



THE LADIES WITH TINY FEET

chinese foot-binding is a thing of the past,
but these women are still going strong.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS GARY JONES

Bundled up against the morning 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 age, 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 eldest son, a none-too-sprightly 83 himself. It's not Yang's longevity that is surprising, though. What makes the nonagenarian unusual is her tiny feet, which measure just over 10 centimetres 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 breaking delicate bones to mould each foot into the shape of a so-called "golden lotus", revered for centuries in China 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 her clan residing in Liuyi, a non-descript, agriculture-driven village of 2000 or so people in south-western China's 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."

The foot-binding process began when a girl was between four and seven years old. Firstly, her feet were soaked in warm water or animal blood mixed with herbs. With her toenails clipped short,

she was given a soothing foot massage. Then the horror would begin – every toe would be broken except for the big toe. The foot was wrapped with binding cloth. Every day, the foot would be unwrapped and wrapped again, but tighter. The youngster's feet would be squeezed into smaller and smaller shoes until the foot was between seven and 10 centimetres long.

Though legend says that the practice of foot binding in China began thousands of years ago, written evidence suggests it was adopted much later, at the court of the Song dynasty (960AD–1279). Binding was a sign of social status – if a woman's feet were bound, and she was unable to perform manual labour, she'd be viewed as noble and posh. Some experts insist foot binding was a form of female subjugation, and that it gradually became a sexual fetish for Chinese males. Whatever the case, foot binding slowly spread to the lower classes aiming for higher social status.

As Yang describes it, while mothers or other female relatives traditionally initiated the daily foot-binding process, young girls were expected to take over the agonising ritual within 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 70-something daughter-in-law.

"It only takes a minute," 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 the gnarled, scaly and slightly pungent foot beneath. Yang's smallest toes have been crushed almost flat, and a shockingly deep cleft – the result of unnaturally forcing the arch upward, reducing the foot's length – runs between the heel and the ball of the foot.

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Yang was born just one year after foot binding was banned in China in 1912, following the fall of the imperial Qing dynasty and the establishment of a republic. But the practice, viewed by the new Nationalist regime as backward and shameful, continued furtively in remote areas. Largely isolated from the authorities, the area around Liuyi was one of the last places in China to abandon the ritual, and girls' feet were still being bound as late as the early 1950s – even after the communists had come to power in 1949.

By the late 1990s, there were still more than 200 bound-feet women living in and around Liuyi. Today, there are less than 20.

“The mountains are high and the emperor is far away,” says Yang's eldest, employing an ancient Chinese proverb to explain how foot binding stuck around so long. Dressed in a blue Mao jacket and cloth cap, he looks every bit as out-of-time in modern China as his mum. “[Foot binding] was kept secret. If government officials came, the village girls would be locked away. Once the officials had gone, life would carry on as normal,” he says.

A short stroll from Yang's home, Pu Guifeng is exchanging village gossip at a shop selling seeds and fertiliser. Though the 77-year-old is willing to chat, she waves away the camera. “No photos,” Pu barks, grinning.

Pu has, in fact, enjoyed a certain level of fame. In the early 1990s, 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,” Pu says. “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.”

Back in her day, Pu says, bound feet were the norm: “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.”

And though the dance troupe was at best a novelty, and maybe even something of a modern-day freak show, she relished her brief moment 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 hamlet of Tuanshan nestles on low hills surrounded by farmland. Outside one ancestral hall, an elderly woman without regular-sized feet squats on the grey-stone threshold. A cardboard box at her side contains exaggeratedly minuscule silk shoes that she sells for 20 yuan a pair to the occasional tourist. “The small feet women used to make them and sell them, but they are too old now,” she says, adding that there are only two such women still in Tuanshan. “Head down towards the lake. Ask for Madam Zhu.”

Zhu Shao Qiong is soon found 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 that can't be much longer than 10 centimetres. (The last factory making these tiny shoes closed in the late 1990s; towards the end, the business – in the north-eastern city of Harbin – was producing just 300 pairs a year.) She totters with the help of a wooden cane topped by a carved dragon head.

Zhu, now 96, says her mother passed away when she was just five years old, and she was cared for by her grandma, who bound her feet when she was six. “I couldn't understand why they were hurting me and I screamed 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 as if my feet were on fire. Relatives brought food to my bed, but I couldn't even eat, I was in so much pain.”

Zhu claims to be of the noble Zhu family (the main attraction in nearby 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). Though she vividly recalls the intense suffering of having her feet crippled for life, she bears no resentment.

In fact, Zhu says her grandmother was being kind, not cruel. “It was thought that only girls with small feet were pretty and had value,” she says. “Only girls with small feet would find a husband from a good family, so it was the right thing for her to do.” Like Yang in Liuyi, Zhu was also kept hidden when authorities came snooping. “When inspectors were sent here to make sure [binding] wasn't happening anymore, our families would hide us away.”

At the ornate wooden entrance to a residential courtyard nearby, Zhu's 95-year-old friend Xiong Xiufeng relaxes in the shade while a clutch of her middle-aged neighbours shell peas at her tiny feet. Like Zhu, she has clearly made an effort with her appearance – she wears a similar blue smock, as well as velvety black trousers. Her doll-like shoes, no bigger than a toddler'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, and whose father died leaving eight children behind. “They wouldn't let me take the binding away no matter how great the pain. It was wrapped 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 come to pass if her feet had not been bound. The couple had six children, but when asked if she ever thought of binding her own daughters' feet, she answers immediately and emphatically: “Absolutely not. This is something from the old society. Those days are gone.”

Xiong is clearly proud, though, of her strikingly unusual shoes, which she made herself, and she twists and turns to show them off from every angle. Sadly, her stitching days are over, she says. “I used to enjoy making shoes very much, but my eyes just can't cope any more.”

Asked how many pairs of shoes she has, those eyes suddenly brighten and Xiong's reedy voice rises in glee. It's clear that, although Xiong was born in an era when China was a very different country, 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,” she gushes. “I have more than 20 pairs, I think – I have a big box full of them! I've always liked shoes.” ❀