimble but some of the troupe are too old now; in their 90s. It's difficult to get them into a car to travel long distances."

A two-hour drive south of Liuyi, heading towards the border with Vietnam, the picturesque and pleasingly well-preserved walled hamlet of Tuanshan nestles on a low hill amid verdant farmland. Established as a mining centre in the 14th century, Tuanshan's residences, temples and ancestral halls were built later – during the 19th and early 20th centuries – when the area prospered from trade with Southeast Asia made possible by a French-built railway.

Outside one ancestral hall, an elderly woman without bound feet sits on the grey-stone threshold. A cardboard box at her side contains exaggeratedly minuscule silk shoes that she sells for 20 yuan (HK\$25) a pair to the occasional tourist.

"The [bound feet] women used to make them and sell them, but they are too old now," she says, adding that there are only two such >>



From left: pictures of Yang in her 80s; Yang (centre) with members of three other generations of her family, including her eldest son and the wife of her second son (both seated); one of Yang's unbound feet.