演　講

On a New Footing: Footbinding and the Coming of Modernity*

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The abandonment of footbinding marked a watershed in Chinese history, and a new phase in Chinese gender relations. This sudden and epochal transition has been chronicled in many and varied sources, but the written record transmits little of how it was experienced by producer-class women. Based on my field interviews with over three hundred elderly women and on detailed surveys of nearly 10,000 more in Sichuan, Fujian, and the Jiangnan, and with Japanese household registers for Taiwan, it is possible to explore the practice, rather than the elite imaginary, of footbinding. In forms virtually invisible in rural communities, industrialization was the most powerful opponent of footbinding; this conclusion forms the necessary background for this paper. Here I stress a subsidiary issue: producer-class women's visions of social change. The limitations of indigenous explanation of change underscores the necessity for researchers to fully contextualize events experienced as "modernizing."

For me, the study of China is guided by one, grand macro-question:

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* This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco, November 28, 1996.

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近代中國婦女史研究　第 5 期（1997 年 8 月）

Given that the eastern end of Eurasia is huge, ecologically mutiplex, inhabited by extremely varied populations speaking dozens of languages, and limited by communications systems that have always been stretched to the max; how is it that this tangle of constraints and agencies generates a significant degree of cultural unity? Put more sharply, the question might read: how do Chinese elites get Chinese commoners to do what their rulers want, and how do commoners shape, if only in limited ways, elite desires?

Such grand questions are unanswerable, but may be approached by the focused analysis of specific cultural phenomena. Footbinding has long seemed to me to be just such a phenomenon, a custom that made no bones about the importance of social control both as forcibly imposed from without, and as voluntarily absorbed as self-control. While foot-binding operated at the level of empire, it also operated in society's most intimate niches: in the family, and in the individual. With footbinding, families strategized about their daughters' future marriages, and about the deployment of their premarital labor. With footbinding, even a little girl could assert a measure of control over *someone*--herself--in an intensely conscious hierarchy that allowed her no subordinates.

Finding Evidence

A rich literature has explored elite views of footbinding, with their many ambiguities. The merits of footbinding were debated by literati long before foreigners began to criticize the practice. These elite, masculine discussions of a sexually-charged area of gender construction lay open hidden areas of elite, male thought (e.g. Ko 1994, Turner 1994), but we should not suppose that they are expressive of much that existed outside those bookish old heads. Foreign missionaries imported their own,

Victorian struggle over gender issues into the Chinese case (Zito 1994). It has been strongly argued (Lin 1980; Pao Tao 1992) that missionaries and other Westerners played only a minimal role in the movement against, and thus in the literate interpretation of footbinding.

When I undertook to do systematic and extensive fieldwork on footbinding, I found both these literatures of little direct relevance. Talking to rural and small-town, largely uneducated women who had been footbound, or had been the first girls on their block not to be, took me into a very different political world from that of urban activists and missionaries. The changes that took place in the kinship/gender sector of Chinese social hierarchy owed very little to Liang Qiqiao, Mrs. Archibald Little, and Sun Yatsen. They owed something to the refraction of national-level ideologies through local views and practices that few elite actors strove to penetrate; but more to social changes directly resulting from industrialization.

There is only one way to hear such views: through interviewing the many living women who remember the days of footbinding. Documents will not do, alas. My set of interview data is large, and carefully assembled. I do not claim some mystical objectivity, but I do have a lot of material taken directly from Chinese women, and have asked that material a lot of questions. Often the answers have been different from those I expected. The study builds on the strengths of a particularly competent group of cadres in the Sichuan Provincial Women's Federation.① We interviewed 500 women, over 65 years of age in 1991, in each of 10 counties (all Han areas).② My provincial colleagues and I went to our sites, trained the local

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① And on funding from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation's program on research into the causes and consequences of aggression--for which I am grateful. My principal colleagues in this research were Vice Director Lo Dong, and Section Heads Jiang Yinghong and Hua Xinghui.

② Footbinding is an obvious and important ethnic boundary marker, and can be universal for Han women in regions of recent ethnic confrontation. In north

interviewers, reviewed each day's work as it came in, stayed till the survey was complete, and had the data entered immediately on our return to Chengdu. I repeated this survey, under slightly less satisfactory conditions, in Xiamen, surveying nearly 800 women. In these surveys, I conducted nearly 300 interviews myself (obviously with the help of local translation into putonghua [or something like it]). These data are bolstered on some topics by a simpler set of footbinding statistics collected by colleagues at Xiamen Daxue for 3,600 elderly rural people in Fujian; and by footbinding censuses derived from Taiwan household registers collected by Arthur Wolf and Chuang Ying-chang of the Academia Sinica.

Because we surveyed all the women over 65 in each of our designated field sites in Sichuan, we easily calculated several parameters of variation in footbinding practice. Ranging women by birthdates, we see the changing ratios of footbound to non-footbound over time. Using information about our informants' grandmothers, mothers, and sisters, the documentation stretches back into the mid-1800s. In some areas, footbinding was near-universal, and in others was limited to the few daughters of the very rich. We asked our informants at what age they were bound, and, if unbound, at what age unbound. Here too we see interesting variations in the exposure period. Girls bound at, say, five, in areas where unbinding was rare were exposed throughout life; while the average girl on Fujian's coast was not bound till age 12, and then let out, at her mother-in-law's insistence, shortly after marriage. We did not attempt the elaborate measurements and generally undignified proceedings that would have been necessary to create a scale of "severity" or "completeness" in the binding itself, and

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Taiwan, clearing aboriginal land for tea growing in the last half of the nineteenth century inspired much violence and a local insistence on footbinding that results in 95 percent of (non-Hakka) women footbound when the Japanese began to register the practice in the early 1900s. Our survey areas were chosen to enable us to better understand intra-Han variation.

found only one indigenous category to help us do so. "Completeness" varied from the rarely-seen four-inch clump of tightly constricted tarsals and metatarsals to what Sichuan women call the "cucumber foot"--toes snugged up under the plantar, thus narrowing the foot without shortening it. Women repeatedly emphasized the variability of feet (and of shoes) "because every woman had had a different experience with it."

What was the experience like? Again, our subjects spoke of the rich variation that almost all behavioral (as opposed to ideological) phenomena yield to the persistent observer. Women showed me severely broken and crumpled feet marked with the scars of bad infections, but these were rare. A few women showed me neat little feet that they proudly announced they had bound themselves, or demanded that their mothers bind. A few women insisted that their pain was minimal, soothed by maternal footrubs and edible treats, but most found it agonizing. It was viewed as distinctive, personal, self centered.

With fieldwork, it is possible to learn something of what women in the earliest decades of this century experienced of footbinding. I am able, then, to fulfill the first requirement of ethnography: through learning what women say about this practice, and how they expressed their understandings of it in ways that go beyond words--in the making of the necessary, and highly culturally elaborated shoes, for example--I can construct a first-level grasp of the meaning of footbinding, on based on its coherence for those who practiced it. However, I am able as well to take the next step required for minimally satisfactory ethnography. I can systematically explore the varied expressions and experiences of my subjects, taking my understanding beyond their local limitations. I can construct a second-level meaning of footbinding: how were these local and regional practices shaped by forces that my informants themselves were not positioned to comprehend and interpret? From these varying

materials, I aim for the good old Enlightenment goal of explanation.

Explaining Footbinding: Unknown Origins, Ethnic Boundaries, and Diffusion through Status Emulation

On some questions about footbinding--its origins, its role as an ethnic boundary marker, its diffusion through status emulation, I will be brief, in order to get on to the main point of this paper. First, we will probably never know much about the precise origins of the custom; but this does not matter much. What matters is when it spread, and why. Second, I assume that where Han people were in close contact with non-Han, footboundness ratios were likely to be high as even poor local Han claimed the ethnic advantages that footbinding signified. Third, I assume that footbinding was initially an elite phenomenon that spread down the social hierarchy in part because emulation of social superiors enabled poor Han to claim some of the status advantages of wealthy ones.

If these assumptions were sufficient, Chinese women should universally have been footbound, and no further explanation would be necessary. But they were not. Even from the anecdotal evidence previously available, the map of footbinding shows very considerable variation in footbinding practice. My own data show the surprising nature of that variation even in a region like eastern Sichuan, which was resettled after massive Ming/Qing population decline by Han immigrants. After considering ethnicity and status emulation, most analysts attempting to account for footbinding variation have turned to differentials in women's labor for explanation. I believe they are right, but generally for the wrong reasons.

The Explanation from Labor

Most of us would agree that Chinese political economy both defined and imposed a specific kinship/gender system as an element of an encompassing hierarchy. Footbinding in late imperial China was "about" the domination of women by men, and of young women by older ones; class dimensions were also salient (v. Mann 1992, Turner 1994). That domination had many aspects, including the imposition of a labor discipline that made Chinese textiles, tea, and other products competitive for a century even with fully capitalist production.③ Control of household labor--and this included the kinship/gender control of women and children--was as important a political activity as existed in the lives of commoners (Blake 1994a, 1994b, Goldstone 1996). While Christena Turner (1994) made heroic efforts to scrape quantitative materials from history's barrel, they are inadequate to demonstrate anything much beyond the important notion that footbinding was a very variable process. Her work, like that of almost all prior students of footbinding, also founders on the problematic assumption that regional footbinding variation would be explainable in terms of agricultural, field, labor.

Interviews have made clear, however, the close connection not with digging and delving, but between local handicraft production and footbinding custom. Some preliminary findings are available (Gates 1996b, 1997, 1998); I hope at last to crunch all my numbers before they drown me in statistical complexity and guilt. My evidence shows the great complexity

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③ Fred Blake's (1994) and Jack Goldstone's (1996) recent papers are important contributions to our understanding of the connections among footbinding, labor, and state-mandated hierarchies. They parallel ideas set forth in Gates 1989 and 1996.

of this practice, but it supports very strongly the argument that handicrafts and low-level processing work are far more important in indexing regional patterns of footbinding than is field labor.

The Value of Girls' Labor

Though the description of girls' must be brief here, I am learning that labor accounts not for footbinding itself, but for much of its variation. In the approximately ten years between about seven *sui*, when a girl began to learn housewifely skills, and seventeen *sui*, when the average girl reached menarche and became marriageable,④ her labor was at the disposal of her *niang jia*--her birth or adopted family. That labor, at least in Sichuan and Fujian, seems rarely to have been of great importance for field agriculture. It was, however, critical to China's handicraft production: for textiles, tea, for opium, for white wax, for a huge number of labor-lavish goods.

Yet that labor is nearly invisible in the voluminous literature on Chinese handicraft production. Women and girls are rarely mentioned, and both the gender and the age divisions of labor are ignored. In home-made textiles, for example, weaving is usually described as "a female job." But it is rarely clear who supplied the labor for initial processing, such as ginning or scutching into clean fiber, or for the spinning and twisting of fibers into thread or yarn.⑤ These processes require only low skills, but are far more time-and-labor-consuming than weaving itself. The written

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④ In these interviews, we asked women their age at menarche. The overall average of about 17 *sui* is late by present-day standards, but typical for pre-industrial agrarian societies of that time.

⑤ Philip Huang has argued for the important roles of females in handicraft textile production (1985, 1990) in both agriculture and processing, but offers little detail on the aged division of labor.

record is of little help in clarifying the division of labor by age in textiles, or in any other typically female tasks. The ten years of a girl's pre-marital labor, the years when her footbinding would be carried out, are virtually undocumented.

The literature on textiles almost always ignores class issues as well. Products used by commoners--rough hemp cloth, *mabu*, and the common, cotton *tubu*, for example--have been of little interest to scholars. The encyclopedic volume *Jiangnan Tubu*, edited by Shanghai Shekeyuan's Xu Xinwu (1992), is a wonderful exception to this lack of concern for every-day producers and products. Yet, because of the severe limitations of written records, even *Jiangnan tubu* can tell us little about the division of labor among women. What it does reveal does not accord very well with our interviewees, who themselves were spinners and weavers in their youth.⑥ Xu Xinwu outlines the "natural family-labor division of labor" of Jiangnan *tubu* production in three proverbs (1992:27):

1. *Nan gong tian; nu zhi bu*--Men plough and women weave. While this is, of course, generally true in rural areas throughout China, it is neither an accurate nor a complete summary. Specialized weaving of high-value silk, cotton, and hemp fibers was often done by males; and in some regions, neither men nor women made textiles. Taiwan, for example, seems to have depended virtually throughout its history on the importation of cloth from mainland coastal cities.

Xu's second proverb reads:

2. *Ah-niang re yi chuang, Xiaogu re wu liang*--A mother makes a

⑥ Sichuan women spun regularly until after Liberation, as did some Fujian women; and women from all three areas wove until quite recently. In fact, on a trip to the Wenzhou county of Yangping, I saw a woman weaving brightly colored diapers for a new baby on an old loom that "all the neighbors borrow when they need to;" Fujian women, in Tongan county especially, still weave special baby carriers for market.

basketful a day; a maiden makes only half a basketful. We cannot tell from this saying whether the women are making ginned cotton, yarn, or something else, although it is probably not woven cloth, which is measured by length, not weight. We are told, however, that older women and younger sometimes did the same work, and that older women worked twice as fast as girls. True, perhaps, but not accurate; young girls were often excellent spinners.

In the most informative of the proverbs,

3. *Da fu gong tan, zhong fu zhi; xianhuan, xiao fu dang chuang zhi*--Old ladies gin/fluff cotton, the middle-aged spin; thread-slaves and young ladies sit by the window and weave. The multi-generation of the proverb is also an elite one: the ladies have a spinning-slave to help them--though, note, they all labor, even the matriarch. In commoner households of Sichuan, Fujian, and the Jiangnan, the division was simpler: in my samples, unmarried girls spun as a kind of apprenticeship, usually graduating to weaving only after marriage. Why? Because spinning requires less skill, and is extremely boring. It is an "upstream" process, so youthful errors cannot ruin the weeks of work required to prepare warp threads and initiate weaving. Mothers expected their daughters to spin while the mother did more expert work. Girls looked forward to moving up to the more interesting and socially valued task of weaving.

In all the handicraft textile producing regions where I have interviewed, women spontaneously made connections between spinning and weaving as women's work, and footbinding. Especially in Fujian, if I asked, "Did your mother spin and weave?" the answer might very well be, "No. She didn't have bound feet" or "She had very little feet"--i.e. "Yes." In this and many other contexts, we discussed what kinds of work women could and could not do with bound feet, and what our subject herself had and had not done of the jobs locally available to her, both just before and just

after her marriage. How her labor was allocated, who allocated it, and who received its rewards were omnipresent, voluntary themes.

Eroticism and Marriage Mobility

While the analyst who reaches beyond culture sees labor discipline as the ultimate basis of footbinding, point-of-production activities were not its most salient feature to our subjects. Many of our interviewees addressed social hierarchy as the key element in footbinding, looking to the custom as essential to the construction of both gender and class, and to upward mobility for individuals and families. They stressed how footbinding improved a woman's opportunities in the principal career open to her: marriage. I will summarize these responses briefly below.

First, however, a word about eroticism. The erotic aspects of footbinding, so emphasized by overfed and underworked elite men, were predictably difficult to inquire about.⑦ Although I cannot prove it, I came to the conclusion that our rural interviewees were not shyly concealing a major commitment to foot fetishism. While they frequently manifested embarrassment when asked their ages at menarche and menopause, for example, they never did so when being asked why girls had their feet bound, or what men thought about bound feet. Rather, when we fished for erotica, we usually caught power differentials. Old gentlemen in Emei Shan, Sichuan, told Arthur Wolf that marrying a natural-footed woman would have been "like lying in your grave." By this they meant that her big feet would tower up over the recumbent couple in bed as a gravestone

⑦ Arthur Wolf and Chuang Ying-chang did some interviewing on my behalf among older men about the possible sexual meanings of footbinding. They too were largely unsuccessful in eliciting what their informants might have seen as risque materials.

towers above a corpse: natural feet "put men down" in their marital relationship. Whether this implied that a natural-footed woman had greater power vis-a-vis her husband, or that her big-footedness shamed him before his more fortunate peers could not be determined; informants found both interpretations equally amusing.

When the ghost of eroticism did hover over a conversation, I usually drew the inference that insofar as the bound foot had erotic associations, it was because it was attached to a woman who was demonstrably physically limited, and--very importantly--who had learned submission and subordination as essential to female desirability. In short, a strong, self-willed woman was seen as less erotically interesting than a fully subordinated one. The eroticization of power assymmetries is a well-known mechanism of the naturalization of hierarchy.

Marriage mobility was the goal that most women associated with the pain of footbinding, the tradeoff that they--or at least their mothers--willingly made. The boundfooted became brides; the unbound became *binu*--bondservants. In Fujian, some elderly women showed me their footbindings, preserved against their death, so that they might go bound into the netherworld, and thus be reincarnated as brides, not *binu*.

But though virtually all women, bound or not, married eventually, being a bondservant was a frequent life-cycle stage for Chinese women. About ten percent of 5,000 Sichuan women surveyed had been some sort of servant before marriage, and about fifteen percent of 770 Fujian women. The term *binu* also covered prostitutes. None of the career possibilities implied by *binu* were attractive, and some were hideous. When Chinese women told me that footbinding distinguished between the bride and the *binu*, I believe they were saying that this visible evidence of parental--and self-control made one a respectable woman destined for a classical family-to-family transfer as a full wife rather than for one of the many

wretched alternatives.⑧

It is important here to mention two factors that bore heavily on women's marital careers. One is that women were almost always able to marry "up"--as defined by family prosperity--in their local social hierarchy. We should expect this, given the unbalanced sex ratio that left perhaps fifteen percent of Chinese men unmarried throughout life. Ultimately, it guaranteed some form of marriage for virtually every woman. My evidence confirms this expectation. By ranking our subjects and their first husbands by family ownership of house, land, and plough animal, it is clear that marriage brought most women a small increment of upward mobility, except where many women married in the minor fashion (A. Wolf 1990).

Yet a girl's class at birth might not protect her from very considerable downward mobility in another dimension. In regions where girls' persons were much commoditized, such as Fujian, they were transferred out of their natal families in a great variety of ways--such as minor marriage and bondservanthood. Some of these forms of transfer gave them very low status in their new families, even when those families were economically superior to their birth families. In the critical years when a girl's future was being planned, having well-bound feet might be an advantage, but it might not. A rich family looking for a maid to do heavy household work, like pushing the grain mill, would not take in a small-footed girl. If they were seeking a pretty attendant for a matriarch--a couple of little *yatou* made an elegant present to one's mother on her sixtieth birthday, for example--a bright face and dainty feet were highly appropriate. So too for a madam buying apprentice prostitutes: the farmer who has successfully sold his

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⑧ Gates 1996a, chapter 8 ("Dowry and Brideprice") documents regular regional variations in ways of dispersing girls from their natal households. These cover a broad spectrum, from what I call "major marriage with dowry" to outright sale.

turnips will pay pennies for a natural-footed drab, while a merchant tourist to a famous beauty spot offers silver for a mincing call-girl.

The *Laobaixing* Perspective on the Polity

Footbinding did not have solely local meanings. The unity of China, fragile as it was in this period, existed even in peasant heads, though in forms that the ruling classes might not easily recognize. Footbinding was implicated in national-level hierarchy--and thus politics--long before it was attacked by foreigners. Before footbinding became a negative national symbol, to be eradicated as China strove for "modernity," it was a positive cultural symbol. Tiny feet distinguished dignified "brides" from lowly *binu*, and separated the daughters of Han from all other women.

And yet footbinding ceased with amazing rapidity, as if the custom were quite disconnected from the many continuities in women's lives that have indisputably persisted into the present day. One might have thought that our subjects would have had a well-considered answer to the question of why footbinding stopped. They did, but it was a most unsatisfactory one.

Overwhelmingly, women replied that families stopped binding feet because "*shehui gaibianle*," "society changed." In the book I am writing from these materials, I recount in excruciating detail why I am convinced, after hundreds of conversations on this subject, that "*shehui gaibianle*" was not simply an evasion. Its meaning, as I interpret it, is only with difficulty teased from this apparently uninformative phrase.

"*Shehui gaibianle*" translates effectively enough as "society changed." Yet what do these largely rural women, 93 percent of them still illiterate, mean by the *shehui*/society concept? They mean (I do believe!) that : 1) *shehui*/society is the complex of social relations that surrounds the family.

Though *shehui* does not absolutely exclude the family, it is usually seen as "outside" principal kin ties. People speak of women working "at home" or "out in society," for example.

2) *Shehui*/society constrains families and individuals; people largely internalize social norms, and try to do what society expects. Some norms are backed by sanctions, of which people are usually well aware, so *shehui* constrains in an authoritative fashion--semantically, it is heavy on the notion of the setting of limits.

3) *Shehui*/society is perceived at the local level, but generalized to a much broader social field. Some of my informants have a fairly clear vision of a nation-state with boundaries, foreign allies and enemies, internal political levels, and great scale and diversity. Most do not. People take their local understanding of *shehui* and expand it, following known principles of hierarchy, into a vision of *tianxia*, of the "all under heaven" of the empire, indeed the cosmos. Their vision of *shehui* is an extrapolation of their own experiences, local knowledge writ large. We could hardly expect anything else from such a population. Naturally, such extrapolations vary regionally, dependent on local structure and contingency. But, by implication, *shehui*/society is the result of the topdown imposition of order.

While I made every effort to unpack the notion of *shehui* from the many contexts in which it was used in these discussions, we also asked directly, "How did '*shehui gaibian*'?" The commonest answer was, '*Bu zhidao*," "I don't know," even when very bright, well-informed women were clearly trying to explain their experiences. The next-most common answer was surprising: After the fall of empire, "*shehui bu xuyao*"--"society didn't require [footbinding];" "*meiyou biyao*"--"[footbinding] was no longer necessary;" "*xiandai shehui meiyou neige guiding*"--modern society didn't have such a rule/regulation [that girls should be bound]."

My provincial cadre colleagues were astonished at this misreading of

history, and repeatedly corrected the old ladies, informing them that under the empire, the Manzhus had attempted to forbid footbinding, and that it had not been an official national obligation on women. They spent a good deal of time after-hours making sure that I did not get this point wrong, that I understood that our informants were in error, that Chinese elites had attacked footbinding long before most of our informants were born.

Some interviewees let the cadres' correction pass. Others followed a soon-predictable debate strategy. They spoke of the linkage between men's Manzhu-mandated hairstyles and women's bound feet. "They're the same thing, just different for men and women. The emperors used to require them, and then society changed, and the regulations were abolished," they said, in a variety of ways. "It cost a lot of money for poor men to go to the barber, and for poor women to buy footbinding cloth. It was good not to have to follow those regulations."⑨

"Was there a law against footbinding?" we asked, just to be sure. From our sample of 498 key Sichuan informants, 397 believed there was not a law against footbinding; 97 thought there was; the rest professed ignorance. At least four-fifths of this core sample was certain that the "change in society" resulted from the removal of an old law, not the imposition of a new one.

In written sources, anti-footbinding movements are described as vigorous actions on the part of enlightened modernizers, pushing recalcitrant peasants into new roles in a new society. In some regions of China, such interventions actually took place. We questioned our subjects about their experiences of elite influences on local footbinding practice. "How did

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⑨ And, indeed, queue-cutting and anti-footbinding campaigns were often run together, or mentioned in the same newspaper and other written sources of the period, as gendered indices of an emerging modernity.

you, in your family and village, learn that society had changed in regard to footbinding? Did activists come to your region to speak against footbinding, did schoolteachers teach against footbinding, did you hear of or see posters, music troupes, or any other indications from official/outside/*shehui* sources that footbinding should be stopped?"

Approaching a political topic this directly immediately lost us a good deal of participation: the response rate fell drastically. Of our 498 key Sichuan informants, 403 retreated to the "don't know" position. Fifty-one women said they had heard of something of the sort, while 10 said they had not. The one-tenth with direct experience of some form of official activism made up half of the one fifth (97) who thought that an anti-footbinding law had been implemented.

It is interesting, but beyond the scope of this paper, to break out the time and space dimensions of these responses. Those who experienced political activism cluster dramatically, with most women at most times and places having had no contact at all with such movements.

"If footbinding was not much influenced by political activism in your home community, what did influence its abandonment?" we persisted.

Patiently or with patent irritation at our dimness, many respondents repeated that "society had changed!" But some, now thinking in terms of communications channels, began to talk of well-travelled male kinfolk--uncles who were porters, fathers and brothers who marketed valuable produce to distant cities, young cousins returning from urban boarding schools. These men returned with the message that, in the bigger cities, "society no longer required" families to bind their daughters' feet.

With the arrival of such news, domestic debates began over the feet of our then-youthful subjects. If footbinding was an option, not an obligation, what should be done with recently-bound or as-yet-not-bound daughters? Women's descriptions often saw men trying to forbid further binding,

while women typically wished to persist. Fathers often argued that girls' premarital labor could be put to more flexible use if they were unbound; mothers clung to hopes for better marriage prospects for their daughters.

These great debates regularly brought us back to an economic setting that was changing in ways impossible to grasp through local knowledge. Our subjects could not know that millions of little spinners had been made redundant by factory girls in Lancashire, Calcutta, Shanghai; nor could they perceive the other huge, slow shifts that only massive effort and sophisticated statistics can document. They knew that--somehow--"society was changing," but the economic underpinnings of that change was beyond apprehension by their local networks of local knowledge. Nor had an explicitly "economic" vision been clearly incorporated into their folk vision of *shehui*. The economic exchanges that underpinned the pyramid of political power they grasped through direct experience and folk ideology were subsumed under mystifying concepts of loyalty, obedience, filial piety, and other "tributary" constructs. Their vivid understanding of local market mechanisms stood divorced from the model of *shehui*, unincorporable within it except as a kind of vulgar excrescence on the body politic.

In this historic change of culture for Chinese women, I see a useful opportunity for we who study it to get a firmer grip on the meaning of meaning. In speaking of "meaning," we cannot limit ourselves to indigenous perceptions. If we do, we will exclude from consideration those structures and contingencies to which our subjects are responding even though they cannot, or do not need to, articulate them. The great transformation that everyone senses (" *shehui gaibianle*") is likely to need more information for its full perception than local knowledge usually provides.

Chinese stories are supposed to end with a moral. The moral of mine

has to do with how anthropologists are responding to the cataclysmic global changes since the 1970s to which we have been uneasy, but still largely ignorant witnesses. The irritating and uninformative phrase "*shehui gaibianle*" is, I think, an almost exact equivalent to "modernization" and its relatives. The "modern" was left for dead in the 1970s for its vacuousness and heavy freight of pro-market ideology. Yet it has been conjured into a new, horrid, zombie-like life in the 1980s and 90s by the magic word "postmodern," the very existence of which wipes away the historical-materialist critiques on which postmodernism relies for its key insights. The reliance of many anthropological inquiries on the notion of "modernity" leaves them in the position of Sichuan villagers of the 1920s. From fragmentary local knowledge, they know that something important is going on, but they lack the systematicity and breadth of information necessary to figure out just what it is. Worse, they sometimes reject as "totalizing narratives" the goals of transcending local knowledge through collecting and analyzing broad and systematic knowledge. I do not think we can justify the existence of programs and departments of anthropology, of tenure-track positions, of publication efforts, of specialized journals, and of the grants that underwrite our studies if our "explanation" of so many global phenomena boils down to the English-language equivalent of "*shehui gaibianle*."

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