

*Excerpted from*

EVERY STEP A  
**LOTUS**  
SHOES FOR BOUND FEET



DOROTHY KO

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FIGURE 20  
Southern-style shoes in red silk. On the side of the upper the wish for many children is expressed by a visual pun: lotus (*lian*, also “continuous”); mouth organ (*sheng*, also “give birth to”); children. Length: 16 cm (6¼ in.), 20th century. bsm s01.5.ab.

FIGURE 21, OPPOSITE  
Children’s tiger shoes, all handmade by women in the twentieth century.

Left to right:  
Beige and black silk tiger shoe.  
Length: 14.4 cm (5½ in.).  
bsm s83.88.a.

Royal blue tiger shoe with green eyes.  
Length: 15.5 cm (6¼ in.).  
bsm p92.139.a.

Maroon velvet tiger shoe with rabbit fur ruff. Length: 15 cm (5¾ in.).  
bsm s93.14.a.

Red satin tiger shoe with two turquoise pompoms. Length: 13.4 cm (5¼ in.). bsm s87.3.a.

Greyish blue tiger shoe with small black ruffle. Length: 15 cm (5¾ in.).  
bsm s80.1073.a.

# The Ties That Bind

*There are three offenses to filial piety,  
and the most serious is depriving your family of posterity.*

—Mencius

Rarely does one pass by a Chinese house, garden, or restaurant without hearing the sound of children. The Chinese love of children is legendary, and colorful folkways have sprung up to ensure their safe passage to adulthood. One scheme allots an individual one of the twelve so-called zodiac animals according to the year of birth, and the newborn is draped in hats, capes, or shoes with the emblem—a tiger, a dragon, or a ram (see “Ancient Zodiac Animals”). Avoid harm by knowing your place in the complex constellation of cosmological forces; the message is loud and clear. And those who live to a ripe old age deserve privileges because they must have done something right.



## ANCIENT ZODIAC ANIMALS



The zodiac animals are products of the sophisticated knowledge of the stars that the ancient Chinese possessed. They appeared in almanacs as early as the third century BCE, two hundred years after Confucius. The twelve animals corresponded to the day of a person's birth—not the year (there were thirty days in a month, a quarter of a twelve-by-ten-day cycle.) Parents were advised to name the child after the animal—Dragon Gongsun—or after attributes of the animal—

Victorious Gongsun. The underlying belief is not a fatalistic attitude that one's future is predetermined by fate. To the contrary, the zodiac animals promote a proactive attitude in life: know yourself and the forces that shape you, and you can then make wise decisions for yourself and your family. The practice of identifying one's year of birth with a calendrical animal became popular in the sixth century and is still customary today.

### TWELVE-YEAR CYCLES OF ZODIAC ANIMALS

<b>Rat</b>	1900	1912	1924	1936	1948	1960	1972	1984	1996	2008
<b>Ox</b>	1901	1913	1925	1937	1949	1961	1973	1985	1997	2009
<b>Tiger</b>	1902	1914	1926	1938	1950	1962	1974	1986	1998	2010
<b>Rabbit</b>	1903	1915	1927	1939	1951	1963	1975	1987	1999	2011
<b>Dragon</b>	1904	1916	1928	1940	1952	1964	1976	1988	2000	2012
<b>Snake</b>	1905	1917	1929	1941	1953	1965	1977	1989	2001	2013
<b>Horse</b>	1906	1918	1930	1942	1954	1966	1978	1990	2002	2014
<b>Ram</b>	1907	1919	1931	1943	1955	1967	1979	1991	2003	2015
<b>Monkey</b>	1908	1920	1932	1944	1956	1968	1980	1992	2004	2016
<b>Rooster</b>	1909	1921	1933	1945	1957	1969	1981	1993	2005	2017
<b>Dog</b>	1910	1922	1934	1946	1958	1970	1982	1994	2006	2018
<b>Pig</b>	1911	1923	1935	1947	1959	1971	1983	1995	2007	2019



Respect for elders and love for children constituted the foundation of Chinese ethics, and this emphasis on continuity has clearly worked: the Chinese family as we know it first took shape during the Han dynasty, two millennia ago, and its basic structure and values are to a large extent still thriving today (see “Confucian Family Values”). The strength of the family creates special opportunities and constraints for men and women alike, and to understand why footbinding became an attractive option for women—leading to its spread from door to door from the twelfth century on—we have to begin by examining the place of daughters in the family.

FIGURE 22  
Children's pig shoes, both pairs  
handmade by women in the twentieth century.

Left to right:  
Length: 12.5 cm (4  $\frac{7}{8}$  in.),  
bsm p00.118.ab.

Length: 12 cm (4  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.),  
bsm s97.153.ab.

### Being a Girl in a Male World

It is often said that girls were second-class citizens in the traditional Chinese family, which is a classic case of a “patriarchy”—where power and responsibilities were handed down from father to son. This picture is not wrong but misleading. Boys and girls were often equally loved, but forces larger than human emotions dictated that boys were *valued* more. To ensure peace and harmony, the Chinese family established clear rules for passing on property, ritual responsibilities, and authority along the male line—from grandfather to father to son. Scholars have called this type of family “*patri*-lineal” and “*patri*-archal”; the root “*patri*” in both words signals a focus on males. The intent was not so much to discriminate against women, as is often taken to be, but to prevent family assets from falling into the hands of the families of the sons’ wives. Unlike our society in which individuals own their houses and cars, in traditional China, strictly speaking, it was the family as a whole—not the sons—that owned houses and land, if any. The wealthiest families thus functioned more as a corporation jealously guarding its assets from hostile takeovers by its marital relatives.

The popular image that parents slighted their own daughters as outsiders is valid in theory. Given the patrilineal nature of the family, a woman did not have a permanent place in society until she married and had her name entered on the genealogy of her husband’s family. But this image of the daughter as a devalued outsider in her parents’ house is a far cry from the experience of most daughters. The historical record is full of diaries of fathers who doted on their girls by teaching them how to read. Human feelings aside, parents had real incentives to raise a healthy and good daughter who would fetch a high bride price. Although daughters were not supposed to inherit family property, they often received jewelry as dowry, which made brides, ironically, the only party in a family who had private holdings. If the family was wealthy, this kind of informal inheritance could be substantial.

## CONFUCIAN FAMILY VALUES



The Chinese family is a living tree. If the climate and soil conditions are right, young branches thrive and buds blossom. Having seen to the healthy growth of the tender shoots by sheltering them from the sun and rain, the old branches would eventually die off. Softly they fall onto the earth—"a fallen leaf returns to the roots," as a proverb says—initiating another cycle of birth and rebirth. Gone but not forgotten, the fallen leaves and stems supply nutrients for the living, just as the memories of grandpa and grandma sustain the young. If old and new, stem and branch, pull together and each does its part, the family tree will prosper, casting a soothing shade on the entire neighborhood for generations to come.

The biggest difference between the normative traditional Chinese family and that in the modern West is that Chinese boys and girls learned from a tender age that the health of the living tree took precedence over individual happiness. It is not that the Chinese did not believe in "individualism"; there was plenty of room for personal growth and private pleasures. But the Chinese sages thought that a broken branch or leaf is weak and less likely to fulfill its full potential. To be part of a whole, that is the condition of being human.

Through the centuries, the trunk of the tree gains another ring, and its tip reaches for the sky as its roots sink deeper and deeper into the soil. Similarly, a family prospers only if it remains rooted in the land. For its members every journey from home is an exile; every day spent on the road is a distraction from life's biggest joy. Today, we who celebrate mobility and speed may find this preference for rootedness limiting and old-fashioned. We should not overlook, however, that the Chinese devotion to a stable and sedentary life offers every family member a deep sense of security. Not only does one always know where one belongs; there is also the assurance of a safety net in case of personal failings.

According to Confucian thinking, a healthy and upright family is the foundation of a civilized country. A filial son will grow to be a good citizen, and a loyal wife sets an example for the public official, who is thought of as the helpmate of kings. This is another difference between the ideal traditional Chinese family and the modern one—the former is not a private haven separate from the state; it is in fact a microcosm of the state and the center of the public sphere. A mother who teaches her children well is the linchpin of a moral society and a peaceful country.

There are many stories that tell of a wife pawning her jewelry to bail out a husband in dire straits.

Marriage is of paramount importance for the families and individuals concerned. The groom's family gained a productive member and a potential mother; the daughter gained a home and a socially respectable identity—wife. She and her parents would want to make her as attractive as possible in order to marry well, into an economically secure family with kind in-laws. The standards for a good bride varied over time and by geographical location, and elite families often held to different standards from those of the socially deprived. Generally speaking, in the early years of the Tang when aristocratic families held sway in politics, marriage was a form of political alliance and pedigree was key. When politics became more democratic and officials were chosen on the basis of merit during the Song dynasty, personal attributes became more common in the selection of brides. Moral repute—signified by a pair of bound feet—later became a common requirement. By the sixteenth century, a sophisticated education was added on top of morality, and an ideal bride had to be both talented in literature and virtuous. In the nineteenth century, ironically on the eve of the practice's decline, a pair of bound feet became an overriding factor among bride seekers in lower-class families.

Footbinding spread from the thirteenth to fifteenth century because it enhanced a daughter's marriage prospects, as is often said. But the reason for the desirability of brides with bound feet is not, as is sometimes assumed, that parents gave in to their son's wishes for a sexually attractive wife. An openly seductive bride threatened family harmony, and in any case sons did not have any say over the choice of a spouse. Marriage was a family-to-family affair, to be decided by parents who knew better. In fact, future in-laws desired brides with bound feet because it signaled not sexuality but modesty and morality. More than marriage prospects, the biggest reason for the domestication of footbinding was its association with women's textile work, which enjoyed

FIGURE 23  
A group of wedding shoes.

Clockwise from top:  
Taiwan-style wedding shoes in plain red satin. Length: 10 cm (4 in.), 20th century. Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.

Taiwan-style wedding shoes in embroidered red satin. Length: 9.3 cm (3 3/8 in.), 20th century. Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.

Southern-style wedding shoes in red silk and decorated with golden and silver couching. Length: 15.4 cm (6 1/8 in.), 20th century. bsm p01.3.

Northern-style wedding shoes in red silk. Paper-cut gold leaf decoration affixed to sole. Length: 15.8 cm (6 1/4 in.), 20th century. Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.



high cultural and economic value in a Confucian society. We will examine this more closely in the next chapter when we visit the women's workroom and learn how they spun, wove, and made shoes. Here we would leave aside abstract analysis about the family and head to the inner chambers of the Chinese house (see "The Chinese House, Where Women Ruled the Roost"). To teach her girl how to be a woman in a man's world, a mother is about to bind her daughter's feet.

### Becoming a Woman

The daughter's first binding took place in the depths of the women's quarters under the direction of her mother, sometimes assisted by grandmothers and aunts; no men were privy to the ceremonial process. It was a solemn occasion marking the girl's coming of age, the first step of her decade-long grooming to become a bride—a prelude to a sweet-sixteen party. A sense of anticipation stirred the women's hearts, tinted with a bittersweet awareness that as women, they could gain power only by way of their bodies. Their physical and bodily labor—in the silkworm hut as in the childbirth chamber—was what made them valuable to the family. This message would soon be inscribed on the daughter's very body. The pain of footbinding anticipated the pain of childbirth, the blessing and curse for a Chinese woman.

As if to underscore the message that binding—like labor—is a fact of a woman's life, the materials and tools needed were not specialized gadgets but everyday items already in use in the women's rooms. These include such sewing implements as scissors, needles, and thread—the former for trimming the toenails and the latter for sealing the binders tight. The binding cloth would have been woven afresh. For adult women the average size of the cloth is about 10 cm wide by 4 meters long (4 inches by 13 feet), but the length varies. Women wove the cloth and stored it in a roll, like fresh bandages, ready to be torn off at the desired length. Alum powder, an astringent,

FIGURE 24  
Tools for binding feet.

Clockwise from left:  
Rolls of binding cloth, in white and dyed colors. 20th century. bsm p01.5.

Jar of medicinal foot powder, assembled in contemporary Taiwan using an ancient recipe. Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.

Bamboo cage for fuming binding cloth. 19th century. Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.

Sewing scissors. 19th century.  
bsm p01.22.

Box of fragrant foot powder sold in emporiums. Early 20th century.  
Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.



## THE CHINESE HOUSE, WHERE WOMEN RULED THE ROOST



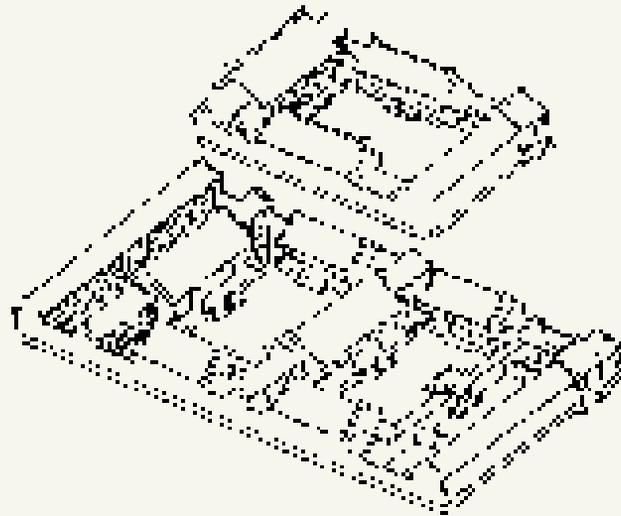
The Chinese house is more than a place to live. It is alive, a space animated with the spirits of ancestors and cosmic energies. It is also a school, teaching a boy or girl by nonverbal means how to behave according to Confucian norms.

The house is wrought of two types of architecture—a material one and an imaginary one superimposed on the wood-and-earth structure. There are three imaginary architectures: the space of decorum, an embodiment of Confucian values; the space of cosmic energy, captured in the art of *fengshui* (geomancy or siting; literally, “wind and water”); and the space of culture, representing Chinese views of home and shelter. Being human is to live and work in a house, not on the road or in the wilderness.\*

The house is a microcosm of the human world and the universe. The basic format of a Han Chinese house—a courtyard lined with living quarters enclosed in high walls—is duplicated in every region and used for palaces, schools, temples, and offices alike. This remarkable uniformity reflects a fundamental Chinese worldview that a family in the house is the moral building block of the empire, part of the natural order of the universe. The imperial palace is but a fancy house built on the identical principles as a peasant house. Indeed, the emperor is the father of the people and the “son of heaven.”

The house is the women’s domain. Marginal to the formal family structure, women are masters of the house. A second-century Confucian classic, the *Book of Rites*, prescribed an ideal division of labor for society:

“Men manage the outer, women manage the inner.” Specifically, the latter includes being in charge of the food and wine, which means not only the daily meals but also the ritually proper supplication in ceremonies honoring the ancestors and the gods. In the house women were not only custodians of domestic morality—industry and frugality—they were also household managers in the practical sense. Among the most visible powers wielded by women is the “power of the key” to the domestic bursar. After years of tutelage the bride would eventually inherit the key from her ailing mother-in-law. In theory, the male head of household controls the family resources, but in practice his wife keeps the account books and makes decisions about the household budget.

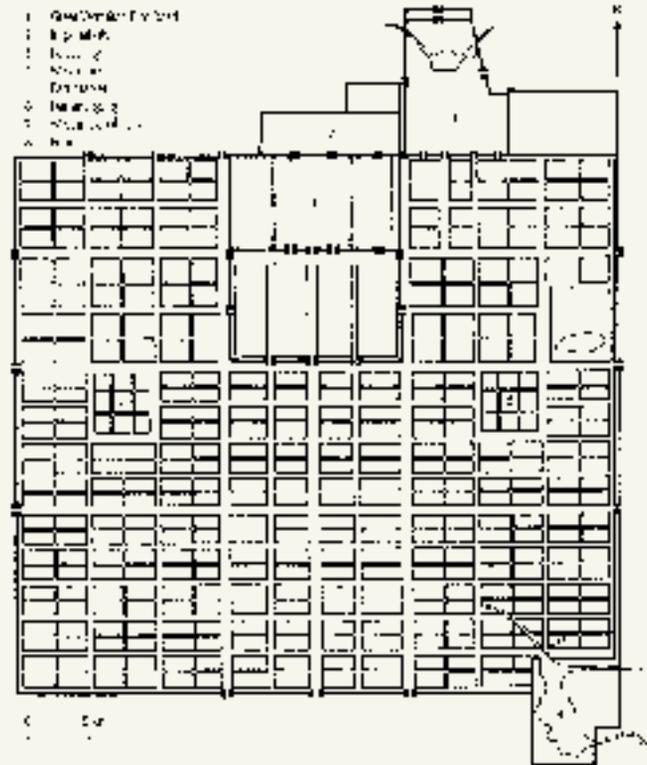




In the modern West, where domesticity is often likened to a prison and women have fought long and hard for equal opportunities in the workplace, it is tempting to regard the Chinese housewife, no matter how well provided for, as a cloistered creature deprived of life choices. Yet this is not the way Chinese

women viewed themselves before the nineteenth century. In the Confucian world, the family—and by extension the domestic life—enjoyed much higher prestige and importance than in our society. Without having to set foot out of her door, a housewife and mother could work hard to make the world a better place. And there is no better place to start than her daughter's feet.

\* The concept of “imaginary architecture” is Klaas Ruitenbeek's. See his *Carpentry and Building in Late Imperial China* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), p. 62. Francesca Bray has expounded on the three spaces of decorum, cosmic energy, and culture in *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For the elaborate scheme of symbols for happiness embedded in the house, see Ronald G. Knapp, *China's Living Houses: Folk Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).



Hierarchical space, showing similar principle of spatial organization from courtyard house to imperial city planning (left to right). From Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, pp. 113, 116, 136.

would be sprinkled in between the toes. Fragrant powder from the toiletry chest dusted the cloth and the lining of the shoe. Ancient herbal formulas for medicinal powder or tonic, made specially to soften the bones or to speed up the healing, were passed on from family to family. Dating as early as the Song dynasty, these formulas remained popular until modern times, attesting to the meticulous care that women from well-off families received.

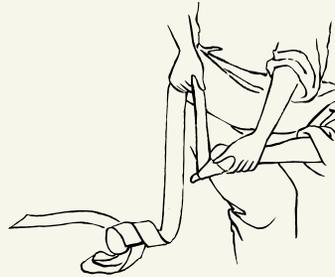
Although many of the implements needed for the first binding were readily available, new shoes would have to be made specially for the daughter. Months before the auspicious day the mother and elder women in the house began to prepare an array of tiny shoes for the girl, for daytime training and for bed. In Taiwan, where only settler families from southern Fujian (Min-nan in Chinese) bound their daughters' feet, mothers followed Fujian custom in making a series of training shoes with a rather odd appearance. Sometimes called "toad shoes" because of their shape, they became progressively smaller in size and higher in the heel. The wooden heels were left uncovered because these shoes were worn strictly behind closed doors, for the purpose of teaching the newly bound girl how to shift weight and walk with a shuffling gait. In other regions, mothers would simply make several pairs of regular shoes progressively smaller in size.

A typical age for binding to start was five to six years old. As infants, boys and girls mingled freely in the house; children were considered gender-neutral in many ways. Boys and girls led more segregated lives as they came of age, which according to Chinese thinking was the time when they became capable of understanding sexual matters. For families who could afford the loss of potential labor force, the boy would be sent to school and the girl would have her feet bound. Ritual convention dictated that a boy came of age when he turned eight by Chinese count and a girl, seven. This is because *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, a classic medical treatise, suggested that boys developed in cycles of eight years, whereas girls' cycles

## STEPS IN BINDING



A. Bind the four toes once around.



B. Then pull the binding cloth toward the outside; turn it toward the sole, folding the four toes toward the underside of the arch.



C. From the inside of the foot, pull the binding toward the front point and turn it tightly around the big toe.



D. Wrap the heel from the outer side of the foot, and pull the binding cloth toward the front point. Wrap the front, except for the big toe.



E. Wrap over the instep, go around the ankle, and return to the instep.



F. Turn toward the heel and wrap the binding cloth from the inner side of the foot to the front point.



G. Wrap from the inner side and over the instep to the outer side. Wrap around the heel and pull the binding cloth back toward the instep.

FIGURE 25  
Adapted from Howard S. Levy,  
*Chinese Footbinding*, pp. 24–25.

## HOW BINDING AFFECTED THE FOOT PHYSICALLY

FIGURE 26

Adapted from Ko, Chi-sheng, *Shengui hongyan lei*, p. 28.

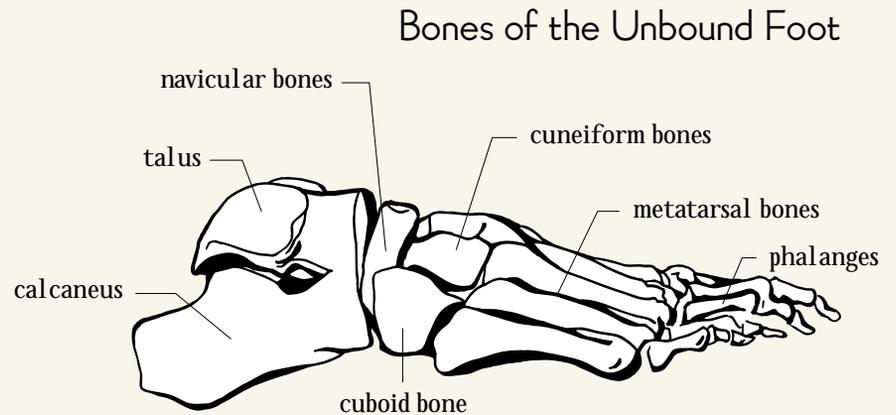
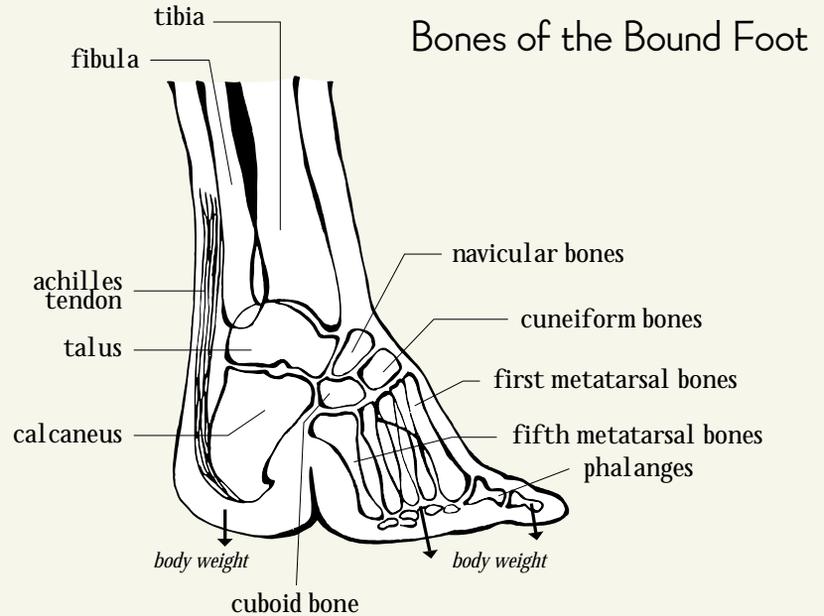
Footbinding had three physical effects on the foot:

1. Shortening the length of the foot
2. Reshaping the sole of the foot, producing an arched bulge on the instep and a deep crevice on the underside of the arch
3. Reducing the width of the sole

The reshaping of the foot was achieved by the bending and stretching of the ligaments and tendons of the foot, shifting the placement of the bones as a result. Footbinding did not break the bones of the foot.

In specific terms, the arched bulge on the instep was made by bending the metatarsal bones downward and stretching the ligaments joining the metatarsals to the cuneiform and cuboid bones. These bones atrophied after prolonged binding. The deep crevice on the underside of the arch was made by pushing the calcaneus (heel bone) inward. As a result, the heel of the foot stood almost parallel with the fibula, the long outer bone of the lower leg, and at a right angle to the floor.

The body weight was born by three parts: the heel, where the achilles tendon joins the calcaneus; the tip of the first metatarsal; the third, fourth and fifth toes, which were folded under. A woman with bound feet walked with a shuffling gait. Her hip and thigh muscles, which propelled her motion, grew strong. Her lower leg between the knee and the ankle, however, atrophied from lack of use.



measured seven years. Since the Chinese count age (*sui*) by taking the lunar year of one's birth as year one and adding a year at each lunar new year's day, a seven-*sui* girl would be around five or six years old by Western reckoning.<sup>1</sup>

Ritual formalities aside, the actual binding age tended to range from five to eight years old. For families that lived close to a hand-to-mouth existence, binding a daughter's feet was like setting aside a sum of its monthly income for the savings account—an investment in the future can only come at the expense of immediate sacrifice. Year after year peasant parents struggled to save up a little cushion so that they could afford to take their daughter out of the most strenuous forms of labor in the fields. This is why the lower one went down the social scale, the later the age for binding tended to become. For most poor daughters before the nineteenth century, however, the day never came. In a flash she grew old enough to marry and like her mother, she would marry a poor farmer.

A prepubescent girl might not have been fully aware that she was being prepared for sexual service to her future family, but she knew that footbinding was her initiation rite into the women's community, which consisted of her mother, maternal aunts, elder sisters, and cousins if they lived nearby. With her hair tied up in tufts and her feet bound, her attire signaled her new status as bride-in-waiting, almost a woman, even though her body had yet to change physically. The women's community is not so much secretive as invisible, hidden behind the formal structures of the male-centered family. If the father's power was all too apparent and the father-son tie was celebrated in concrete physical form—the ancestral shrine and the genealogy book, for example—women's power was informal and the mother-daughter tie was celebrated only in the women's hearts and minds.

In fact, instability and insecurity were the first facts of life that the mother had to teach the daughter. A woman's station in life was not fixed. Unlike her brothers, who were born into the same house they would eventually inherit



FIGURE 27  
A series of training shoes.

Clockwise from top:  
Red training shoes with painted wooden heels. Found in Singapore and possibly used by Chinese women who settled in Malacca. They also resemble the "stilt shoes" (*qiao xie*) worn by actresses playing the "female comedian" (*caidan*) role in Cantonese opera. Length: 18 cm (7 1/8 in.), 20th century. bsm s80.1329.ab.

Flat toad shoes in quilted and embroidered cotton. Used in the initial stage of training. Length: 18 cm (7 1/8 in.). Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.

Toad shoe with bare wooden heel.  
Used in the second stage of training.  
Length: 16.2 cm (6 3/8 in.). Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.

and often die in, a girl had to rise up to new challenges in every stage of her life. The most traumatic dislocations she suffered were on her wedding day, when she entered a stranger's family, which she had to make her own. As she learned the idiosyncrasies of her mother-in-law, the most important person to please, she became more settled and comfortable. Her position became secure with the birth of a son; as the mother of sons she would gain a permanent and visible place in the family. As the mother of daughters she could only hope for the best.

Sons did not have an easier life—they were under intense pressure to succeed and not to let the family down. Nor were they free to pursue their own interests at the expense of the family business. Yet at least men in Chinese society had a basic choice—to work with the body or the mind; to be a worker or a scholar. For a woman, the body was her only gateway to a better future. To do textile work and to give birth—to attain value and meaning for herself, she could not do without the body. As a mother readied the training shoes and cloth binders for her daughter, both fruits of female labor, these thoughts might have raced through her head. Our bodies and labor make us women, she might have said to her daughter, and our bodies and labor are the ties that bind us in a female kinship that no men can undo.

### Praying to the Tiny-Footed Maiden

As a crucial rite of passage for the daughter and a central event for the women's community, the binding of feet was rich in spiritual and religious meanings. To begin with, the day to begin binding had to be selected with care. Almanacs specifying auspicious days for the first binding can be found as early as the sixteenth century. In practice, the day and rituals varied a great deal from region to region, but the women's desire for perfect feet and the great length to which they were willing to go to achieve them, was universal.

For pragmatic reasons, the ideal season for binding to start was autumn, when feet were no longer sweaty and the breeze cooled off some of the discomfort. In Suzhou, a southern city famous for its elegant, elongated shoes for bound feet, binding customarily started with fanfare on the twenty-fourth day of the Eighth Moon. In honor of the Stove (or Kitchen) God, on that day women of the house would cook sticky rice, add red beans, shape the mixture into balls, and make offerings on the stove. The Stove God, ironically always a male, belongs to the male pantheon of celestial bureaucrats and presides over the line of patriarchs in the household. The offering of rice balls was a common ritual throughout China, for red beans were believed to have the power to ward off diseases and evil spirits. But in fashionable Suzhou the women added another layer of meaning to the ritual by designating the day the birthday of their goddess, the Tiny-Footed Maiden. When they made offerings to the Stove God, they also whispered a prayer to their goddess, wishing that their bones would be as soft as the rice ball and their feet as pretty as the Maiden's. A folk song describes the occasion:

*Misty is the white dew and full is the panicle of rice,  
The new rice ball, every family has tasted.  
Pity is the girl, hair newly tied in tufts,  
Trying on her first arched shoes, unsullied by dust.<sup>2</sup>*

“White dew” is one of the twenty-four solar terms on the Chinese calendar and signals the slight chill of autumn that can turn dew into frost.

If there were statues or paintings made to honor the Tiny-Footed Maiden, they did not survive; hence we do not know what she looks like. Unlike the god of the stove, who was a public deity sanctioned by imperial decrees, the women's goddess was private and hidden, although no less “real” to the women because of it. We may picture the Maiden as the embodiment



FIGURE 28

Shown actual size, tiny votive shoes with embroidered prayer. The prayer on the right shaft (shown) reads: "Who on heaven, / Can I lean on? / May you go in peace, / Across the waves." On the left shaft: "May god bless you, / 'Til we meet again, / Meet again, / Meet again." Length: 5.7 cm (2 1/4 in.), late 19th century. Collection of Vincent V. Comer.

of the collective aspirations of numerous mothers and daughters. Perhaps she even looked different to each of her devotees, as the projection of each girl's most cherished self.

More widespread than prayers to the Tiny-Footed Maiden were offerings made to the Bodhisattva Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy. In India, where Buddhism originated, the bodhisattva was depicted as a handsome man with a thin mustache. As he traveled to medieval China, he underwent a sex change and eventually appeared as a woman—often a mother figure—with boundless compassion. Her temples have dotted the Chinese landscape for centuries, even in the most remote corners. She promises immediate assistance to all who call upon her name or chant her prayers, regardless of sex, class, or creed. Although Guanyin has no lack of male followers, she is a special patron to countless mothers and daughters. One of her most important jobs is to grant children, and she remains as popular as ever today.<sup>3</sup>

In many regions of China, weeks before a girl was to start binding, her mother would make a pair of votive shoes and place them on the incense burner in the neighborhood Guanyin temple or on the altar of a makeshift shrine at home. Prayers were offered every day. Guanyin became the patron saint of footbinding simply because she was the most beloved deity in the female quarters, always ready to grant the women's secret desires. The lotus also figures prominently in the Guanyin cult. The scripture that bears her name is taken from the *Lotus Sutra* (a sutra is a Buddhist scripture), one of the most popular among female devotees. In another sutra, there is a story about a person being thrown into burning coals but saved by Guanyin, who turned the flames into lotus buds in a lake. In a Chinese devotional story, a general sought the goddess's blessing at the Cave of Tidal Waves, where she is believed to live. Not finding her there, the brutal general shot an arrow into the cave before turning to leave in his boat. All of a sudden lotus flowers sprouted from the water and filled the sea. The general, realizing that Guanyin was nearby,

repented and erected a shrine above the cave.<sup>4</sup> The lotus is not only a Buddhist symbol of purity, piety, and wisdom; to devotees of the Guanyin cult it also signifies the apparition of the Goddess of Mercy and her saving grace.

To save people in various kinds of predicaments, Guanyin often appears to people in different forms. In paintings by artists and devotees, one of her earliest poses is that of a Water and Moon Guanyin, holding a willow branch in the right hand and a water bottle in the left. In a tenth-century painting, before Guanyin's sex change, there is an image of him sitting on a rock surrounded by water. Lotus blossoms sprout from the water, and he rests his left foot on one of them. His pose is one of repose (called "royal ease" in art history parlance), and the picture of lotus in water connotes tranquility and peace of mind.

In the most popular image after the sex change, Guanyin appears as the White-Robed Guanyin, an elegant woman wearing a long white cape and often sitting on a lotus throne. In her court female deities of the lotus clan also wear white robes. Not only is white the symbol of purity, like the lotus, but it also symbolizes the mind of the enlightenment, which is the mother of all buddhas and bodhisattvas.<sup>5</sup> By association with whiteness, the lotus also became a complex and somewhat contradictory symbol of purity and motherhood or fertility. When a mother whispered prayers for a pair of properly bound feet to the Bodhisattva Guanyin, she might well be seeking blessings of purity and fertility on her daughter's behalf. Oh the most Compassionate One, she prayed, may lotus blossoms bloom at every step of my daughter's life.



FIGURE 29

The White-Robed Guanyin appears as a young woman sitting on a rock with lotus blossoms sprouting from her seat. One of twenty-eight woodblock prints entitled *The Dabei Dharani of the Bodhisattva Guanyin in Thirty-Two Manifestations* (Guanyin pusa sanshi'er xiang dabei xinqian). Attributed to Ding Yunpeng, ca. 1621–27. From Zhou Wu, *Zhongguo banhua shi tulu*, p. 73, pl. 61.



FIGURE 30

Shoes in dark blue satin with embroidered motif of a successful examination candidate returning home on horseback, expressing a bride's desire for her husband's career success. Length: 12 cm (4¾ in.), 20th century. bsm p92.55.ab.

### Every Step a Lotus Shoe

On the daughter's footbinding day, she received her first gifts of lotus shoes from her mother. From then on, the mother would teach her one by one all the necessary skills to be a good woman, beginning with sewing and shoe-making. Shoes thus have special emotional meanings to a woman beyond the material aspect. We may say that votive shoes are expressions of her religious devotion, and the first binding shoes are a mother's labor of love. Girls and adult women made shoes as gifts for distant friends and nearby relatives. As a product of a woman's hand, a pair of lotus shoes is not an inanimate object but the material extension of her body and her medium of communication. Literate daughters wrote letters and poetry in their elegant hand, but illiterate daughters spoke through the shoes they made, the shoes they wore, and the shoes they gave away as souvenirs and tokens.

Bridal daughters were literally judged by the shoes they made. Some matchmakers were said to take along a shoe of the prospective bride to show to the groom's family. But the real test came after the betrothal agreement was sealed. A bride-to-be could spend as long as two years making gift shoes for her future in-laws and their entire families. In Zhejiang and other southern provinces, each pair of these shoes would be tied with a bow of colorful silk cord or sewn onto a piece of brocade for presentation. They would then be stored in wooden shoe chests and sent to the groom's family as part of her trousseau, before whom they would be proudly displayed and admired (or harshly criticized.)

The bride-to-be would also lavish attention on her own wedding shoes. Since she was not supposed to loosen her foot binders even for her husband, a pair of soft, socklike sleeping shoes would serve as the focus of his amorous attention. They were often made of red satin, sometimes green, and seldom embroidered save for a tiny flower or baby under the curled tip. Sleeping shoes are perhaps the most tactile of lotus shoes, designed to appeal to the



FIGURE 31, OPPOSITE

Gift shoes stitched for presentation on a piece of tasseled green silk, placed here at the foot of a trousseau shoebox. Length: 12.5 cm (4 7/8 in.), late 19th century. bsm p01.6.ab.



FIGURE 32

Nested shoes for the wedding night.

Sleeping shoes made of red cotton with quilted sole and heel area. Length: 18.4 cm (7 1/4 in.).

Shandong-style wedding bootie in red satin with decorated sole. Length: 21.2 cm (8 3/8 in.), 20th century. Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.

sensory experience of touch besides the visual. The sleeping shoe is often the innermost layer in a set of three. Slightly larger would be an indoor shoe with a stiffer sole, to wear inside the bedroom, and finally an outdoor shoe or bootie for a trip to the outhouse. Many women wore sleeping shoes to bed during their entire adult lives. On her wedding night, a bride might have followed a southern custom in handing a pair of sleeping shoes to her groom; “handing over shoes” is a pun for “handing over harmony” (both *xie*). Sleeping shoes also made popular love tokens in the entertainment quarters.

Married women used shoes to express a different kind of love. Although busy with housework and, if they were lucky, child-rearing, brides did not lose contact with their natal families and friends. Those who married far away from home often sent gift shoes to celebrate the birthdays of friends and relatives. Literate women might slip a poem in the shoe, and upon receiving the gift her friend would respond with a poem of her own. One such lucky recipient of gift shoes, a certain Madame Ma, was overjoyed by her friend’s thoughtfulness and skills:

Gratitude for Your Gift Shoes

*In the azure pond, tiny leaves of golden lotus fall,  
Deep in the inner chambers, our happy days of sewing recalled.  
Your boundless skills so laboriously sent afar,  
Dare I set foot onto the verdant steps, now wet with dew?*<sup>8</sup>

“Azure pond” is the home of the Queen Mother of the West, the most powerful Daoist goddess. Madame Ma paid homage to her friend by comparing her to the goddess. Although the two friends no longer lived in the same vicinity after their respective marriages, a pair of gift shoes reunited them in spirit by recalling the sewing and embroidering they used to do in each other’s company as girls.

FIGURE 33

Blue funerary "longevity" shoes of blue cotton with black cotton band. Soles of white cotton embroidered with lotus flower, bamboo ladder, and two lanterns. Length: 21.1 cm (8 3/4 in.), 20th century. bsm p93.70.ab.





FIGURE 34

Pale mourning shoes of distinct regional styles.

above

Shanxi-style mourning shoes in pale yellow with purple tuft on tip. Length: 11.1 cm (4  $\frac{3}{8}$  in.), early 20th century. Collection of Douglas D. L. Chong.

right

Shanxi-style mourning booties. Length: 15.6 cm (6  $\frac{1}{8}$  in.), early 20th century. Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.

opposite

Northern-style mourning shoes with white tuft on tip. Length: 15.5 cm (6  $\frac{1}{8}$  in.), early 20th century. Collection of Dr. Chi-sheng Ko.



### The Full Circle

The medical theory that prescribes that a girl comes of age at seven *sui* also suggests that seven cycles later, at age forty-nine, she would cease to menstruate. The end of her fertile years is a cause for celebration for a woman; she has fulfilled her duties to the family as the bearer of sons. She comes full circle when a timid young bride—the bride of her son—presents to her a gift of embroidered shoes. If mothers were loved by their sons, mothers-in-law were to be revered and feared. Such was the bargain a woman struck with the patriarchal family: the pain and tears on her first footbinding day—her ticket to motherhood—finally brought her power and authority within the family when she became a mother-in-law.

Now that someone else was to make the everyday shoes and supervise the kitchen, old women were free to indulge their hearts' desires for the remainder of their lives. Many took religious vows and spent their time embroidering portraits of the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Others entered the most creative period of their artistic careers, spending hours refining their painting brushstrokes or embroidery stitches. There remained one last task of great importance before a woman could relax—making her own funerary (or “longevity”) shoes. These shoes are blue with a vamp of plain design; the key message is inscribed on the white sole in the form of a lotus blossom and a ladder or a white crane, her vehicle to the Western Paradise. “Every step a lotus, all the way to heaven”—these would be her last wish for herself. On the day she was laid to rest, her son would slip the shoes on her feet and bid her goodbye with tears in his eyes. Her daughter-in-law retrieved her all-white mourning shoes from the bottom of her wardrobe, tried them on for size, and stepped out of the room knowing that she would be lonelier but not wiser in this world.

