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## THE BODY AS ATTIRE:

### *The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth-Century China*

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**F**ootbinding was superfluous in the colonial age: its prestige had waned and its aura dimmed but the practice lingered, more stubbornly than the abolitionists had anticipated. I have been probing this disjuncture by subjecting the bound foot to historiographical inquiry. This essay is a preliminary report. My premise is simple: for a historian, there is no neutral or objective knowledge about footbinding. Whatever knowledge we can gain depends on who we are, who wrote the texts, when, and why. The impossibility of coherent, objective knowledge is compounded by the peculiar history of footbinding. It was neither a uniform practice across regions, nor did it sustain a timeless and essential core of meanings. The unanimity of condemnation in modern times masks the multiplicity of practice and the instability of meaning that is the only salient truth about footbinding.

#### **Footbinding as History: The Problem With the Archives**

Behind the uniform label of "footbinding" lay a colorful variety of local traditions and distinct practices that have fascinated anthropologists and medical missionaries since the nineteenth century. The practices they have documented range from pressing a girl's four toes toward the heel with cloth binders, hence bulging the foot into an arched shape, to wearing tight socks for a slender look. The local variations in method of binding, desired length and shape, age of initiation, required paraphernalia, public and private rituals, shoe patterns, and terminologies of footbinding were so great that it was impossible to produce a master narrative.

Historians have encountered a different problem in writing about footbinding, which defies the conventional approach of seeking meaning, if not truth, from archives. Footbinding is a puzzling anomaly. On the one hand, what it is about seems painfully obvious to its modern critics, who condemn the practice as the most hideous bodily mutilation inflicted on women by patriarchs (often dubbed "Confucian") to serve male interests. First, footbinding kept women in a hobbled and subservient domestic state; second, it rendered them sex objects to satisfy certain perverted erotic fantasies of men. These are dead certainties to our modern minds. Yet on the other hand, we hardly know what footbinding is about because

the archives fail to answer even the most rudimentary questions. Legends aside, when did it start? How did it spread through time, across geographical regions, and across class lines? And, most important, how did women feel about it? Upon scrutiny, our certainties may turn out to be dead wrong, based as they are on an uncritical imposition of modern perspectives onto a Chinese past that thrived on values and body conceptions alien to ours.

In order to answer questions about the history of footbinding we need to re-ask them in more self-reflexive ways. To begin with, we need to recognize the modern nationalist bias of our sources and informants. Much of our present knowledge of footbinding is colored by China's search for a virile identity under the traumas of imperialism. Our "factual" knowledge about the practice derives almost exclusively from nineteenth- and twentieth-century writings, drawings, or photographs: literature produced by anti-footbinding societies, missionary accounts, medical reports, field-notes of Japanese anthropologists, interviews with footbound women.<sup>1</sup> These materials would not have been produced without the intrusion of Euro-American missionaries into the heart of China since the 1860s and the colonialization of Taiwan by Japan in 1895.

Couched either in a scientific tone of objective observation or as an impassioned plea for abolition, these accounts cannot be accepted at face value. They document less the sociology of footbinding than the vehemence of "national shame" as China was exposed, in a feeble and dependent state, to the scrutiny of the community of nations. Stated tacitly or loudly, the authors' goal was the same: to eradicate the practice as the epitome of "tradition." Yet all of the classic treatises on footbinding, from Howard Levy's *Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom* in English to Okamoto Ryuzo's *Tensoku monogatari* [The story of footbinding] in Japanese, have used this literature uncritically to reconstruct not only the symbolic and personal meanings of footbinding in the modern age, but also the realities of its practice in pre-modern China.<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese connoisseurship literature, which details the erotic attraction men found in the bound foot, has to be read with equal caution. These explicit accounts of drinking games in the brothel, whereby men wax lyrical about the sizes, shapes, and smell of the arched foot, were produced no earlier than the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Ridiculous if not outright offensive to our sensitivities, they are in fact documents not of footbinding's popularity but of its unequivocal demise. For such explicit disclosure of vulgar details is possible only in an era when the cultural aura of footbinding had weakened and the social status of its practitioners had declined. When footbinding was a valorized practice in imperial China—a marker of genteel status—this genre of vulgar writing was, by

definition, unthinkable. The very *raison d'être* of footbinding, as we shall see, lies in concealment, which links it to ideals of civility and culture [*wen*], the highest value in the Chinese cultural world.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the multiple meanings of footbinding when it was still an honored practice, the historian has to examine its literary and pictorial representations produced before the nineteenth century. In this essay, I limit myself to a small fragment of such textual traces—memorials and edicts that advocated footbinding's promotion or prohibition in the late Ming–early Qing period (ca. 1550–1720). These public political records are poor guides to women's experience of footbinding, a worthwhile subject for a separate article, but they bespeak the curious role played by footbinding in definitions of manhood and nationhood. In the late sixteenth century, members of the Ming scholar-official class were preoccupied with threats of alien domination and, in 1644, the threats became a reality. The suicide of the Ming emperor and the subsequent southward march of the Manchu army ended the reign of Ming (1368–1644), the last Han Chinese dynasty in history. In this period of intense anxiety over personal and national survival, loyalty was expressed in gendered terms and sexuality acquired overt political significance. Indeed, footbinding became the terrain on which the ethnic and cultural boundaries between the Han Chinese and the "Other" were being drawn.

At that moment, then, footbinding traversed the borders of the inner chambers and the domain of womanhood as it became the focus of a public political discourse. What was hidden became, at least figuratively, a glaring sign of contested identities: as a loyalty test, the bound foot would have to be seen. This accent on its visibility allows the historian a rare glimpse into the inner construction of footbinding's multiple and often contradictory meanings. My thesis is that Chinese elite males in the seventeenth century regarded footbinding in three ways: as an expression of Chinese *wen* civility, as a marker of ethnic boundaries separating Han from Manchu, and as an ornament or embellishment of the body. My sources are inherently limited. They are largely silent on views of footbinding more private and sensuous in nature, nor do they document with clarity the extent to which elite women and commoners shared these three perceptions. But this focus on the usefulness of footbinding to the construction of ethnic and gender boundaries may help explain the enduring appeal and relevance of the practice in late imperial China.

### Footbinding as a Sign of Civility

Shen Defu (1578–1642), a well-connected resident of Ming Beijing whose father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all ranking offi-

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cials, committed his rich knowledge of palace intrigues and bureaucratic strivings to a private history, *Private Gleanings in the Reign of Wanli* (1573-1620) [*Wanli yehuo bian*]. In it Shen disclosed a little-known proposal:

Recently, Qu Jiusi, a native of Huanggang, proposed a plan to strengthen China's defense against the barbarians. One of his suggestions is to entice them to civilize their customs by having their women follow the Chinese method: have them all tie up and bind their feet into an arch shape. Their men would thus be indulgent; their spirit would diminish and they would become lax in striking and lancing. This he proposed as a strategy to weaken and subdue the barbarians.

Shen commented: "I do not know if the plan worked." But he went on to relate a story of the "barbarians'" stupidity. In 1567, a barbarian insurgent charged into Shizhou, Shanxi province, and kidnapped hordes of women to take back to the steppes. Impatient that these footbound women could not run with the horses, the barbarians lopped off their feet and carted them home. They all bled to death. Shen quipped: "Since some people in this world do not take to the pair of bound feet, Qu's strategy is no guarantee for subjugation."<sup>5</sup>

We do not know if Qu Jiusi's plan was submitted to the throne, let alone if it was carried out. Qu's proposal, if it was ever committed to writing, is no longer extant. All that is left is Shen's light-hearted paraphrase, recounted in a section entitled "The Arched Foot of Women." Inundated with news of the faltering Ming defense efforts, Shen's contemporary readers might have found comic relief in Qu's undisguised optimism about the Chinese enlightenment project. As bizarre as his plan may sound, however, Qu Jiusi was a Ming patriot and military affairs expert whose opinions were not to be dismissed lightly. Holder of a provincial degree (1573), Qu was the author of a treatise on national security, *Military Annales of the Wanli Reign* [*Wanli wugong lu*, preface 1612]. In it, Qu combined his intimate understanding of border affairs, gained during a protracted exile, with his extensive knowledge of the history and political ambitions of the peoples on the fringes of the Ming empire.<sup>6</sup>

The wording of Shen Defu's paraphrase, when read against the edicts discussed below, is suggestive of a cluster of attitudes toward footbinding in the late sixteenth century. The first is the opposite of the prevailing modern perception: the arched foot was a sign of the *civility* that China monopolized. Shen referred to footbinding as "the Chinese method" [*Zhongguo fa*, also "Chinese law"]. The verb "to entice them to civilize their customs" [*youhua qisu*] was commonly used to describe the enlightenment projects carried out by imperial bureaucrats in areas peripheral to

China proper. Building of Confucian schools, canonization of virtuous women, and the production of a local history were signs of the area's incorporation into the imperium. The superiority of "the Central Kingdom" over its surrounding "barbarians" [*lu*] was underscored by the practice of footbinding in the former and the lack of such a practice in the latter.<sup>7</sup>

### **Beasts Do Not Wear Shoes: Clothing and the Chinese Civilizing Project**

This equation of footbinding with the superiority of Han Chinese civilization has to be understood in the context of the immense cultural, political, and moral significance that the Confucian tradition invested in properly covered bodies.

Correct attire—headdress, dress, and shoes—was the quintessential expression of civility, culture, and humanity, all being ramifications of *wen*. Attire played a central role in both the external and internal definitions of Chinese identities: clothing differentiated the Chinese from their (inferior) neighbors while marking social and gender distinctions within society. The inherent links among clothing, the civilizing process, and politics are highlighted in the *Book of Changes*: "The Yellow Emperor, Yao, and Shun allowed the upper and lower garments to hang down, and the world was in order." The three mythical rulers-cum-cultural heroes' draping of their garments constituted the very act of governance, the goal of which was creating order out of the disorder of nature.<sup>8</sup> Getting dressed was thus at once a cultural act, one that distinguished humans from beasts, and a political act.

As such, the clothing of bodies was laden with moral and symbolic significance. "Why did the Sage [Confucius] devise the institution of clothing?" a first-century commentator on the Five Classics asked rhetorically. "To conceal the form [of the body] with fine and coarse cloth; to promote virtue and guide [people to] goodness; to distinguish the high from the lowly."<sup>9</sup> Properly attired bodies were thus at once an instrument of political control and a sign of its efficacy. It is no wonder that among the first order of business of each ascending dynasty was promulgating its own regulations for official attire to signify a new beginning in the dynastic cycle.

If properly clothed bodies marked the civility and orderliness of the Chinese, unadorned bodies and feet recurred as visible signs of the savagery of peoples on the peripheries. This contrast is evinced by depictions of "barbarians" on the fringes of Chinese civilization, a popular genre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One example, from a 1599 ency-

clopedia, depicts Koreans as "civilized barbarians," considered closest to the Chinese cultural world because of their incessant importation of Chinese customs and books since antiquity. Next to a drawing of a Korean man dressed impeccably in Ming-style literati robe and shoes (fig. 1), a description reads: "In governmental buildings, bureaucracy, poetry, writing, rituals, music, medicine, divination, *cap and gown*, they follow Chinese institutions in their entirety" [emphasis mine].<sup>10</sup>

The contrast between these civilized barbarians in Korea and the natives of Jiaozhi, modern-day Vietnam, is graphic: "Descendents of monkey-like dogs, they are cunning and crafty in character. They shave their hair and bare their feet." The drawing depicts a civil official adorned in a loose robe and shoes, but a military man has his chest, legs and feet exposed without shame (fig. 2).<sup>11</sup> Similar pictures of "barbarians" were widely anthologized in the late Ming period, reinforcing a common-sense knowledge that an alien people's distance from civilization was measured in the degree to which they imitated Chinese attire, shoes in particular. Naked and unadorned feet were fitting attire for animality.

Footbinding became the norm for elite Han Chinese females during the Ming dynasty, although it was never formally mandated as proper



Figure 1. The most civilized: Korean scholar-official in cap and gown. Source: Yu Xiangdou, *Santai wanyong zhengzong*, 5.1a.

attire in the dynastic regulations. My hypothesis is that footbinding partook of the high cultural prestige that the Confucian value of *wen* conferred onto clothing, concealed bodies to be exact. In an eighteenth-century account of the tributary peoples of the Manchu imperium, the fashioning of male and female hair, clothing, and feet were among the standard criteria for evaluating the peripheral peoples. The Black Lolo [Luoluo] and White Lolo, residents of Yunnan province, were presented as close kin of Han Chinese because their women also bound their feet and wore shoes [*chanzu zhulü*]. Described as tame, industrious farmers "resembling the people of Qi [the Central Plain; China Proper]," these peoples were seen as benefactors of a prolonged civilizing process.<sup>12</sup>

Legends about the southward spread of footbinding in the twelfth century testify to how deeply the state of concealment or exposure of female feet was implicated in the Han enlightenment project. Oral traditions in Fujian province maintained that when the Neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi (1130-1200) served as prefect in southern Fujian, he promoted footbinding in that peripheral area to teach the natives a sense of propriety and chastity.<sup>13</sup> That this is most likely fictitious is irrelevant. What matters



Figure 2. The less civilized: Partially-clothed military and civil officials of Jiaozhi. Source: Yu Xiangdou, *Santai wanyong zhengzong*, 5.7a.



is the recognition that in its heyday, the aura of footbinding reinforced the glory of the Chinese imperium; on women's bound feet stood the unbearable weight of exclusionist and supremacist attitudes that justified imperial conquest of non-Han Chinese territories. In the sixteenth century, the footbound woman marked the cultural lines separating "us" and "them." She represented, in other words, the boundaries of China's "national" identity before the age of modern nationalism.<sup>14</sup>

Shen Defu's rendition of the Qu proposal also reveals a less salutary perception of footbinding. The premise of the barbarian-subduing plan is that footbinding corrupts; by making men indulgent, it undermines their virility and military prowess. It is not known if Qu went so far as to suggest that such was indeed the cause of the sorry state of China's border defense.<sup>15</sup> But with reference to the barbarians, the footbound woman was cast as the classic *femme fatale*. She was entrusted with a double-mission: to save China by corrupting the barbarians and spreading Chinese civil culture; and to destroy the barbarians by diminishing *their* defining trait, military power.

The construction of this seemingly contradictory double-mission rests on a situational logic: in China, footbinding is civil and enabling; in the barbarians' domain, footbinding is disabling and disarming.<sup>16</sup> Thus the Chinese male elites accentuated the distinctions between Chinese and barbarian even further. The barbarians, steeped in their brutalities and given to military forays, were twice-condemned. They remained barbaric if they did not import Han customs, yet a practice as civilizing as footbinding would destroy their very militant nature and nullify their *raison d'être*.

On a different level, the situational logic of footbinding makes an important historiographic statement. Footbinding is not one monolithic, unchanging experience that oppressed all unfortunate women in each succeeding dynasty, but was rather an amorphous practice that meant different things to different people, depending on their positions in ethnic, social, and gender hierarchies. It is, in other words, a situated practice, and the only knowledge that can be gained is a time-specific local knowledge.

### **The Manchus Strike Back: Qing Prohibition Edicts**

For all its imperial aura, the faltering Ming dynasty was no match for its natural-footed contenders on the battlefield. In 1636, Manchu leader Hung Taiji (Abahai), having brought Mongolia under his banner and claimed the vassalage of Korea, crowned himself the emperor of a new dynasty, Qing. As he openly announced his ambition to conquer Ming

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China by claiming a Chinese-style mandate of heaven, he admonished his followers to honor the history of their distant ancestors, the Jurchens, whose Jin dynasty (1114-1234) once ruled northern China. In Frederic Wakeman's words, the new Qing emperor, Taizong, "wished to prevent the sinification of his society while sinifying the polity."<sup>17</sup>

Besides the accent on ethnic history, Qing Taizong's nativistic project of promoting Manchu culture included the promotion of hunting and a ban on Han attire among the Han Chinese under his jurisdiction. According to a 1636 edict: "All Han people—be they official or commoner, male or female—their clothes and adornments will have to conform to Manchu styles. Males are not allowed to fashion wide collars and sleeves; females are not allowed to comb up their hair [*shutou*] nor bind their feet."<sup>18</sup> In 1638, he reiterated the need to adhere to Manchu attire, this time to his Manchu followers: "all those who imitate the other country [Ming China] in clothes, headgear, hair-bundling, and footbinding are to be severely punished."<sup>19</sup> "Hair-bundling" [*shufa*] refers to the gathering of hair into a topknot, the rite of passage to adulthood for Han men.

Read against Qu Jiusi's earlier barbarian-subduing proposal, Qing Taizong's edicts are suggestive of two perceptions of footbinding shared by the male Han Chinese elites and their Manchu enemies in the north. First and foremost is the premise that footbinding marked "national" boundaries. Qu, according to Shen Defu, described the process of separating "us" from "them" in politico-cultural terms: "the Central Country" [*Zhongguo*] versus barbarians. The Chinese translation of Qing Taizong's edicts resorted to a similar rhetoric: Han people [*Hanren*] from the "other country" [*taguo*] versus Manchu [*Manzhou*]. At the same time that the Manchu leaders valorized hunting, archery, and military prowess as their cultural characteristics, they marked off Han Chineseness primarily by the latter's distinctive male and female attire.

As the sign of Han identity, footbinding in this Manchu formulation underwent a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn in the function of its visibility. Footbinding, or the lack thereof, was instrumental to the Manchu nativistic project only if women's feet could be inspected in public. A hidden sign was self-defeating. In China, on the contrary, the allure of footbinding lay in concealment. To be provocative, a pair of small feet had to be covered by binder, socks, and shoes, dredged with perfume and fragrant powder, and then hidden under leggings and skirts. In other words, footbinding's aura derived from concealment of the physicality of the foot. It was defined by ornamentation and coverings—the essence of the civil culture of *wen*—not the texture or smell of raw flesh.

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## The Body As Attire

This accent on dress and surface appearance is suggestive of a second perception of footbinding shared by the Manchu and Han male elites. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, footbinding was considered part of female attire, an adornment to be exact, not a form of bodily mutilation. It was supposed to embellish, adding something to the female body, not breaking and hollowing it by taking something away. This attitude is apparent from the 1636 Manchu edict which coupled the Han men's robes styled with wide collars and sleeves with the women's hairdos and bound feet. The 1638 edict mentioned clothes, hairstyle, and footbinding in an explicit parallel formulation. What we today consider to be three separate categories—coverings exterior to the body (clothes), an auxiliary part of the body that can regenerate and be clipped (hair), and the body itself (limbs)—were lumped together. All were "attire" that could be manipulated and altered at will by the person displaying his or her political allegiance and cultural identity.

Although Qu's proposal did not construe footbinding as an adornment, this Han Chinese attitude can be seen in other written texts produced at the time. Encyclopedias routinely classified footbinding as clothing or bodily decoration. One with a 1591 preface, for example, included footbinding in a section on "Female Adornments" [*nüzhuang*], alongside five styles of hairdo, twenty-one ways to draw eyebrows, red finger nails, various powders and rouges, and immediately after ear-piercing.<sup>20</sup> To the editor's mind, footbinding was an embellishment. The fact that a bit of flesh was hollowed from the earlobes and much more flesh had to rot away on a pair of feet did not detract from the purpose of beautification.<sup>21</sup> Besides functioning as a marker of national boundaries, footbinding was also signaled femininity and hence gender distinctions, as is often argued.

The location of clothes, hairstyles, and footbinding in the same realm, as evidenced by the Manchu edict and supported by the classification schemes in Ming encyclopedias, bespeaks an essential conception of the body in the Chinese cultural world at the time. The body was not necessarily viewed as an enclosed physical entity; the boundaries between the body and the environment were shifting and permeable. A modern reader, steeped in the scientific medical discourse, may find this perception alien if not outright ludicrous. Charlotte Furth, in her studies of gender in Chinese medicine, has reminded us how futile it is to speak of "the body" as a unitary historical subject that is constant across temporal and cultural divides. The classical Chinese medical authorities, for example, conceptualized "the body" in terms of cosmology instead of anatomy:

They saw the human body—the domain of medicine—not so much as biology as a discourse on embodiment. It took as its subject not the physical body but the patterns of change in human life. When medicine stressed process over event, function over anatomy, and environmental influences over inborn qualities, it was linking human growth and development with creative processes seen as part of the timeliness of heaven and earth's organic functioning.<sup>22</sup>

That is to say, in the classical Chinese formulation, what signifies a body is its cosmological location, not physicality in itself. Moreover, the emphasis on the organic links between the body and cosmology means that the body was not perceived as an enclosed object, with definite boundaries separating it from the outside world, but was instead part of a larger organic process of regeneration. This perception was still prevalent in the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

This view of permeable boundaries between the body and its environment recalls the world of "ambivalent corporeality" that Barbara Duden has reconstructed for Europe before the rise of modern medicine in the second half of the eighteenth century. Interrogating the voices of women patients recorded in a physician's journal from Eisenach, a German town, in the first half of the eighteenth century, Duden has discerned a sense of personhood that is distinctly premodern: "There was neither a demarcated, self-contained body nor a social environment that stopped abruptly at the skin. On the level of the body, the Eisenach stories . . . point to a society in which the concept of a body that could be isolated did not yet exist because an isolated individual did not exist. What did exist were people who were bound into social relations down to their innermost flesh."<sup>23</sup>

This perception of the body as primarily a social body that is neither self-contained nor isolated illuminates the significance of Chinese clothing as social, moral, and ethnic markers. It also resonates with the imperial Chinese notion of dressing as embodiment, a corollary to the conception of the body as attire. Writing of the cosmological and political value of Qing court dress, John E. Vollmer has thus explained embodiment: "Court clothing forged a link between the needs of human society and the universal order. When worn, both coat and courtier were transformed. The human body became the world axis, and the neck opening became the gate of Heaven, separating the material world of the coat from the realm of the spiritual, represented by the wearer's head. Universal forces were activated, creating the harmony that was essential to the survival of the empire."<sup>24</sup>

Although Vollmer was referring only to formal and semi-formal court coats that radiated, by design, ritual significance, I believe that male

and female wearers of non-court clothing incorporated and expressed a host of contested values through a similar dynamic of embodiment. These other forms of embodiment await historical research. Suffice it to say here that the concept of attire-as-embodiment helps explain the conflation of dress, hair style, and footbinding in the prohibition edicts: these are different sites of a cosmic process of embodiment.

This expansive conception of the body also helps explain why the predominant view of footbinding before the eighteenth century was one of attire and adornment, not bodily mutilation.<sup>25</sup> As we understand it, the concept of mutilation is premised on the notion of the body as a fixed, integral, and physical entity. At a time when boundaries of the body were viewed as negotiable to a certain extent, it is not unreasonable to conceive of footbinding as part of female attire and, as such, a sign of civility and cultural advancement.

These perceptions of the body and clothing go a long way in explaining the popularity of footbinding. Although details about the custom of footbinding in northern China in the late Ming are scant, what the 1636 and 1638 prohibition edicts suggest, as repeated prohibitions generally do, is that Han Chinese and Manchu women in the Manchu territories were eager to bind their daughters' feet. The extent of the edicts' success is not known. But they bespeak the resilience of the identification of footbinding with the civility of Han Chinese civilization. This cultural aura lingered long after the political viability of the Ming court had expired. When the Qing regime consolidated itself in central and southern China as the new Chinese dynasty, its renewed round of prohibition edicts addressed to Han women was thus doomed. Although Manchu women apparently resisted the temptation—they were good guardians of their men's ethnic identities after all—their gesture of imitating footbinding by wearing platform shoes served as the ultimate testimony to the enduring appeal of footbinding in the seventeenth century.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Seen and the Unseen: Men Shaved Their Heads, Women Kept Binding Their Feet**

The Qing seizure of the capital of Beijing in 1644 and its brutal conquest of the south in 1645 ushered in a new period of sexual politics, when footbinding became embroiled in the demarcation of political loyalty from dissent. It was during this period that the undoing of footbinding was coupled with the notorious order of hairshaving for Han men, an order that sparked off loyalist resistance throughout the lower Yangzi region. This coupling of hair and feet testifies to the prevalence of the view of the body-as-attire. The body was a signpost that could be rear-

ranged by a person to show political allegiance or defiance. The mass hysteria that this enforced conformity to Manchu attire unleashed, in turn, affords us new insights into the gendered nature of conceptions of the body.

The proper hairdo for a Manchu man was an exercise in contrasts: depletion in one area and excesses in another. He was to shave off his hair cleanly save for an island toward the back of his head, while growing out the hair in the island and braiding it into a long queue. The bald ring required constant shaving, a ritual interrupted only by communal or parental mourning. This fashioning of male hair had been used as a political test during the reign of the Jurchens. When the Jin dynasty ruled in the twelfth century, these distant ancestors of the Manchus were known to have decapitated males with Han clothing or those who failed to shave their heads in the proper way.<sup>27</sup>

Given Qing Taizong's nativistic program and his weariness of cultural sinification after the 1630s, it is not surprising that his successor, Qing Shizu (Shunzhi, r. 1644-61), seized upon the bald-ring-with-queue style as the essential symbol of the distinctness of Manchu identity and its virile history and continued its use as a loyalty test.<sup>28</sup> Yet the Manchu leaders wavered on the extent to which they could afford to alienate the Han officials and populace, issuing decrees only to be followed by rescissions. On June 19, 1645, upon the seizure of Nanjing, the southern capital, the Qing authorities opted for caution by ordering all surrendered Han soldiers in the occupied territories to shave their heads and grow their queues. Civilians were spared.<sup>29</sup>

In July, this relatively lenient decree was rescinded. Hysteria swept the land as word came that all Han men, soldiers and civilians alike, had to shave their heads. Frederic Wakeman has captured the sexual overtones of this hysteria by describing the prevalent perception of haircutting as a "betrayal of Han masculinity" and, even more poignantly, "tonsorial castration—almost a symbolic mutilation of one's integrity, far more damaging in some ways than physical death." He has also recounted the outbreak of political resistance that this provoked: "the rulers' effort to make Manchus and Han one unified 'body' initially had the effect of unifying upper- and lower-class natives in central and south China against the interlopers."<sup>30</sup>

Yet Wakeman and other historians of the Ming-Qing transition have neglected to recount a story that is crucial to our understanding of "tonsorial castration": its conceptual connection to the undoing of footbinding. The very rescission of the more lenient June decree resulted from the memorial of a surrendered Chinese official from Shandong, Sun Zhixie (*jìnshi* metropolitan degree 1622, d. 1647), who curried favor by voluntar-

ily shaving his head and having the women in his family unbind their feet. His memorial and that of another collaborator, Li Ruolin, who also shaved his hair but did not try to undo footbinding, prompted a reversal of policy.

According to the *Draft History of the Qing Dynasty* [*Qingshi gao*], Sun and Li paid dearly for their act. "Zhixie and Ruolin both shaved their hair; in addition, the males and females in Zhixie's household changed into Manchu attire. Thus the other officials plotted to entrap them." They were soon implicated in a corruption scandal. Sun was stripped of his bureaucratic rank and returned home in disgrace as a civilian. In 1647, he was slaughtered with his seven grandchildren when his native city was raided by rebels. Sun's official biography in *History of the Qing Dynasty* presented him as a loyal subject at the end of his life, first attempting suicide and then killed when cursing the bandits.<sup>31</sup> It is curious that suicide and cursing were normally the course of action that a threatened female was supposed to take to preserve her chastity.

Indeed, by unbinding his women's feet, Sun seemed to have harmed his own masculinity in the minds of his contemporaries. Although Sun and Li equally incurred the rage of their Han colleagues in court by voluntarily shaving their heads, Sun bore the blunt of ridicule and vicious condemnation from loyalist resisters as far as Jiangsu because of what he did to his women's feet. His dismissal, violent death, and, most important of all, the annihilation of his family line were greeted as fitting divine retribution for his crimes of violating the natural Han order inscribed in male literati robes with wide sleeves and women's bound feet.<sup>32</sup>

In this reasoning one discerns another early-Qing perception of footbinding that runs counter to a popular modern assumption. Sun's enthusiasm in unbinding his women's feet was not considered an act of liberating the women nor a restoration of the foot to a state that approximated naturalness. Quite the opposite was true. A common criticism against footbinding levelled by modern "natural foot societies" was that unbound feet were more natural.<sup>33</sup> This reasoning is so instinctive to us that it is difficult to imagine that when footbinding was still a valorized elite practice, it was the fact of *binding* that constituted naturalness. Since adornment was the mark of womanhood, footbinding was the most natural enactment of a woman's gendered identity.

Construed as parts of a larger category of "attire," man's hair and woman's bound foot were integrally linked in the minds of Han Chinese elites in the seventeenth century. The two were related because they constructed each other by virtue of their opposite attributes: man's hair, similar to his clothes, made a visible political statement; woman's bound foot,



marked by concealment, constituted the most private concern. The very concealed nature of footbinding meant that the male and female apprehensions associated with the undoing or ban of binding could not be openly discussed. Hence the groundswell of overt resistance to male hair-cutting may be interpreted as a substitute for a deeper anxiety that by definition could not be voiced. This is admittedly speculative, but perhaps the undoing of footbinding struck at the core of the Han definition of masculinity in a more potent way than "tonsorial castration." In any case, it is clear that perceptions of women's bound feet were integral to articulations of manhood and nationhood in late imperial China.

In the end, the story of Emperor Kangxi's unsuccessful attempt to ban footbinding is anticlimatic. In 1664, the third year of what turned out to be a very long reign (1662-1722), he decreed that all girls born after the year he ascended to the throne could not have their feet bound. The offender's father would be punished by flogging and exile; the local officials in charge would be held accountable. Kangxi thought that he had learned his historical lesson well and refrained from forcing footbound women to unwrap their bindings. He would instead start with a clean slate. But this prohibition turned out to be as futile as numerous ones before and after. Barely three or four years after the ban was promulgated, the Ministry of Rites submitted a memorial urging its retraction.<sup>34</sup> The oldest girls affected by the decree were six or seven years old by Chinese count, and it would have been too late if the footbinder were not summoned immediately.

We do not know if the monarch and his ministers were aware of the extent to which a custom as private and trivial as footbinding was implicated in the grandiose project of empire-building. But we know by now that as long as the aura of the Chinese imperium was projected to the four seas, all efforts to ban footbinding would be futile. It was only in the nineteenth century, when domestic and foreign assaults brought the magnificent empire to its knees, that footbinding lost its prop and became superfluous. In its "recently dated" mode in the colonial age, footbinding continued to figure as symbol of the Chinese nation, even as countless women held on to the practice and continued to invent new meanings outside the nationalistic discourse.

#### NOTES

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dents at the University of California, San Diego, especially Julie Broadwin, Michael Chang, Yue Dong, Sue Fernsebner, and Joshua Goldstein, kept me informed and engaged during the writing process. They have helped in more ways than they realize.

<sup>1</sup> The bibliography of Howard Levy's *Chinese Footbinding* (Taipei: Southern Materials Center, 1984; reprint of 1967) includes an impressive array of samples from each of these genres.

<sup>2</sup> Levy, *Chinese Footbinding*; Okamoto Ryuzo, *Tensoku monogatari* (Tokyo: Toho shoten, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Most representative of this genre are Fang Xuan, *Cailian chuan* [The lotus-picking boat] and its compendium *Xianglian pinzao* [Ranking and tasting the fragrant lotus]; in *Xiangyan congshu* [Collectanea of the fragrant and beautiful] (Shanghai: Guoxue fulun she, 1914), vol. 8. Erotic fiction from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries did mention footbinding; fondling the bound foot was common foreplay and a euphemism for sexual intercourse according to Keith MacMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 127-128, 133. But Fang's direct tone and the obvious delight he took in the disclosure of details signify for me an aesthetic sensitivity not found before the nineteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> In her discussion of the Chinese rhetorical tradition, Wai-Yee Li has aptly summarized the meaning of *wen*: "the sense of culture associated with rites, music, civilized institutions, learning, writing, and language"; *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 14. According to the Confucian vision, *wen* was gendered male; mastery of literature and the civil arts—gateway to political power—were prerogatives of men. In a separate essay, I argue that footbinding can be understood as a female inscription of *wen*: it allowed women to partake bodily in the aura of *wen*, marked by the dynamics between concealment and ornamentation. The relationship between footbinding and the Confucian discourse is thus fraught with ambiguities.

<sup>5</sup> Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian* (Guangzhou: Fuli shanfang, 1827; preface 1606), 23.26b-27a. True to generic conventions of "jottings," Shen did not provide sources for Qu's proposal. Qu and Shen were contemporaries; both were well-connected in scholar-official circles. My guess is that Shen heard of it from Qu or some mutual friends. The *Wanli yehuo bian* was teeming with little-known anecdotes; scholars from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries have deemed it a reliable work of history rather than fiction. A Qing scholar valued it as "the best private historical work written in and about the Ming dynasty." A modern scholar concurred: "He disclosed the seamy side of life and portrayed also the human and personal elements in the seemingly grandiose political sphere." Both cited in L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 1190-1191.

<sup>6</sup> Because of its unflattering portrayal of the Manchus, the *Wanli wugong lu* was banned by the Qing authorities. Extant versions of the work are fragmentary and corrupted. The edition I consulted is *Wanli wugong lu* (Taipei: Guangwen,

1972). For Qu's biography, see *Mingshi* [Official history of the Ming dynasty] (Shanghai: Zhonghua, 1933), 288.3b-4a.

<sup>7</sup> Ethnic composition on the northern frontier was by no means as dichotomized as this formulation suggests. See Frederic Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 37-49; Pamela Crossley, *Orphan Warriors: Three Manchu Generations and the End of the Qing World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5, 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, the Richard Wilhelm translation from Chinese in German; rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 331-332. The translator, Richard Wilhelm, observed how the nonchalant manner of allowing their garments to hang down was interpreted by later commentators as the three rulers' preference for a Daoist philosophy of government by inaction (332).

<sup>9</sup> Ban Gu (A.D. 32-92), *Bohu tongyi*, cited in Wang Yuqing, *Zhongguo fuzhuang shigang* (Taipei: privately printed, 1994), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Yu Xiangdou, *Santai wanyong zhengzong* [The authentic Santai encyclopedia of ten thousand uses] (Fujian: Yushi Shuangfang tang, 1599), 5.1a. For the legendary ruler Jizhi (Korean Kija), who introduced Chinese civilization into Korea, see Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992), 24, 107-108.

<sup>11</sup> Yu Xiangdou, *Santai wanyong zhengzong*, 5.7a. Although the Jiaozhi civil official was dressed in the wrong style, he enjoyed a modicum of civility because he was believed to be a descendent of a Han general.

<sup>12</sup> Zhuang Jifa, comp., *Xie Sui Zhigong tu Manwen tushuo jiaozhu* [Collated and annotated edition of the Manchu text of Xie Sui's *Diagrams of Tributary Peoples*] (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1989), 480-483; Shen Chongwen, *Zhongguo gudai fushi yanjiu* [A study of costumes in traditional China] (Taipei: Nantian, 1988), 451. The *Zhigong tu* was commissioned by the Qianlong emperor in 1751. The depiction of footbound women in this work as creatures of a higher civilization is most curious, for the same Qianlong emperor had reiterated prohibitions against footbinding during his reign. To me, this incongruity is further evidence of the strength of the deep-seated identification of footbinding with Chinese civility. On the writing of Lolo (Yi) history itself as part of the civilizing project, see Steven Harrell, "The History of the History of the Yi," in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, ed. Steven Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 63-91.

<sup>13</sup> One modern rendition of the legend, which seeks to blame Song Neo-Confucian orthodoxy for the spread of footbinding, is in Yao Jushun, *Zhongguo chanzu fengsu* [The customs of Chinese footbinding] (Shenyang: Liaoning Daxue chubanshe, 1991), 7. Patricia Ebrey has discussed the dubious nature of this legend in "Women, Money, and Class," in *Papers on Society and Culture of Early Modern China* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1992), 614. I have not been able to track down the origin of this legend, but am grateful to Professor Setsuko Yanagida, whose encyclopedic knowledge of Song sources has aided my search. For accounts of the southward spread of footbinding during the Song, see Guo Hongxing, *Chanzu shi* [A history of footbinding] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi, 1995), 18-20.

<sup>14</sup> This equation of footbinding with Chinese civilization accounts for, I believe, both the vehemence of the anti-footbinding movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the enduring opposition they encountered. How traumatic it must have been in the modern era, when that equation still stood but the hierarchy of Chinese-barbarian was reversed. This reversal of fortune is the epitome of modern Chinese history.

<sup>15</sup> The polemics of modern reformers were built on just such an argument: footbinding crippled the female half of the citizenry and weakened China's military prowess. For the demise of the Ming defense mechanisms on the northern frontier and the rise of the Manchus, see Wakeman, *Great Enterprise*, 23-66.

<sup>16</sup> The supposed rationale for footbinding in China entails a similar situational logic: bound feet would enhance the chastity of domestic women while heightening the erotic appeal of prostitutes and concubines.

<sup>17</sup> Wakeman, *Great Enterprise*, 208. This emphasis on Manchu particularism represented a change from earlier policies and arose from his growing political confidence: "whereas he had strongly promoted Confucian education for the sons of Manchu and Chinese officials and openly favored Chinese collaborators during the early years of his reign, by the mid-1630s Hung Taiji was much more concerned with maintaining Manchu values and tribal virtues" (206).

<sup>18</sup> "Qing Taizong shilu gaoben," cited in Chen, "Tifaling," 71. Qing court attire took after the styles of Ming, but with notable innovations reminiscent of the nomadic horse-riding culture of the Manchus. See Valery Garrett, *Chinese Clothing: An Illustrated Guide* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1-83.

<sup>19</sup> Jiang Liangqi, comp., *Donghua lu* [Chronicles of the first five reigns of the Qing] (Tainan: Dadong shuju, 1968; reprint of 1765), 40. These cultural and visual reinforcements make sense in light of the fact that "Manchu" was neither an entrenched nor stable identity. Hung Taiji named his people "Manchu" (Manzhou) only in 1634. See Chen Shengxi, *Ming-Qing yidai shi dujian* [Revisionist views of the history of the Ming-Qing transition] (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji, 1991), 235.

<sup>20</sup> Huang Yizheng, *Shiwu ganzhu* [Names of things on memory beads] (n.p., 1591), 13.7b-8a.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Ebrey has made a similar observation that in the Song, elite men considered footbinding a type of beautification. *The Inner Quarters* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 40.

<sup>22</sup> Charlotte Furth, "From Birth to Birth: The Growing Body in Chinese Medicine," in *Chinese Views of Childhood*, ed. Anne Behnke Kinney (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 157-191 (quote on 158); Jiang Shaoyuan, *Faxuzhua* [Hair, beard, and nails] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi, 1987; reprint of 1928), 37. For further discussions on Chinese amorphous bodies, see Angela Zito and Tani Barlow, eds., *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin*, tr. Thomas Dunlap (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 145. Similarly, John Hay has suggested that the representation of Chinese bodies can be understood in terms of a

process of "linearity." "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" in Zito and Barlow, *Body, Subject and Power*, 42-77.

<sup>24</sup> John Vollmer, *Five Colors of the Universe: Symbolism in Clothes and Fabrics of the Ch'ing Dynasty* (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1980), 19. See also Vollmer, *In the Presence of the Dragon Throne* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1977), 40.

<sup>25</sup> In the Confucian tradition there existed a strong argument against bodily mutilation on the basis that our physical body is an inheritance from our parents, hence should not be jeopardized. Yuan Mei (1716-97), in fact, used this argument to denounce footbinding, which he equated with cremation. Cited in Chen Dongyuan, *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi* [A history of the lives of Chinese women] (Taipei: Shangwu, 1981; reprint of 1928), 241. Yuan was a vehement anti-Buddhist. There were a few scattered outcries like Yuan's through the centuries, but this possibility of criticizing footbinding on Confucian antimutilation grounds did not become prevalent until the nineteenth century. One outspoken critic, Li Ruzhen, completed his novel, *Flowers in the Mirror*, around 1825. The other critic, Yu Zhengxie, published *Guisi leigao* in 1833. It is interesting that the argument of the body as parents' progeny was used in the 1640s to denounce the haircutting order imposed on Han men, but the same argument was not used as protest against footbinding until two centuries later.

<sup>26</sup> Chen Dongyuan wrote of emperor Qianlong's (r. 1736-95) repeated foot-binding bans directed at Manchu women, suggesting that some might have taken up the practice in the eighteenth century (233). For a description of a loose and quick variation of footbinding practiced among the *Hanjun* division of the Manchu Banners, see Guo Hongxing, *Chanzu shi*, 27-28. On the issue of Manchu foot-binding, I have benefitted from discussions with Mark Elliott.

<sup>27</sup> In 1129, Jin Taizong issued an edict banning Han clothing and improper hairshaving; both were crimes punishable by death. Chen Shengxi, "Tifaling," 67-68. After the Jurchens, the Mongols of the Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) also forced the men under its rule to fashion shaved heads. Ryu Kaori, *Dampatsu: Kindai To-Ajia no bunka sho totsu* (Tokyo: Aisha Shimbusha, 1990), 28-30. For a fascinating account of the relationship between hairstyles and political legitimacy of the Mongol, Jurchen, and Qidan states, see Tsao Hsingyuan, "Shaved Heads as Marks of Identity: Pictorial Sources as Aids in Understanding the Concept of *Zhengtong* [Legitimate Succession]." Paper presented at the symposium "Empire, Nation and Region: The Chinese World Order Reconsidered. Berkeley, 4 March 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Similar to footbinding, the queue was also subject to a situational logic that rendered its meanings multiple. James Millward has written that for the Tungans (Chinese-speaking Muslims) in Altishahr, part of the Qing empire in Xinjiang, "the queue served not so much a symbol of submission to the Manchus, a *sine qua non* of loyalty, but rather as a flag of Han-ness. Tungans and Han Chinese were required to fly that flag; after 1828, Uyghur begs above a certain rank were permitted to fly it." (Personal communication; see also "Beyond the Pass.") The Tungans, in other words, had stood the identification of queues and Manchuness on its head.

<sup>29</sup> The decree is translated in Frederic Wakeman, *Great Enterprise*, 646-647.

<sup>30</sup> Wakeman, *Great Enterprise*, 649-650; Chen Shengxi, *Ming-Qing yidaishi*, 162-192, has cited many anti-Manchu slogans in Jiangnan which linked political

loyalism to clothing and hairstyle. See also Michael Godley, "The End of the Queue," *East Asian History* 8 (1994): 55-60.

<sup>31</sup> *Qingshi gao, liezhuan* 32.2a; *Qingshi liezhuan*, 79.25a-26b. According to unofficial history, Sun's reasoning in urging hair-shaving is curiously nativistic: Chinese customs dictate that a new dynasty adopt its own system of attire. Cited in Ryu Kaori, *Tampatsu*, 69.

<sup>32</sup> Wang Jiazhen, *Yantang jianwen zazhi*, in *Taiwan wenxian congkan*, no. 254 (Taipei: Taiwan yinhang jinji yanjiu shi, 1968), 23-24. The story of Sun's disgrace and violent end is legendary; see also, for example, Anonymous, *Qingchao yeshi daguan*, in *Biji xiaoshuo daguan*, vol. 33, no. 6-8 (Taipei: Xinxing, 1983), 3.6-7; Chen Shengxi, *Ming-Qing yidai shi*, 160.

<sup>33</sup> See Julie Broadwin, "Walking Contradictions" (unpublished paper, 1995) for the rhetoric of the natural foot societies.

<sup>34</sup> Zhao Yi, *Gaiyu congkao* (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1957; reprint of 1790), 656; Ino Yoshinori, "Shina Kanzoku no joshi ni okonowaruru tensoku no fu," *Tokyo jinrui gakkai zasshi* 20, no. 229 (1905): 311. Zhao dated the memorial urging retraction Kangxi 7 (1668), whereas Yu Zhengxie dated it Kangxi 6 (1667). An early Qing official, Wang Shizhen (1634-1711), recounted a significant detail: the same memorial urging retraction of the ban on footbinding also urged the emperor to rescind the logistical reforms of the civil service examination he introduced in 1662. Wang Shizhen, *Chibei outan* (Taipei: Zhengwen, 1974; reprint of 1691), *sheng*. 41. This coupling of footbinding and the examination, the institution central to the production of *wen*, lends further support to my contention that footbinding borrowed its aura from that of the Confucian imperium.

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