

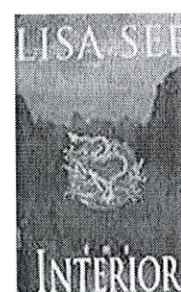
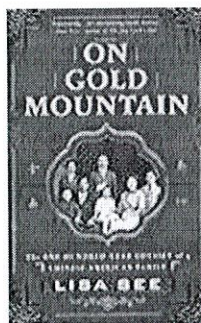
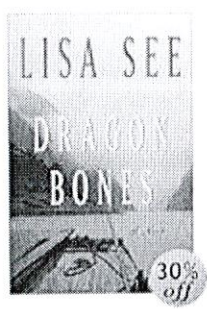
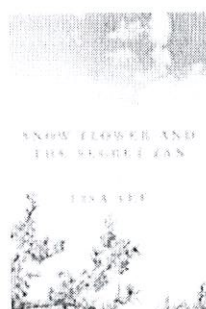


*Nancy -
Here's all the material
I used.*

Johnna **Book Club Discussion Questions**

1. Lily endures excruciating pain in order to have her feet bound. What reasons are given for this dangerous practice?
2. Did See's descriptions of footbinding remind you of any Western traditions?
3. If some men in 19th-century China knew about nu shu and "old same" friendships, why do you think they allowed these traditions to persist?
4. Reflecting on her first few decades, Lily seems to think her friendship with Snow Flower brought her more good than harm. Do you agree?
5. Lily's adherence to social customs can seem controversial to us today. Pick a scene where you would have acted differently. Why?
6. Lily defies the wishes of her son in order to pair her grandson with Peony. Does she fully justify her behavior?
7. Lily sometimes pulls us out of the present moment to reflect--as an old woman--on her youthful decisions. What does this device add to the story?
8. How would you film these moments of reflection?
9. If Lily is writing her story to Snow Flower in the afterworld, what do you think Snow Flower's response would or should be?
10. Did you recognize any aspects of your own friendships in the bond between Lily and Snow Flower?

Snow Flower Main Page



Snow Flower | Flower Net | On Gold Mountain | The Interior | Half + Half

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About This Book

Discussion Questions

Critical Praise

Author Biography

Excerpt

Random House

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan A Novel by Lisa See

List Price: \$13.95

Pages: 288

Format: Paperback

ISBN: 0812968069

Publisher: Random House



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[Canadian Readers: Buy this book from Amazon.ca](#)

About this Book

Lily is haunted by memories --- of who she once was, and of a person, long gone, who defined her existence. She has nothing but time now, as she recounts the tale of Snow Flower, and asks the gods for forgiveness.

In nineteenth-century China, when wives and daughters were foot-bound and lived in almost total seclusion, the women in one remote Hunan county developed their own secret code for communication: nu shu ("women's writing"). Some girls were paired with laotongs, "old sames," in emotional matches that lasted throughout their lives. They painted letters on fans, embroidered messages on handkerchiefs, and composed stories, thereby reaching out of their isolation to share their hopes, dreams, and accomplishments.

With the arrival of a silk fan on which Snow Flower has composed for Lily a poem of introduction in nu shu, their friendship is sealed and they become "old sames" at the tender age of seven. As the years pass, through famine and rebellion, they reflect upon their arranged marriages, loneliness, and the joys and tragedies of motherhood. The two find solace, developing a bond that keeps their spirits alive. But when a misunderstanding arises, their lifelong friendship suddenly threatens to tear apart.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan is a brilliantly realistic journey back to an era of Chinese history that is as deeply moving as it is sorrowful. With the period detail and deep resonance of **Memoirs of a Geisha**, this lyrical and emotionally charged novel delves into

one of the most mysterious of human relationships: female friendship.

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Discussion Questions

1. 1. In your opinion, is Lily, who is the narrator, the heroine or the villain? What are her flaws and her strengths?
2. Do you think the concept of "old sames" exists today? Do you have an "old same," or are you part of a sworn sisterhood? In what ways are those relationships similar or different from the ones in nineteenth-century China?
3. Some men in nineteenth-century China apparently knew about *nu shu*, the secret women's writing described in **Snow Flower**. Why do you think they tolerated such private communication?
4. Lily writes her story so that Snow Flower can read it in the afterworld. Do you think she tells her story in a convincing way so that Snow Flower can forgive and understand? Do you think Snow Flower would have told the story differently?
5. When Lily and Snow Flower are girls, they have one intimate -- almost erotic --- moment together. Do you think their relationship was sexual or, given the times, were they simply girls who saw this only as an innocent extension of their friendship?
6. Having a wife with bound feet was a status symbol for men, and, consequently, having bound feet increased a woman's chances of marriage into a wealthier household. Women took great pride in their feet, which were considered not only beautiful but also their best and most important feature. As a child, would you have fought against having your feet bound, as Third Sister did, knowing you would be consigned to the life of a servant or a "little daughter-in-law"? As a mother, would you have chosen to bind your daughter's feet?
7. The Chinese character for "mother love" consists of two parts: one meaning "pain," the other meaning "love." In your own experience, from the perspective of a mother or a daughter, is there an element of truth to this description of mother love?
8. The author sees **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan** as a novel about love and regret, but do you think there's also an element of atonement in it as well?
9. In the story, we are told again and again that women are weak and worthless. But were they really? In what ways did Lily and Snow Flower show their strength and value?
10. Although the story takes place in the nineteenth century and seems very far removed from our lives --- we don't have our feet bound, we're free and mobile --- do you think we're still bound up in other ways; for instance, by career, family obligations, conventions of feminine beauty, or events beyond our control such

as war, the economy, and natural disasters?

11. Because of its phonetic nature, *nu shu* could easily be taken out of context and be misunderstood. Today, many of us communicate through e-mail or instant-messaging. Have you ever had an experience where one of your messages has been misunderstood because of lack of context, facial or body gestures, and tone of voice? Or have you ever been on the receiving end of a message that you misinterpreted and your feelings were hurt?

12. Madame Wang, the matchmaker, is a foot-bound woman and yet she does business with men. How is she different from the other women in the story? Do you think she is considered a woman of status or is she merely a necessary evil?

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Critical Praise

"Powerfully alive, unfolding like a waking dream, haunting, magical, and absolutely impossible to forget."

—*The Boston Globe*

"Both heartbreaking and heartbreakingly lovely . . . immerses the reader in an unimagined world . . . The characters and their surroundings come vibrantly alive."

—*The Denver Post*

"A provocative and affecting portrait."

—*Chicago Tribune*

"Riveting . . . a story that informs as it charms."

—*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

"Extraordinary . . . breathtaking."

—*Baltimore Sun*

"Lisa See has written her best book yet. **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan** is achingly beautiful, a marvel of imagination of a real and secret world that has only recently disappeared. It is a story so mesmerizing the pages float away and the story remains clearly before us from beginning to end."

—Amy Tan, author of **The Joy Luck Club** and **The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings**

"I was mesmerized by this wondrous book --- the story of a secret civilization of women, who actually lived in China not long ago. . . . Magical, haunting fiction. Beautiful."

—Maxine Hong Kingston, author of **The Fifth Book of**

Peace

"Only the best novelists can do what Lisa See has done, to bring to life not only a character but an entire culture, and a sensibility so strikingly different from our own. This is an engrossing and completely convincing portrayal of a woman shaped by suffering forced upon her from her earliest years, and of the friendship that helps her to survive."

—Arthur Golden, author of **Memoirs of a Geisha**

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Lisa See

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From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Lisa See is a Chinese-American writer and novelist. Her books include *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family* (1995), *Flower Net* (1997), *The Interior* (1999), *Dragon Bones* (2003), *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), and *Peony in Love* (2008).

Flower Net, *The Interior*, and *Dragon Bones* make up the Red Princess mystery series. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* contains references to the ancient Chinese practice of female foot binding, the secret language of *Nü Shu* and the treatment of women in the 19th century.

See has written a personal essay ("The Funeral Banquet") for *Half and Half*.^[1]

Contents

- 1 Biography
- 2 Notes
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Biography

Lisa See was born in Paris in 1955 but has spent many years in Los Angeles, especially **Los Angeles Chinatown**. Her mother, Carolyn See, is also a writer and novelist.

Lisa See has been West Coast correspondent for *Publishers Weekly*; has written articles for *Vogue*, *Self*, and *More*; has written the libretto for the opera based on *On Gold Mountain*; and has helped develop the Family Discovery Gallery for the Autry Museum, which depicts 1930s Los Angeles from the perspective of her father as a seven-year-old boy. Her exhibition *On Gold Mountain: A Chinese American Experience* was featured in the Autry Museum of Western Heritage and the **Smithsonian**. See is also a public speaker.

She has written for and led in many cultural events emphasizing the importance of Los Angeles and Chinatown. Among her awards and recognitions are the Organization of Chinese American Women's 2001 award as National Woman of the Year and the 2003 History Makers Award presented by the **Chinese American Museum**.

Notes

- ↑ O'Hearn, Claudine Chiawei, ed. *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural*. See, Lisa. "The Funeral Banquet", pp. 125-138, Pantheon Books, 1998

Books by Lisa See

- On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese American Family*. St. Martins Press, 1995.
- Flower Net*. HarperCollins, 1997.
- The Interior*. HarperCollins, 1999.
- Dragon Bones*. Random House, Inc., 2004.
- Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Random House, Inc., 2005.
- Peony in Love*. Random House, Inc., 2008.

External links

- "About the Author," Lisa See's official site
- See interviewed by Ron Hogan (1996)

Lisa See



Born	18 February 1955 <div>Paris, France</div>
Occupation	Novelist, Biographer, Writer, Community Leader
Spouse(s)	Richard Kendall
Children	Alexander and Christopher

- Opera based on *On Gold Mountain*
- Biographical sketch in BookBrowse
- See interview in BookBrowse
- On Gold Mountain: A Chinese American Experience -- the Autry Museum of Western Heritage
- On Gold Mountain: A Chinese American Experience -- the Smithsonian Institution (2001)
- Chinese American Museum
- *Half and Half*
- Carolyn See's official site

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Lisa See Kendall

1955-

Also known as: Lisa See Kendall, Monica Highland, Lisa See

Entry updated: 08/09/2007

Birth Place: Paris, France

Awards

Career

Further Readings About the Author

Media Adaptations

Personal Information

Sidelights

Source Citation

Writings by the Author

Personal Information: Born February 18, 1955, in Paris, France; daughter of Richard Edward (an anthropologist) and Carolyn (a novelist; maiden name, Laws) See; married Richard Becker Kendall (an attorney) July 18, 1981; children: Alexander See Kendall, Christopher Copeland Kendall. **Education:** Received certificate from Institute for Balkan Studies in Greece, 1978; Loyola Marymount University, B.A., 1979.

Avocational Interests: Travel (including Mexico and Greece), tennis, Mexican folkloric dance. **Memberships:** American Society of Journalists and Authors, Writers Guild of America, West, PEN (judge). **Addresses:** Homeoffice: 17975 Porto Marina Way, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272. Agent: Elaine Markson, 44 Greenwich Ave., New York, NY 10011.

Career: Triad Graphic Workshop, Los Angeles, CA, printer and in sales and public relations, 1973-75; Sun Institute, Los Angeles, event coordinator, 1977-78; freelance writer, 1979--; event coordinator for Loyola Marymount Writers Conference, 1980--. Vice-president of Kendall Restaurant Corp.

Awards: Proclamation from City of Los Angeles and Long Beach Literary Hall of Fame Award, both 1983, both for *Lotus Land*.

WRITINGS:

WITH MOTHER, CAROLYN SEE, AND JOHN ESPEY UNDER JOINT PSEUDONYM

MONICA HIGHLAND

- *Lotus Land* (novel), Coward-McCann (New York City), 1983.
- *110 Shanghai Road*, McGraw-Hill (New York City), 1986.
- *Greetings from Southern California* (nonfiction), Graphic Arts Center Publishing (Portland, OR), 1988.

UNDER PSEUDONYM LISA SEE

- (Author of text) *A Day in the Life of Hawaii*, Workman Publishing, 1984.
- *On Gold Mountain Mountains: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family* (autobiography), St. Martins (New York City), 1995.
- *Flower Net* (mystery), HarperCollins (New York City), 1997.
- *The Interior*, HarperCollins, 1999.
- *Dragon Bones* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Random House (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Peony in Love* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 2007.

OTHER

- Contributor of articles to *TV Guide*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *New West*, *Dynamic Years*, *City Kids*, *Emmy*, *Forum*, *Today*, *Sporting Times*, *Women's Sports*, *LA Weekly*, and *Twin Circle*. Western correspondent for *Publishers Weekly*, 1980--.

Media Adaptations: *Lotus Land* and *110 Shanghai Road* have been optioned for television miniseries.

"Sidelights"

Lisa See Kendall, who has published under the pseudonym Lisa See, and with mother, Carolyn See, and John Espey under the joint pseudonym Monica Highland, once told CA: "I've been around journalism and letters all my life. My mother, Carolyn See, is a journalist, novelist, and critic. She has taught me everything I know about what might be called the popular, contemporary West Coast literary scene. I've known my other collaborator, John Espey, for over twenty-five years. He has taught me about the scholarly life. It is a pleasure to work with them as 'Monica Highland.' I know I speak

for all of us when I say that it gives us a feeling of strength in numbers--something all writers need in the West."

Kendall, one eighth Chinese, presents more than her own life story in her autobiography *On Gold Mountain Mountains: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*. The narrative is "a comprehensive and exhaustively researched account of a Chinese-American family as it deals with their rise and fall of several Los Angeles 'Chinatowns,' with the exigencies of discrimination, fire, flood, earthquake, the Great Depression and two world wars," summarized Zilpha Keatley Snyder in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. "Intricate genealogy, bravura entrepreneurship, bitter adulteries and perdurable rivalries. . . . business in rambunctious frontier California; ferreting out the heirlooms of abruptly bankrupt Chinese families and buying them up; dealing in art, antiques and furniture; marrying, divorcing and carrying on--the See family's adventures would be incredible if *On Gold Mountain* were fiction," proclaimed Elizabeth Tallent in the *New York Times Book Review*.

The "diversity" in "deal[ing] with a great number of individuals and a time span of over 100 years . . . [and a] unique crosscurrents of cultural and ethnic diversity. . . . sets [Kendall]'s saga apart from other excellent family histories of Asian immigrants. . . . Throughout the lengthy and complicated account the reader is carried along effortlessly by the author's skillful and absolutely convincing invocation of the fears, joys, loves, hatreds, strengths and weaknesses of her remarkable progenitors," praised Snyder, who superficially faulted the book for not editing some "duplications of information" and for a lack of "family photographs." Tallant cautioned, however: "[Kendall]'s handling of her characters' emotional lives on occasion [Kendall] seems downright fatigued." Regardless, Kendall, a "clear-eyed biographer" did "a gallant and fair-minded job of fashioning anecdote, fable and fact into an engaging account," recognized Tallant. *On Gold Mountain* is a "lovingly rendered dynastic saga," applauded Pam Lambert in *People Weekly*, concluding: "Deeply felt, [Kendall's] story of culture and assimilation would likely make her ancestors proud."

"The complexity of [Kendall's] own background" is credited by Paula Friedman in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* for "the graceful rendering of two different and complex cultures, within [the] highly intricate plot" of *Flower Net*, a "novel of political conspiracy and family betrayal." Kendall's debut mystery, presents "a workman-like job with . . . plot and paints a vivid portrait of a vast Communist nation in the painful throes of a sea change," stated a *People Weekly* review. Critics applauded Kendall's portrayal of Beijing and characterization of Liu Halan, a female detective with the Ministry of Public Security in Beijing. Halan is paired with her love interest of a decade earlier, David Starke, an assistant U.S. Attorney. The team bridges countries, and rekindles romance, when investigating an apparent serial killer whose latest two victims were recently discovered. The body of a powerful Chinese businessman's son was found in U.S. territory and the body of a U.S. ambassador's son was found frozen in a Beijing lake. "True to [Kendall]'s predilection for doubling throughout this novel, when Hulan

and David do reach the end of their investigation, they find two interdependent solutions. One is so sensationally evil, its hard to swallow; the other is quietly appalling," declared *Washington Post Book World* contributor Maureen Corrigan.

"All and all," recognized Krist, "[*Flower Net* has] an inviting premise for a thriller . . . capitalizes on its inherent novelty and exoticism. . . [and has] delight[ful] . . . local descriptions [of Beijing]. . . but when it comes to plotting, [Kendall] unfortunately adopts the old policy of letting a hundred improbabilities bloom. . . [and there is] a nagging aura of inauthenticity hang[ing] over the novel's investigative mechanics." In the novel, "paradox and contradiction are enmeshed in increasingly ambiguous scenarios that are about as tough to sort out as any 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. Following the crisscrossing narrative that moves from China to Los Angeles and back again, the reader quickly begins to feel trapped in a hall of mirrors," contended Friedman.

Of the detective pair, Gary Krist wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*: "Although Stark is constructed largely from crime-novel boiler plate . . . Hulan is a provocative mixture of vulnerability, bitterness and hardheaded practicality." Calling Hulan an "intriguing, if not fully fleshed out, character," Corrigan asserted: "David may have the muscle, but Hulan has the moxie." With Hulan, declared *USA Today* reviewer Deirdre Donahue, Kendall has "[successfully and] compellingly" created a "woman far more tough-minded than the man." Praising the novel, Corrigan contended that "if . . . you have a strong stomach and an appreciation for atmospheric, tightly plotted suspense stories, *Flower Net* is a treat." This "nifty tale of suspense" presents "colorful observations of Chinese life . . . seamlessly combined with basic suspense elements," lauded *Chicago Tribune* contributor Chris Petrako, calling Kendall "a writer comfortable with imaginative storytelling and the sweep of history."

Kendall once told CA: "It's a rare day when I don't ponder that the West Coast (especially Southern California, the second-largest book market) isn't adequately represented in the media or seriously considered by the power brokers in the East. There is power, talent, and money out here, and except for the movie business, little connection is made between the East Coast publishing business and the extraordinary cache of West Coast energy."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Boston Globe*, November 2, 1997.
- *Chicago Tribune*, October 12, 1997.
- *Economist*, December 13, 1997.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, March 20, 1983; July 13, 1986; July 23, 1995;

November 17, 1996; September 28, 1997.

- *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1997.
- *New York Times*, August 17, 1995.
- *New York Times Book Review*, August 27, 1995; October 26, 1997.
- *People Weekly*, November 20, 1995; November 3, 1997.
- *Publishers Weekly*, February 4, 1983; June 5, 1995; October 30, 1995; July 21, 1997; September 1, 1997.
- *School Library Journal*, January, 1996; April, 1998.
- *USA Today*, July 19, 1983; October 30, 1997.
- *Virginia Quarterly Review*, winter, 1996.
- *Washington Post Book World*, March 6, 1983; July 28, 1986; August 31, 1986; August 2, 1987; August 20, 1995; September 21, 1997.*

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

REVIEWS

From the San Diego Union Tribune:

Unfolding Secrets: An old woman's memoirs reveal a culture wrapped in a story

By Julie Brickman

Nothing is as riveting as a story that informs as it charms: What do we read for, if not to live alternate lives and learn about extraordinary settings? Lisa See's new novel, "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan," takes us into remote 19th-century China, where girls had their feet bound – meaning crushed to the size of lily flowers – in a ritual of beauty that started at age 6 and took two full years to complete. From foot-binding onward, girls and women lived secluded in a second-story chamber of their household, because " ... the difference between nei – the inner realm of the home – and wei – the outer realm of men – lay at the very heart of Confucian society."

At 80, the narrator, Lily, is the senior woman of a wealthy household, powerful enough that she can speak her mind about her life's treasures and errors. Born in 1823 in the Hunan province, Lily started off as "a second worthless girl" in a poor farming family. Because her feet were high in the arch and potentially breathtaking, she had the potential to marry well and elevate the status of her family. She could also enter a second formal match, to another woman, a lifetime best friend called a sworn sister or laotong.

"A laotong match is as significant as a good marriage," Lily's aunt explained. "A laotong relationship is made by choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity. A marriage is not made by choice and has only one purpose – to have sons." "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" is the story of such a friendship.

Snow Flower becomes Lily's sworn sister, or "old same," meaning perfect match. Snow Flower is from a high family in a prestigious neighboring town, her grandfather an imperial scholar. She can teach Lily the social rituals of important families. Lily can teach her the humble arts of cooking and cleaning.

Rural, 19th-century China was a culture in which education and scholarship was limited to the male elite. Secluded from age 7 until death, "married out" into a husband's family, where they remained abject in stature and subservient to their husband's mother unless they had sons, women were isolated from anyone who cared about them personally. What they said and how they communicated was rigidly formalized, learning the calligraphy of men was prohibited, so they developed a secret writing called nu shu. Only in nu shu and only to each other could they write or speak from the heart.

The first communication between Snow Flower and Lily was inscribed on a fan in the code of nu shu. The secret fan became the journal of their lives.

That fan guides Lily as she records her memoirs. Because she is old and times have changed, she filters her memories through the late-life awareness of what mattered and what didn't. And what mattered most of all was the friendship with Snow Flower.

This is a stunning setup for describing a culture inside a story, and Lisa See takes full advantage of it. On every page, she provides fascinating details of the lives of women in China. ("Obey, obey, obey, then do what you want.") The particulars suggest that the indenture and confinement of women by men started in the Far East and traveled west across India to the Middle East, where it appears daily in the dark curtains of cloth

impulse toward self-actualization was tamped down; identity was subsumed within the family unit and then buried within the ceremonial folds of the arranged marriage.

All of this is well-trod history, a rich seam that has been excavated by many novelists both here and in Asia. What See brings to the story is a historical secret, something, as she explains in the afterword to this book, that she herself learned from Wang Ping's book on the history of foot-binding in China, "Aching for Beauty." It's *nu shu*, a written language that was invented in order for women to freely communicate among themselves without fear or restraint. It was a gender-specific lexicon; men couldn't write or read it and therefore couldn't suppress it.

Nu shu becomes a lifeline between the two protagonists in See's novel: Lily, the daughter of an uneducated, neglectful farmer and an overbearing matriarch, is now the 80-year-old spinster who narrates this story, and Snow Flower is a girl from the upscale village of Tongkou who has delusions of hauteur. The two girls, who are separated by thousands of miles and vastly different cultural assumptions, are brought together by a diviner, a kind of matchmaker who sees in Snow Flower and Lily the possibility of a *laotong*, a rare conjoining of two kindred souls that lasts a lifetime.

This *laotong* is put to the test in myriad ways as See's story unfolds, changing like the Chinese characters on the shared fan that Snow Flower and Lily decorate with their delicate calligraphy and exchange back and forth across the passing years. Bound by obdurate tradition, the two friends sense something of the liberating force in each other, the possibility that the future could burn brighter from their mutual ardor. "Lying next to [Snow Flower]," Lily muses, "looking at her face in the moonlight, feeling the delicate weight of her small hand on my cheek, listening to her breathing deepen, I wondered how could I make her love me the way I longed to be loved."

See, who has written three crime thrillers set in Communist China and the acclaimed memoir "On Gold Mountain," has pulled off a deceptive balancing act here. China's culture of ritual and ceremony is both an attraction and a repellent for the two girls, as it is for readers of See's evocative novel. Lily is entranced by Snow Flower's elaborate finery, her "sky-blue tunic embroidered with a cloud pattern," her feathery penmanship and her gift for *nu shu* metaphor. Snow Flower, in turn, envies Lily's capacity for practical labor, the handiwork of the working class.

But ritual leads to strangulation of the spirit. Stifled by the mores of their culture, Snow Flower and Lily are locked in cages within cages, altering their personas to attract a better class of husband and putting on airs with each other. This leads to a fissure in their *laotong* as the two friends glean each other's secrets through the hazy scrim of Chinese custom.

Even *nu shu*, the very thing that allows their friendship to blossom, is an elaborate code, another ritual of indirection and obfuscation. The tragic irony that provides the heart-rending conclusion to See's novel results from a misreading of *nu shu*; nuance and shading in a single line turns the entire story on its axis.

See's translucent prose style gleams with the beauty of 19th century Chinese culture but also makes us burn with indignation at its sexist ugliness and injustice. By bringing the secret world of these Chinese women into vivid relief, See has conjured up an alien world that is the better for being lost.

From the *Washington Post*:

Scripted in the Shadows
By Judy Fong Bates

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, an old woman fainted in a rural train station. While trying to identify her, authorities found scraps of paper with writing they had never seen, leading them to think she was a spy. But scholars identified the script as *nu shu*, a writing that had been used exclusively by women for over a

women wear to prevent themselves from being visible participants in the public arena of men.

Lisa See is the author of four previous books, a memoir that reconstructs four generations of Chinese-American heritage called "On Gold Mountain" and three mystery novels set in China. The deft weave of fact and fiction stands out as her signature strength: All her books probe themes like archaeological theft, the smuggling of undocumented immigrants, sweatshop labor.

"Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" contains such an unexpurgated description of the tortures of foot binding and the miseries of walking on tiny, folded feet that I looked up pictures of bound feet on the Web. To my horror, I discovered that they look exactly like high-heeled shoes. That is the brilliance of the light See shines between cultures.

Julie Brickman is on the fiction faculty of the brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program at Spalding University in Louisville, Ky. She lives in Southern California.

From the Cleveland Plain Dealer

Loyalty and love abide in a culture that cripples girls **By K Long, Book Editor**

When our narrator Lily is 6 years old, her mother strikes her hard across the face, a slap for good luck and to ward off evil spirits on the cusp of Lily's foot binding.

"Although my face stung, inside I was happy," she tells us. "That slap was the first time Mama had shown me her mother love, and I had to bite my lips to keep from smiling."

Appalled, I was also thoroughly hooked. It is a measure of author Lisa See's craft that by the time a grown Lily slaps her own daughter, Jade, we no longer register surprise. The reader has learned enough about the ways of women in provincial 19th-century China to anticipate the blow.

In her fourth book, See has triumphed, writing an achingly beautiful, understated and absorbing story of love. The love is between Lily and Snow Flower, her *laotong*, a match with another girl that Chinese families once considered as significant as a good marriage. *Laotong* means "old same" and served as a designated soul mate to help each woman navigate a life of sorrow, pain and confinement.

All three converge in foot binding, a four-year ordeal that Lily describes as the novel begins in a straightforward, step-by-step fashion. It sears a reader to know that the toes finally break and rattle loose in the bindings, that mothers deform their daughters' feet to achieve "golden lilies," dumpling-sized feet considered highly desirable and highly erotic.

The child of a poor farmer, Lily carries on her crippled feet the prospect of marriage into a better life - and therefore the survival of her extended family.

"Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" is so rich in psychology, feminine high stakes and marital intrigue that it evokes the work of Jane Austen. The warring matchmakers are marvelous characters, and the story made me recall the girl closest to my own *laotong*. See's novel contains all the elements - joy, knowledge, betrayal, erotica - that give female friends a power over each other that husbands cannot match.

Lily tells her story chronologically, introducing herself in old age: "I am what they call in our village 'one who has not yet died' - a widow, eighty years old." See's writing calls as little attention to itself as Lily's plain, formal voice, but both accumulate in power. The reader picks up vocabulary from context and tension from Lily's forthright disclosure that much will go wrong.

This novel has none of the overripe, operatic tone of "The Joy Luck Club." See forms her characters as subtly as strokes of calligraphy. Typhoid and a political uprising move the plot, but so does the Chinese insistence on sons, which saturates every page of this book and every day of these women's lives. Because they were confined to upstairs chambers in their fathers' homes, then their husbands', Lily and Snow Flower must find a way to cultivate their bond.

The pair write on a secret fan in Nu Shu, a 1,000-year-old language thought to be the only one ever invented and sustained for the exclusive use of women. See tells us in her end note that Nu Shu obsessed her, that she traveled from her Los Angeles home to the Chinese province of Jiangyong to meet surviving practitioners. Here she found the remarkable, tucked-away town of Tongkou, in which she set her novel.

Last year, Ann Patchett garnered a lot of favorable attention for her depiction of female friendship in the memoir "Truth and Beauty." That book pales to near-insignificance next to the truth and beauty in "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan."

It moved me to tears of recognition.

From the Baltimore Sun:

Secrets, misery in a Chinese woman's tale By Victoria A. Brownworth

From its understated opening passage titled "Sitting Quietly," through to its extraordinary finish, Lisa See's latest novel captivates.

Phrases like "breathtaking" are used so often to describe what is usually dreary prose, deaf to nuance, that one comes to ignore such modifiers as mere hyperbole crafted by publicists. Not so with See's novel, which is, by any description, breathtaking in its most literal sense: For much of Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, you hold your breath, feeling as if the wind has been knocked out of you, or as if you are drowning.

In 1832, in China's Hunan Province, Lily is born a "so-so girl to a so-so family in a so-so village." Hope has no place in her lexicon. Neither poor nor rich she has one irrevocable flaw: she is female. At seven, her feet are bound and soon she is, along with the other older girls and women, relegated to the upper story of the house where women are kept like pretty crippled birds in rooms with single windows and no access to the outer world. Caged and cowed by the men who orchestrate their lives, they have no recourse to anything resembling a fully actualized life.

Into this suffocating and pain-wracked world, in which life careens between physical drudgeries and emotional cataclysm, there appears Snow Flower, Lily's laotong or "old same," a girl of vaguely similar breeding and exact age who shares with her the nu shu. Nu shu is a 1,000-year-old language specific to the Hunan Province of encoded ideograms devised by women for women. It is, See, explains in a brief early note, "the only written language in the world to have been created by women exclusively for their own use."

This language, messages written in nu shu to Lily along the folds of a secret fan, and Lily's deep, insatiable and unrequited desire to be loved - by her mother, her natal family, her husband's family, her children and Snow Flower - form the evolving plot of See's remarkable and almost unbearably sad tale.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan is told by Lily from the vantage point of her old age. At 80, "I have nothing left to lose and few to offend." She tells her story in anticipation of the afterlife, as an explanation of her actions to her ancestors, her husband and most importantly, Snow Flower, all of whom she expects to meet there, but only one of whom she longs for.

Her story reeks of misery. From the hideous cruelty of her foot-binding at seven (Lily's mother tells her over and over, "Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you have peace.") to her conflicted old age, See reveals Lily as a 19th-century rural Chinese woman whose life is rigidly defined and programmed by her gender: foot binding, arranged marriage, virtual imprisonment by both her family of origin and her husband's family. The inferior status that women held is made all the more hellish by the adherence to Confucius and to a range of ancient superstitions.

The mesmerizing relationship between Lily and Snow Flower comes to supersede everything in Lily's life - it sustains her through every harrowing moment. As she re-reads messages on the fan, Lily recalls "We were to be like long vines with entwined roots, like trees that stand a thousand years, like a pair of mandarin ducks mated for life."

But alas, *nu shu*, the very language of succor that has led Lily to the most important and lasting relationship of her life, the only relationship in which she is an equal and respected for herself despite her gender, ultimately betrays both her and Snow Flower as misunderstandings become explosive, mistrust takes hold and their connection is sundered.

This haunting, beautiful and ineffably sad tale of longing so intense as to be taken beyond the grave, is written in See's characteristically strong prose. She has a keen ear for Lily's yearning, and manages to depict an era and place vastly different from our own Westernized world with grace, acumen and not a little humility. In her capable hands, Lily evolves as a character with whom the reader (of either gender) can feel a deep affinity, for Lily's quest is irrespective of era or geography or even isolation. See makes her audience feel what Lily feels, to identify with her desperate desire to be touched at that place we call "soul," to exorcise the alienation she feels through one passionate connection with another person.

Like Lydia Kwa's equally compelling, *This Place Called Absence*, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* journeys into the dark duality of women's lives in an earlier time, illustrating what it was to live an exterior life from dawn till dusk while maintaining a deep and resonant interior life that was secret to all, save one.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan is redolent of history, memory and the brutal nature of the unrequited. It is an extraordinary novel, simply breathtaking.

Victoria A. Brownworth is the author of several works of fiction and non-fiction, and has edited numerous collections of short stories and essays, including the award-winning *Coming Out of Cancer*. She wrote about foot binding for the *Harrington Literary Quarterly* in 2003.

From the *Los Angeles Times*:

By Marc Weingarten, *Special to The Times*

The women of 19th century China whom Lisa See writes about in her tenderhearted new novel were a brutally oppressed class. They were the reproductive oxen of a culture that was ruled by men for men, a culture that insisted upon absolute obedience and lots and lots of baby boys from "bed business."

Women were partitioned, forced to dwell in women's chambers with their mothers, aunts and sisters. They endured the abject pain and humiliation of foot binding, in effect undergoing primitive reconstructive surgery to appeal to potential suitors. Every

thousand years in a remote area of southern Hunan province. *Nu shu* was different from conventional Chinese script in that it was phonetic and its interpretation was based on context. Years later when author Lisa See became aware of *nu shu*, her discovery turned into an obsession, resulting in her fourth novel, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*.

Written in the style of a memoir, the book is narrated by 80-year-old Lily Yi as she looks back on her life. Her story begins in 1828 in her village of Puwei in southwestern China. Her father is a hardworking, respected farmer. As in all traditional Chinese families, sons are revered and daughters are seen as temporary obligations, to be passed on to other families at the time of marriage. Even at age 5, Lily, the third daughter in a family of five children, understands her position.

But everything changes on the day the village diviner arrives to help her mother choose a propitious date for Lily and her cousin to begin having their feet bound. The diviner declares that Lily is no ordinary child. A special matchmaker announces that Lily's feet have particularly high arches and, if properly bound, could be shaped into golden lilies - those highly coveted tiny, perfect feet that might be their key to prosperity. "Fate -- in the form of your daughter -- has brought you an opportunity," the matchmaker says. "If Mother does her job properly, this insignificant girl could marry into a family in Tongkou." Thus in one day, Lily's position in her family changes -- she remains a commodity, but one that now needs to be nurtured so that the family can realize her full value.

Later the matchmaker also suggests to Lily's mother a *laotung* match for her daughter, a relationship with a girl from the best village in the county. She is the same age as Lily, and their friendship is meant to last a lifetime, being perhaps even more profound than marriage itself. This match would signal to her future family that Lily is not only a woman with perfect golden lilies but also one who has proved her loyalty. When Lily meets her *laotung*, Snow Flower, she is given a fan with a secret message written in *nu shu* script inside.

So begins a correspondence between Lily and her new friend in *nu shu* -- a language considered by men to be of little importance because it belonged to the realm of women. But for Lily and Snow Flower it provides an opening for expressing and sharing their hopes and fears in lives that are otherwise powerless, repressed and bound by rigid social conventions. In the years that follow, Lily teaches Snow Flower the domestic arts of cooking and cleaning, while Snow Flower teaches Lily the more refined arts of weaving and calligraphy. Their bond also deepens during the extended visits Snow Flower makes to Lily's home.

Through See's careful, detailed descriptions of life in a remote 19th-century Chinese village, we experience a world where women spend their days in upstairs chambers, kowtowing to elders, serving tea and communicating in *nu shu*. She reveals to us the horrors of foot binding (foot bent back, bones broken and reshaped), a young girl's innocent dreams of life in a new home mingled with fears of being married off to a stranger, and the obsession with bearing sons. Woven through all this is the friendship between Lily and Snow Flower, which is compromised when Lily misinterprets a letter from her friend, cutting herself off from the one person she loves most. Years later, when Lily begins to understand her own failings and the depth of Snow Flower's affection for her, it is too late. She must find other ways to seek forgiveness and make amends.

The wonder of this book is that it takes readers to a place at once foreign and familiar - foreign because of its time and setting, yet familiar because this landscape of love and sorrow is inhabited by us all. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is a triumph on every level, a beautiful, heartbreaking story.

From *Booklist*

Snow Flower is an *Entertainment Weekly* Editor's Choice and an A rating. "You can relish See's extraordinary fourth novel as a meticulously researched account of women's lives in 19th century China, where it is "better to have a dog than a daughter.... You can also savor See's marvelous narrative as a timeless portrait of a contentious, full-blooded female friendship, one that includes, over several decades, envy, betrayal, erotic love, and deep-seated loyalty."

Snow Flower is one of *Good Housekeeping's* 10 Fictional Babes We'd Like You to Read This Summer.

"A longing for connection is at the disciplined heart of Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, a novel set in a remote province of 19th-century China. For Lily and Snow Flower, lifelong friends and prisoners of domestic tradition, the coded women's language of nu shu was "a means for our bound feet to carry us to each other...to write the truth about our lives." Intimate revelations about betrayal and forgiveness artfully bridge the cultural divide." *O Magazine*

"As both a suspenseful and poignant story and an absorbing historical chronicle, this novel has bestseller potential and should become a reading group favorite as well." *Publishers Weekly*

"See's writing is intricate and graceful, and her attention to detail never wavers, making for a lush, involving reading experience." *Booklist*

From *Kirkus*:

A nuanced exploration of women's friendship and women's writing in a remote corner of Imperial China.

At the end of her life, Lady Lily Lu, the 80-year-old matriarch of Tongkou village, sits down to write her final memoir—one that will be burned at her death. Using nu shu, a secret script designed and kept by women, Lily spends her final years recounting her training as a woman, her longing for love and the central friendship of her life. Born, in 1823, into an ordinary farming family, Lily might not have ended up as a wealthy matriarch. Her earliest memories are of running through the fields outside with her cousin Beautiful Moon in the last days before her foot-binding. But in childhood, Lily's middle-class fate changed dramatically when the local diviner suggested that her well-formed feet made her eligible for a high-status marriage and for a special ceremonial friendship with a laotong (sworn bosom friend). Accordingly, Lily became laotong with Snow Flower, a charming girl from an upper-class household. Together, the two begin a friendship and intimate nu shu correspondence that develops with them through years of house training, marriages, childbirths and changes in social status. See (*Dragon Bones*, 2003, etc.) is fascinated by imagining how women with constrained existences might have found solace—and poetry—within the unexpected, little known writing form that is nu shu. Occasionally, in the midst of notes about childbirth and marriages, Lily and Snow Flower wonder how to understand the value of their secret writing in relation to the men's "outside world." The question is left delicately open. As the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64) approaches the villages around them, threatening to disrupt the social order, Lily and Snow Flower's private intimacy changes, stretches and is strained. Taut and vibrant, the story offers a delicately painted view of a sequestered world and provides a richly textured account of how women might understand their own lives.

A keenly imagined journey into the women's quarters

From *Publisher's Weekly*:

See's engrossing novel set in remote 19th-century China details the deeply affecting story of lifelong, intimate friends (*laotong* , or "old sames") Lily and Snow Flower, their imprisonment by rigid codes of conduct for women and their betrayal by pride and love. While granting immediacy to Lily's voice, See (*Flower Net*) adroitly transmits historical background in graceful prose. Her in-depth research into women's ceremonies and duties in China's rural interior brings fascinating revelations about arranged marriages,

women's inferior status in both their natal and married homes, and the Confucian proverbs and myriad superstitions that informed daily life. Beginning with a detailed and heartbreaking description of Lily and her sisters' foot binding ("Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you have peace"), the story widens to a vivid portrait of family and village life. Most impressive is See's incorporation of *nu shu*, a secret written phonetic code among women—here between Lily and Snow Flower—that dates back 1,000 years in the southwestern Hunan province ("My writing is soaked with the tears of my heart,/ An invisible rebellion that no man can see"). As both a suspenseful and poignant story and an absorbing historical chronicle, this novel has bestseller potential and should become a reading group favorite as well. *Agent, Sandra Dijkstra. Author tour . (July)*

time to develop. The mother who was the one to bind the feet, and usually started the process late in the fall or winter, so the foot would be numb and the pain would not be as severe. The daughters' feet would first be soaked in warm water or animal blood and herbs (Jackson 39). The special potion that was used for this caused any dead flesh to fall off (Levy 12). She would have her toe nails cut as short as possible therefore not allowing them to grow into the foot. After she received a foot massage, the four smallest toes on each foot were broken (Chinese Foot Binding 2). This was not even the worst of the pain. The mother soaked silk or cotton bandages in the same liquid the girl's feet were soaked in. The bandages, which were ten feet long and two inches wide, were wrapped around the smallest toes and pulled tightly to the heel. Every two days, the binding was removed and rebound. This part of the process went on for two years. By this time her feet were three to four inches long. To assure the feet staying small, the ritual continued for at least ten more years (Hwang 1).

The process was very painful; every time the feet were rebound the bandages were pulled tighter. But besides just the pain of the process, there were many after affects that were detrimental to the young girls' health. The pain of the bound feet never stopped. The most common consequence was infection (Hwang 1). There were many ways a girl could get an infection. One was the ball of the foot would folding directly into the heel. A second was that the toenails continued to grow, eventually curling into the skin. This led to flesh rotting off, and sometimes even a toe. The worst part of the process was that the feet would practically die after three years. The feet being dead caused a terrible smell the girl carried with her everywhere (Chinese Footwear 1). Diseases followed infections, and death could even result from foot binding (Hwang 1).

Some girls made it through their youth without having any medical problems; yet the time when most women had health problems due to foot binding was in their later years. The women who had their feet bound were more likely to fall, less able to squat and less able to rise from a sitting position in their older years. The combination of the lower hip bone density, along with the fact women with bound feet were more likely to fall, put these women at an extremely high risk for hip fractures (Ling 1,2). Overall, foot binding had its beauty, yet the consequences were very severe.

Such a painful and crippling tradition could not be completely due the popularity and fashion it had at the time. There were many reasons mothers made the decision to bind their daughters' feet. Men in [China](#) in that era would not marry a woman who did not have bound feet. The man's mother was always responsible for making sure the woman he was to marry had bound feet. If the mother of the man lifted up the woman's dress and



discovered "clown feet," she would not allow her son to speak to that woman again. The mother of the man that she loved finding out she does not have bound feet was the most embarrassing thing that could happen to you (Jackson 62). Feet binding also divided men and women and upheld old Chinese beliefs. Foot binding kept women weak, out of power, and dominated by her husband. When women bound their feet, men could dominate more easily and not worry about women taking their power. The process took place so early, the young girl had no choice but to follow her family's order and have her feet bound. She was uneducated and considered foot binding

Diary

Everything about interests of a mature person

Friday, May 18, 2007

Painful Memories for China's Footbinding Survivors -from a mail

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In this post I repeat info I received in a mail from my friends. I think it's interesting. Not tooo new, but interesting enough to repeate.

Legend has it that footbinding began during the Shang dynasty (1700-1027 B.C.), ordered by an empress who had a clubfoot. But historical records date the practice to a later dynasty: An emperor was captivated by a concubine, a talented dancer who bound her feet to suggest the shape of a new moon and performed a "lotus dance."



Suffering for beauty is a concept familiar to most women, who have dyed, plucked or shaved their hair, squeezed their feet into

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uncomfortable high heels or even surgically enhanced parts of their anatomy. Millions of Chinese women went even further — binding their feet to turn them into the prized "three-inch golden lotuses."

Footbinding was first banned in 1912, but some continued binding their feet in secret. Some of the last survivors of this barbaric practice are still living in Liuyicun, a village in Southern China's Yunnan province.



Wang Lifan was just 7 years old when her mother started binding her feet: breaking her toes and binding them underneath the sole of the foot with bandages. After her mother died, Wang carried on, breaking the arch of her own foot to force her toes and heel ever closer. Now 79, Wang no longer remembers the pain.

"Because I bound my own feet, I could manipulate them more gently until the bones were broken. Young bones are soft, and break more easily," she says.

At that time, bound feet were a status symbol, the only way for a woman to marry into money. In Wang's case, her in-laws had demanded the matchmaker find their son a wife with tiny feet.

Outside the temple in Liuyicun, old women sit chatting, some resting their shrunken feet in the sunlight. Seven years ago, there were still 300 women with bound feet in this village. But many have since died. The village's former prosperity, from its thriving textile business, was the reason every family bound their daughters' feet. And they carried on long after foot binding was outlawed in 1912.

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The bandages that women used for footbinding were about 10 feet long, so it was difficult for them to wash their feet. They only washed once every two weeks, so it was very, very stinky. Some married women with bound feet would even get up in the middle of the night to start their toilette, just to ensure they would look good in daytime.

Some scholars say footbinding deepened female subjugation by making women more dependent on their men folk, restricting their movements and enforcing their chastity, since women with bound feet were physically incapable of venturing far from their homes.

Certainly the "three-inch golden lotuses" were seen as the ultimate erogenous zone, with Qing dynasty pornographic books listing 48 different ways of playing with women's bound feet. Some estimate that as many as 2 billion Chinese women broke and bound their feet to attain this agonizing ideal of physical perfection. Women with tiny feet were a status symbol who would bring honor upon the entire clan by their appearance.

These women disfigured their feet to guarantee their own future, but this act ultimately consigned them to tragic lives. Most of Liuyicun's bound-feet women were forced to perform hard physical labor in the late 1950s, digging reservoirs, for example — work which was punishing enough for ordinary women, but agonizing for those with tiny, misshapen feet. Their tiny feet sealed their tragic fates.



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FOOTBINDING

Footbinding was specific to and unique to traditional Chinese culture. Its various names conveyed its multifaceted image in Chinese eyes: *chanzu* (**binding** feet) called attention to the mundane action of swaddling the body with a piece of cloth; *gongwan* (curved arch) described a desired shape of the **foot** similar to that of a ballerina in pointe shoe; *jinlian* (golden lotus, also gilded lilies) evoked a utopian image of the body that was the subject of fantastical transformation. A related poetic expression of *lianbu* (lotus steps) suggested that **foot-binding** was intended to enhance the grace of the body in motion, not to cripple the woman.

Body Modification

The much-maligned practice has often been compared to corsetry as evidence that women were oppressed in cultures East and West, modern and traditional. The comparison is apt albeit for different reasons. The goal of both practices was to modify the female figure with strips of carefully designed and precisely positioned fabric, and in so doing alter the way the wearer projected herself into the world. During its millennium-long history, footbinding acquired various cultural meanings: as a sign of status, civility, Han Chinese ethnicity, and femininity. But at its core it was a means of body modification, hence its history should be sought from the

a means of body modification, hence its history should be sought from the foundational garments of **binding** cloth, socks, and soft-heeled slippers.

The materials needed for **binding** feet were specialized articles made by women (**binding** cloth, socks, and shoes) together with sewing implements readily available in the boudoir (scissors, needle, and thread). Alum and medicinal powder were sprinkled between the toes as an astringent. Women often wove the cotton **binding** cloth; its average width was three inches, and its length ranged from seven to ten inches. Skillful wrapping of the cloth allowed the woman to reshape the **foot** into desirable shapes in accordance to footwear fashion. The method and style of **binding** feet varied greatly with geography, age, and occasion. A moderate way involved compressing the four digits into a pointy and narrow tip; an extreme regiment required both the folding of the digits and the bending of the **foot** at midpoint into an arch. The tendons and extensors of the toes were stretched to the point of breakage, but the breakage did not, at least in theory, require fracturing the bones. The **binding** of feet altered the shape of the **foot** and the woman's gait. Slender slippers and dainty steps signified class and desirability.

Similar to tattooing, footbinding bespeaks an attitude that viewed the body as a canvas or a template—a surface or "social skin" on which cultural meanings could be inscribed. Yet the effect of **binding** was more than skin deep. It signaled an extreme form of self-improvement and mastery; the contemporary body-piercer's motto of "no pain, no gain" is equally apt for Chinese women.

Unlike tattooing and body-piercing, however, **foot-binding** was only practiced by females, and its connections with the female handicraft traditions of textile, embroidery, and shoemaking rendered it a quintessential sign of feminine identity. It is paradoxical that footbinding, supposedly a signal of the woman's family status as "conspicuous leisure," was in itself a result and expression of a strenuous form of female labor.

Early Beginnings

The earliest material evidence for the **binding** of feet is several pairs of shoes from twelfth- to thirteenth-century tombs in south-central China. Scholar Zhang Bangji (fl. 1147) provided the first known textual reference to **foot-binding** as an actual practice: "Women's footbinding began in the recent times; it was not mentioned in any books from the previous eras." By the twelfth century, **foot-binding** was a common but by no means mandatory practice among the wives and daughters of high-status men, as well as courtesans and actresses who entertained this same group of privileged scholar-officials.

Song-dynasty China (960–1279) enjoyed a prosperous commercialized economy. The Northern Song capital of Kaifeng and the Southern Song capital of Hangzhou, with populations of over a million each, were the largest cities in the world at the time. Indeed, historians have suggested that the beginnings of Chinese modernity can be traced back to the Song. A taste for novelty, together with status-anxiety—the same factors that gave rise to fashion in early modern Europe—also facilitated the birth of footbinding. Adoration for small

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feet ran deep in Chinese culture: the story of Ye Xian, China's Cinderella, appeared in a ninth-century story collection *Youyang zazu* (Ko, pp. 26–27), and poets eulogized dainty steps and fancy footwear from the sixth to tenth centuries. But these fantasies gave rise to the actual practice of **binding** feet only in the urban culture that emerged after the fall of the Tang aristocratic empire.

The style of women's shoes from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries conforms to two subtypes: one is long and narrow with pointy toes, like a kayak; the other, with turned-up toes, is like a canoe with a high stem. These shoes are made of monochrome silk and decorated with embroidered abstract floral or cloud patterns. The length of archaeological specimens ranges from 5.9 inches to 9.4 inches (15 to 24 cm). Both styles feature flat fabric soles, suggesting that in this early stage women swaddled their four digits together with a **binding** cloth to achieve a sleek, pointy look.

Paintings show these pointy toes or the more dramatic upturned toes peeking out from long, flowing silk trousers, creating an aesthetic of subdued feminine elegance. The most credible origin myth attributes **foot-binding** to Yaoniang, a dancer in the court of the last ruler Li Yu (r. 969–975) of the Southern Tang kingdom, who beguiled Li with her graceful dance and shoes that "curl up like the new moon." In the beginning, **foot-binding** was not meant to cripple.

The Cult of the Golden Lotus

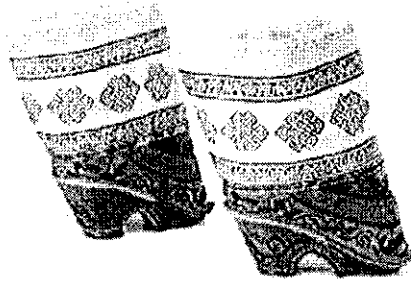
A more extreme regime of beauty arose around the sixteenth century with the invention of high heels. One type of shoes was elevated on a cylindrical heel; another featured a curved sole supported by a piece of silk-covered wood from the heel area to the instep. Not only did heels afford an optical illusion of smallness, they also enabled an extreme way of **binding** that pushed the base of the metatarsal bones and the adjoining cuneiforms upward, forming a bulge on the top of the **foot**. A crevice was formed on the sole due to the compression of the fifth metatarsal bone toward the calcaneus or heel bone. The high heel redirected the wearer's body weight into a tripod-like area consisting of the tip of the big toe, the bent toes, and the back of the heel. However unsteadily, heeled footwear provided better support for the triangular **foot** than flats.

This strenuous regimen bespeaks heightened female competition in a fashion-conscious society. In the sixteenth century, the Ming Empire (1368–1644) enjoyed the largest trade surplus in the world. Buoyed by a



money economy spread to the abundance and social fluidity, there display the status of their fathers and small feet and their attendant rise to a cult of the golden lotus.

Silk Ginlein shoe. Footbinding is a form of body modification mainly practiced by Han Chinese women. One of the two popular styles of shoes available to women from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries was made of silk with pointed toes. Shoes in this style averaged in length about 3 inches. COURTESY OF THE BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO. PHOTO BY HAL ROTH. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.



Cantonese boots. High-heeled shoes were introduced to women's fashion in China during the Ming Dynasty. The heels created the illusion of smallness and, due to the shoes' design and the weight and balance modifications resulting from foot-binding, they actually provided more support to women with bound feet than did flat shoes. COURTESY OF THE BATA SHOE MUSEUM, TORONTO. PHOTO BY HAL ROTH. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

Female footwear—often store-bought—became fanciful. Some women hired famous carpenters to carve their heels, often of fragrant wood. Floral cutouts were made on the surface of hollowed heels; perfumed powder inside the heels would leave traces of blossoms on the floor as the wearer shifted her steps. The shoe uppers were fashioned from red, white, or green silk with increasingly elaborate embroidered motifs of auspicious symbols. The earlier flat socks evolved into contoured and footed soft "sleeping slippers" which women wore to bed on top of the binding cloth. The erotic appeal of the golden lotus

was wrought of layered footwear as instruments of concealment.

Even at the heyday of the cult, many women did not have bound feet. Footbinding was more a privilege than a requirement. Women of Manchu descent, an ethnic minority group, eschewed footbinding, as did Hakka women, who shouldered back-breaking manual labor. After the Manchus became the rulers of China in 1644, they issued prohibition edicts that only served to make foot-binding more popular among the subjugated Han Chinese majority.

The Anti-Footbinding Movement

The decline of footbinding can be attributed to internal and external factors. Domestically, it became a victim of its own success. As footbinding spread geographically outward and socially downward during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), it lost its raison d'être and ceased to be a

sign of exclusivity. Externally, Christian missionaries and merchants brought an imported concept of the natural God-given body as well as a new sartorial regime in the second half of the nineteenth century. Footbinding became so dated that it was synonymous with "feudal and backward China" in the Republican period (1912–1949). Although coastal women gave up the practice in the early decades of the twentieth century, girls in the remote southwestern province of Yunnan were forced to stop by the Communist regime only in the 1950s.

THE FETISHISM OF BOUND FEET AND TINY SHOES

William Rossi has suggested the bound **foot** was "the organ of ultimate sexual pleasure"; the soft fleshy cleavage on the underside of the **foot** was "the equivalent of the labia" for men (pp. 29–30). Although this view is corroborated by Chinese erotic paintings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, no premodern Chinese sources depict footbinding in this light.

Novels, poetry, and prose by premodern Chinese male scholars suggest that embroidered slippers and partially undressed, but still concealed, feet served as the locus of their erotic imagination. The first credible connoisseur of bound feet was the Yuan dynasty scholar-poet Yang Weizhen (also known as Yang Tieya, 1296–1370), who in his later years retired from the court and dallied in the garden city of Suzhou. To add to the merry-making, Yang drank from wine cups fashioned from courtesans' tiny shoes. Brothel drinking games involving the tiny shoe persisted and became more fanciful, as evinced by the connoisseur Fang Xuan's (probably a pseudonym) treatises first published in the last decade of the Qing dynasty (Levy, pp. 107–120).

The connoisseur Li Yu (c. 1610–1680)—no relation to the Southern Tang ruler—described the sexual appeal of the bound **foot** in both visual and tactile terms. In a bedroom scene in Li's erotic novel *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, the protagonist Vesperus removed all the clothes of Jade Scent but left her leggings on, because "in the last resort tiny feet need a pair of dainty little leggings above them if they are going to appeal" (p. 50). Li recounted his own experience of removing courtesans' stockings to fondle feet so soft that they feel "boneless" in an essay collection, *Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling*. Presumably the **binding** cloth was not removed. Li added: "Lying in bed with them, it is hard to stop fondling their golden lotus. No other pleasures of dallying with courtesans can surpass this experience" (Hanan, p. 68).

The most vivid Chinese account of the fetishism of shoes and feet during the height of the cult of the golden lotus is the erotic novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, first published in 1618. Presiding over a polygynist household, the protagonist Simen Qing is the paragon of male privileges and excesses. Females vie to get his attention, hence their heart's desires, by a parade of tiny shoes they designed and assembled. Simen was partial to red sleeping slippers; his love for them—and their wearer—was transference for his own desire to wear red shoes (chapter 28). Simen, a merchant, personifies the commodity culture that enabled new economies of pleasure and desire in seventeenth-century China.

scene in seventeenth century China.

Chinese fetishism assumes different meanings than that which crystallized in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, in part because the association of pleasure and guilt is absent in Confucian morality. But in China as in Europe, the fetishism of the **foot** found its most graphic expression in the spectacular details lavished onto high heel shoes. As a vessel for wine, plaything, or token of exchange, embroidered slippers were receptacles of boundless fantasy.

The very subject of footbinding has been fetishized in the West. As a stand-in for the exotic and erotic Orient, footbinding has continued to fascinate modern observers and collectors after its demise in China as a social practice.

Ironically, on the eve of footbinding's decline, the paraphernalia of footbinding reached the height of its glory, surpassing previous centuries in rapidity of stylistic changes and ornamental techniques. Each region developed

its own distinct footwear styles. New genres of patterns, snow clogs, and rain boots served the growing number of working-class women with bound feet. Footwear innovation continued into the 1920s and 30s, when women with bound feet updated their wardrobes with such Western styles as the Mary Jane, fastened with buttons and flesh-colored silk stockings.

In sum, there is not one footbinding but many. During each stage of its development the way of **binding**, shoe styles, social background of the women and their incentives are different; the regional diversities are also pronounced. But in the final analysis, the **binding** of feet was always motivated by a utopian impulse to overcome the body and to elevate one's status in the world.

See also **China: History of Dress; Fetish Fashion.**

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