Lotus Steps: Looking at Footbinding from the Perspective of Participants

My paper examines foot-binding in late imperial China from the perspective of power: the power held by those who developed and perpetuated the practice as a form of control, and the power held by those who utilized foot-binding as a method of social advancement. I focus on the historiography of foot-binding, and evaluate the work and perspectives of various historians.

In particular, I examine foot-binding from the viewpoints of those who participated in it (both male and female). While I accept the notion that foot-binding emerged as a result of the patriarchy in China, I also explore the creativity of Chinese women in appropriating, reinventing, and subverting the practice.

In so doing, I argue foot-binding allowed for women to exercise ‘agency’ within the patriarchal system. I define agency as a woman using whatever means possible to influence her own life, whether or not these means were devised through a patriarchal system.

Lastly, I work through the difficulty of trying to find female perspectives in histories and commentaries largely written by and for men. My intention is to look at foot-binding as a method of patriarchal sublimation, as well as a mode of improving one’s social status in a male-dominated society.