

Laurel Bossen and Hill Gates (2017). *Bound Feet, Young Hands: Tracking the Demise of Footbinding in Village China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 264 pp., ISBN 9780804799553.

Ten years after Dorothy Ko's study that shifted the understanding of footbinding fundamentally (Ko, 2007), Laurel Bossen and Hill Gates's ground-breaking research on footbinding will again change our knowledge of this practice for good. Through exploring the long-neglected subject of rural women's footbinding, Bossen and Gates argue that the reason for the demise of footbinding in village China is not because of fashion, beauty, sex, education or a political campaign. Instead, women stopped this practice because of industrialisation, which inevitably drove them out of the business of domestic, sedentary textile-production.

One of the most impressive aspects of this book is its methodology. Previous studies of footbinding predominantly relied on written evidence, such as the writing of elite men and women, foreign observers and researchers, local and foreign reformers, and governmental archives that recorded various anti-footbinding campaigns (Fan, 1997; Gao, 1995; Ko, 2007; Levy, 1966; Wang, 2000; Yang, 2012). In recognising the lack of information about rural women among this evidence, Bossen and Gates carried out empirical research in 16 counties in eight provinces in China. This painstaking research is built on data collection carried out on an unprecedented scale, obtaining information from 5,000 elderly women, and conducting surveys and interviews with 1,943 elderly women, most of whom had bound feet.

As anthropologists, Bossen and Gates present this book in an anthropological way, unlike other social and cultural historical works prior to it. The book devotes the entire second chapter to explaining their research methods and fieldwork process. Their field work stretched over a period of two decades, from 1991 to 2010. Geographically, their research sites include villages in Hebei, Shandong, Anhui, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan provinces. The following three chapters are organised geographically, grouping women's experiences in three regions: north China, northwest China and southwest China. The structure within these three chapters is rather repetitive. For each research site, Bossen and Gates provide its social and economic history, geographical information, the work women did there, and a statistical analysis of the demise of foot-binding. The authors find positive correlations between the demise of footbinding and the local development of the textile industry, or industrial textile imports, in all of their research sites. Therefore, their data strongly supports their argument that footbinding disappeared because factories eliminated the economic benefits of women's hand labour.

The most surprising case is perhaps Ding county in Hebei province, which all historians specialising in modern China know as a place where modern mass

education experiments took place. Bossen and Gates find that even in Ding county the real reason for the death of foot-binding was industrialisation, rather than education. The final chapter integrates their data across regions, and confirms the correlations between the demise of foot-binding and the cessation of women's participation in handwork for income across China. Generally speaking, the grounded data of this research has convincingly uncovered an important cause of foot-binding's disappearance that had long been neglected by historians, presumably due to lack of evidence. At times, however, one suspects that too much effort has been spent on analysing the statistical data. Although the authors conducted 1,943 interviews with women, analysis of these qualitative materials is rare throughout the book. Historians who expect to read rural women's life stories relating to footbinding would be disappointed.

Another significant contribution of this book is its inclusion of young girls in the history of the economy and labour in China. Textiles have long been one of the most important products in Chinese history, both for domestic usage and exports. However, previous economic histories of textiles have long neglected the importance of young girls in their production (Huang, 1985; 2011; Chao, 1977). By revealing women's extensive participation in production since the age of around seven, Bossen and Gates challenged the May Forth paradigm that condemned women for their unproductivity in Chinese history.

Although the book has convincingly proven that one of the definitive motives mothers had for ending the practice of binding their daughters' feet was the rise of the modern textile industry, the negative proposition raised by the authors, that mothers bound their daughters' feet because of the need of young girls' labour, is not self-evident. One of the three reasons why the relation between girl's hand labour and footbinding has been neglected by so many observers and scholars, Bossen and Gates points out, is that previous researchers were reluctant to believe that mothers would cripple their daughters in order to make them work (Bossen & Gates, 2017: 147). The authors attempt to explain this argument by suggesting that infant killing or the extreme disciplining of children are not uncommon in Chinese history or even today (Bossen & Gates, 2017: 12).

However, this could not explain the universality of foot-binding. After all, infant killing was not carried out in every single family, whereas footbinding was. This argument needs to be illustrated with further evidence, probably by using the first-hand narratives of women. The following questions are left unanswered: did mothers use footbinding as a tool to make their daughters work diligently, from a very young age, intentionally or subconsciously? Is it possible that mothers sincerely believed foot-binding was necessary for their daughters to enter into marriage, and that the usage of their labour was just a side product? Was it really necessary to keep girls working through this extreme method? How can we explain that some girls had their feet bound before or after the age of doing handwork, at the age of four, or fifteen?

In addition, in challenging the idea that women bound their daughters' feet so they could get married in the future, this book has limited success. As a cause-effect

study, this study only measures the relationship between female labour and foot-binding, without taking marriage as a variable. Therefore, it could not decide which reason is more significant.

Nevertheless, this book successfully demonstrates that in researching modern history, especially the history of those who could not speak for themselves, it is essential to use methods such as surveys or interviews, to provide a fuller picture. As quantitative data-driven research, this book also inspires historians working with words to pay serious attention to numbers.

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