

Visual Femininity under the Male Gaze: Foot-binding Custom and Female Self-Censorship

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Abstract: In the social aesthetic system based on patriarchy, the standards and shaping of femininity are usually closely related to the male gaze, which puts forward a series of requirements for the daily behavior norms of women as objects, including clothing, speech, and body shape. Under the long-term moral judgment and social monitoring, while bearing the pressure of aesthetic standards, women have gradually strengthened their self-control and censorship in terms of femininity. This study will take the custom of “female footbinding” in traditional Chinese society as an example, and analyze how men’s gazes contributed to the evolution of this aesthetic standard from the perspective of visual culture, and how women under the influence of this custom have strengthened their sense of self and even same-sex monitoring. The study found that patriarchal social norm constraints and objectified gaze strengthen women’s control over self-image, and women themselves form self-monitoring under the background of habitual pressure, which still affects modern women’s aesthetic self-evaluation today.

Keywords: visual culture, femininity, traditional custom, foot-binding

1. Introduction

Foot-binding was a practice widespread in feudal China in which the feet of young girls were broken and tightly bound in order to change their shape and size, and to restrict the development of them [1]. The foot changed by footbinding is called “Golden Lotus”, and the shoes made for this kind of foot also have different styles and names in different regions of China. During imperial China, footbinding was considered a social status symbol and a sign of femininity. However, footbinding is a painful practice that limits women’s mobility and causes permanent disabilities. It encapsulates the deviations and shortcomings of traditional Chinese society, including oppression of women, closed conservatism, tyranny and disregard for human rights. At the same time, in the process of Chinese culture interacting with the outside world, this barbaric custom also caters to the European oriental fantasy to a certain extent: grotesque and pathological [2].

The prevalence and custom of footbinding has varied over time, region and social class. According to Ko’s speculation, this practice may have originated from the end of the Tang Empire to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period in the 10th century [2]. It was first popular in royal court, representing the power of male from upper class constructing the women’s behavior norms. The effect of this discipline is long-term, lasting and profound, which forces women to obey a series of rules designed for controlling them, at the same time, if they break the consensus set up by men,

they will be charged with evil and rebelliousness [3]. Meanwhile, the custom of foot binding has an important connection with the female aesthetic system in traditional Chinese society. Delicate and small feet are considered to be an external manifestation of femininity. At the same time, this sexualized representation is also regarded as an expression and evaluation criteria of male control and female obedience. Although this body norm is not considered to be exclusively related to sexual presentation, as it to some extents serves to constrain women's sexual attractiveness in order to preserve their fidelity to their husbands, it is undeniable that visual communication and the patriarchal gaze played a key role in this millennia-old practice, and this legacy of external constraints on women's self-examination still exists today [4]. This article will take the custom of footbinding as an example, through the relationship between body and society and visual culture, to explore the shaping of femininity under the male gaze.

2. Foot Fetish and Femininity

In the evolution of footbinding, visual construction plays a key role. A visual society means not only ubiquitous visual images or visual consumption, but also population and life governance implemented by modern society using visual models or through visual control. Whether it is ancient society or modern society, the subject and object, the viewer and the viewed, and the way and effect of viewing are all ways to control social order by visual means [5]. As a concrete object of direct visual interaction, the body is a unique field where social discipline is active. In a patriarchal society, men as subjects are considered to have a complete and normative body, while women as "others" are restricted in civil, social and political rights because of their "incomplete" and "deficient" body [6]. In the confrontation between "soundness" and "defect", the condescending scrutiny from male has become a tool to dispel the meaning of women and rebuild femininity. The feet, as a sexual extension of the womb representing fertility, also belonged to the control of men in Chinese traditional societies. Footbinding represents female submission and a metaphor for female devotion to male. It enables men to castrate the phallic mother figure in order to assert patriarchal privilege. The threat of women as "other" is discreetly overcome by being coerced by men—both binding their feet and displaying it openly through this symbolic form. This elaborate concealment masks castration anxiety: footbinding is simultaneously absent and present, visible and invisible [7]. The act of watching is actually a process in which the subject seeks and agrees with an ideal reference object in order to identify and confirm men's own image. Watching is associated with image identification with the ego, and this identification is largely driven by unconscious behavior, what Freud called libidinal investment. The erotic viewing behavior is based on the physical advantages of men, which strengthens their gender self-identity and consumption of women's bodies. Watching and being watched convey power and status in the process of being oppressed and oppressed. At the same time, the role relationship between subject and object, consumer and commodity is established in the process of projection of lust, and it lays a foundation for the continuous gender and physical exploitation establishes the basis for institutionalization, and then evolves into a fetishism mystery [5].

Fetishism involves a man projecting his castration anxieties onto a woman's body. Boys who are unable to find "mother's penis", and then gradually turn their attention to substitute body parts, including feet, hands and hair, and give them erotic meanings. Footbinding thus symbolized the castration of women and the controlling power of men as the dominant sex [2]. According to Wu, the detailed description of body parts which is based on male gaze has strengthen the pornographic objectification of female, and then leads to the result that female's body becomes an object stimulating lust. Meanwhile, the detailing of female bodily representations is not just a fetishism expression of male desire, it is also an ideology of gender difference. For example, in the patriarchal society in ancient China, a complete value system was proposed for femininity based on gender

differences. By writing the aesthetic symbols recognized by men into women's physical requirements, a coding system for the body is formed. These coding systems are bound to gender characteristics through various disciplines for women, and women respond to this coding system in long-term social practice. Footbinding is a product born in this complete set of image symbol systems [5]. As the material signifier of such symbol system, embroidered shoes (designed for footbinding women) have already exceeded the practical meaning and evolved into the visual capital in certain field, especially the social status in traditional farming society. Thorstein Veblen pointed out that in the stage of conspicuous consumption, elegance becomes an important indicator of the ideal woman. To prove that they were dignified, leisurely, and labor-free, these women were expected to have slender bodies and petite feet. Whether it is the corset in the Western court, or the footbinding in traditional Chinese society, the idleness and waste of women's human resources symbolizes the family's status and wealth. Moreover, in China's social production model, footbinding can make women seem incapable of productive labor, so that family members in patriarchy system can deny women's labor value to consolidate their own power and status. The combination of many factors made this exaggerated status appeal eventually evolve into a masculine aesthetic concept with incompleteness as femininity [2]. Sexual attraction does not lie in the bound feet themselves. The hidden bound feet are more attractive to men when they are displayed in front of men through embroidered shoes. Once bound, the feet cannot be displayed or seen in their "natural" nude state, a practice that greatly adds to its mystery and appeal. Here, what excites desire is not what is revealed, but what is hidden, obscene. Feet and shoes are practically inseparable. Just as the feet reveal the background information of the girl herself, the shoes also reveal a lot of information: girls and women made embroider shoes by themselves, so the creativity and the dexterity of fingers can be seen from the shoes. These shoes are now filled with femininity, the outward expression of femininity that has overshadowed the cruelty of footbinding itself as a product of masculine desire [7]. Once people get rid of the ornate exterior of the embroidered shoe, the feet it hides are disappointing. In ancient Chinese society, the feet that are usually covered by shoes can arouse the infinite reverie of men, and even many literary works praise and praise them, comparing them to "sacred flowers" (three-inch golden lotus). This perhaps reveals the only truth about footbinding: its charm lies in concealment, its beauty can only be realized through the imagination required by literary metaphors, its value is only manifested in the process of being gazed at. In other words, they have become a form of fetishism. When hiding the bound feet, men are no longer obsessed with shoes or boundfoot, but with the gaze itself [3].

3. The Shape of Beauty and Female Self-Censorship

The shape of beauty in footbinding is based on the sacrifice of health, and the correlation between body parts and femininity. In the sexual atmosphere of the male gaze, the body can only appear as a sexual carrier, and only under the scrutiny of the male gaze can it gain the meaning of existence. Sexuality needs to be looked at, to be judged by the gaze in public spaces. As a form of social expression, the meaning of sexy lies in the public nature of the body. The functionality of the body is replaced by a symbol full of sensuality, to the point of sacrificing health and integrity to achieve a sensual state. This is an important basis for the existence of footbinding as a cruel and bizarre custom of mutilating the body. For women, in the process of pursuing the social body expected by men, not only have to endure physical pain, but also at the expense of health. What they are involved in is the conflict between the signifier and the signified of the body: a sick, weak body is to some extents a meaning of beauty and elegance [8]. In the social context which has been reinvented by men, the standard of beauty has been defined as the needs change, no matter being chubby or slender. Women, as mirror images and substitutes of historical subjects, constitute the customary background of a specific period, but women themselves are banished from history and

become functional texts of male-dominated historical narratives. The goal of male aesthetic desire points to the parts of the female body, and usually a specific part represents the whole and establishes femininity. This system of constructing aesthetics includes not only feet, but also women's breasts, buttocks and hands, and the shaping of these parts is also related to the display of femininity. As Chinese Qing Dynasty scholar Gu Hongming once defended the custom of footbinding, he believed that small feet are the external representation of the ideal Chinese woman, embodying supple and dignified femininity, and marking the superior Chinese female beauty. Women are not only in the position of being watched as objects of male desire, but their own aesthetic shaping can only be attached to the visual representation dominated by patriarchal ideology [2,5].

In the shaping of female aesthetics, in addition to specifying the standards of ideal temperament down to the smallest detail, the image of women who go against the norm is also stigmatized in order to achieve the purpose of unifying aesthetic standards. Fat and muscular bodies are considered unsexy and masculine. This de-naturalistic approach reproduces the idea of femininity, making femininity a socialized product from the very beginning, and a product designed by men [6]. Under the influence of socialization of body, In order to preserve their reputation and avoid being influenced by stigmatization, women have to participate in shaping and managing their statures, including footbinding. If a girl is unwilling to bind her feet, she "will be despised and treated as a handmaid" [2]. In terms of family, In the marriage culture of traditional Chinese society, women's loyalty and obedience to their husbands affect the moral judgment of wives in the social environment. Decent clothing, such as headwears, skirts, and shoes, together with foot binding, constitutes the outward expression of female loyalty, cultural literacy, and family upbringing [9]. Soon claims that Chinese traditional women associate tied feet with "beauty, product value and ethics." Foot binding is a sacrificial ritual that, if done well, guarantees a happy marriage, as foot binding is the epitome of a woman's beauty and tenderness, as well as her ability to endure and transcend pain and hardship [7]. In a patriarchal world, women not only have strong anxiety, but also have a high sense of self identity. In particular, clothing as a medium conveys not only erotic intimate feelings, but also social negotiations about status hierarchy and gender identity. In a visually oriented society, the appearance of the female body, especially the ornamental foot binding, acts as a boundary between the self and the other, and between social classes. A pair of small feet can win the approval of men, and there is also the possibility of winning social prestige. In order to show their social capital and personal ability, foot binding is an opportunity for women to achieve class transition on the one hand, and the fear of being exposed to being "gazed" in front of others on the other, both of which together lead to women's aesthetic anxiety [2]. In order to maintain and consolidate their social status and reputation, women self-discipline and compete with each other under the aesthetic standards planned by men, and supervise each other in a social environment like a ring prison, maintaining the unfair and inhumane system of rule under the patriarchal system.

4. Conclusion

Foot binding has a thousand-year history in China, and some women still suffer from this aesthetic custom today. In modern times, anti-foot binding campaigns have been carried out in various parts of China, and although they have achieved certain results, they are far from reaching the point of eradication, and the visual femininity represented by foot binding still exists in other forms in the current society. This paper analyzes femininity under visual culture based on the "erotic viewing" of the male gaze and the socialization of femininity. Watching this aggressive interaction was used by men in ancient societies as a tool of erotic projection to examine women, while foot binding and its derived clothing and behavioral norms are disciplined behaviors developed based on the act of viewing. Under the aesthetic system of patriarchal society, women not only need to meet the needs

of being gazed, but also produce self-monitoring and control in the process of being gazed, which not only restricts the free development of women, but also effectively consolidates the existence of patriarchy to a large extent.

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