A Study of Daoist Immortal Mao Nü: Ming Dynasty Zhangzhou Ware Dish in the Collection of the Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka

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Abstract
The Daoist immortal is one of the most popular and auspicious iconographies in Asian Art. One such figure is depicted on a Zhangzhou, or Swatow, ware from the Ming dynasty housed in the collection of the Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka. A barefoot figure holding a cane and carrying a basket with an open parasol accompanied by a deer is depicted in the center of the dish. This essay testifies that the figure on the dish is the legendary Daoist Immortal Mao Nü, who served in the palace of the emperor Qin Shi Huang in the third century BC. After the fall of the dynasty, Mao Nü is said to have taken refuge in the mountains and sustained herself on pine needles, attaining not only immunity to cold and hunger but also an ethereal lightness of body.

Images of Mao Nü abounded in Chinese art throughout the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), before suddenly dropping off in the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). This research argues that the main reason for this change is closely linked to the practice of foot binding. During the Qing dynasty, paintings of female feet were newly deemed inappropriate. Since bare feet were an essential feature by which Mao Nü was recognized, her image suddenly became controversial in the world of Chinese art and faded out.

Keywords: *Daoist Immortal; Swatow ware; Female hermit; Mao Nü; Foot binding*

1. Introduction
The subject of various iconography studies, the name of the legendary Chinese female immortal Mao Nü (or Mao Nu) has been translated in English as the 'Hairy Woman' (British Museum) or the 'Feathered Woman' (Philadelphia Museum of Art). This paper focuses on a representative example of Mao Nü found on a Ming dynasty dish in the collection of the Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka (Fig. 1). In the center of this dish, a deer and a barefoot figure carrying a basket and holding a cane and parasol are depicted. Wares with similar designs can be found in Shanghai Museum's collection and at international auctions. This figure has become almost unrecognizable, however, and has often been misidentified with other Daoist immortals, such as Han Xiangzi (1), Lan Caihe (2), and Magu (3). Traditionally, the figures known as the Eight Immortals are depicted together as a complete set. In Daoist mythology, Han Xiangzi and Lan Caihe are male members of the Eight Immortals who possess magical vessels that channel power—in Han's case a flute, in Lan's case a basket of flowers. Viewers are highly unlikely to find Han or Lan depicted individually or without their vessels, making them easily identifiable. Magu, on the other hand, is a female immortal with staggeringly long nails and a flowing gown who represents longevity. Magu's popularity grew during the Qing dynasty. Clearly, none of these descriptions match the iconography on the Ming dynasty dish. By shedding light on the core elements of her iconography and proposing a reason for

her gradual disappearance from Chinese art in the Qing dynasty, this paper suggests that the figure depicted is the immortal Mao Nü.

Figure 1: Porcelain dish with an overglaze enamel design featuring a Daoist immortal and deer.
The Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka (Gift of Mr. YABASHI Shigeo)
Photograph by MUDA Tomohiro

2. Biography of Mao Nü

According to the *Liexian Zhuan (Biographies of Immortals)* (4), Mao Nü, born Mao Yujiang, was one of the ladies serving in the palace of the emperor Qin Shi Huang in the third century BC. After the fall of the dynasty, she took refuge in the mountains. By eating only pine needles while in the mountains, she attained to an ethereal lightness of body and became immune to both cold and hunger.

In the Daoist text *Baopuzi Neipian* (5), Ge Hong (283-343) wrote an account that claimed Mao Nü was captured in the wild by huntsmen during the Han dynasty. She was taken to their home and fed grain, a common food at the time. At first, she could not bear the smell of their food at all, but gradually began consuming it. After two years, her hair had fallen out and she eventually died as an ordinary mortal. Ge commented that if she had not been found by people, she would have persisted in the mountains as an immortal.

Mao Nü's existence was also recorded in the *Tai Ping Guang Ji* (6) that was written during the Song dynasty (960-1279). It said that at the beginning of the Dazhong period (847-860) of the Tang dynasty, two old men known as Tao Taibai and Yin Zixu often traveled together to the Songshan and Huashan Mountains. Tao and Yin met Mao Nü and a man called Gu Zhang Fu who had served in the former emperor Qin Shi Huang's palace. After the fall of the Qin dynasty, both Mao Nü and Gu Zhang Fu unwittingly achieved immortality by living off pine needles and oak acorns. In turn, the two immortals gifted Tao and Yin the same harvested plants that had sustained them as parting gifts. It is said that Tao and Yin became immortals as well and have since lived on the peak of Lianhua Mountain.

In addition to these accounts of her immortality, poems and stories have described Mao Nü as a beautiful lady associated with collecting herbs, hermitage and longevity. In China's Shanxi Province, places like Mao Nu Mountain and Mao Nu Cave have been dedicated to her. Paradoxically, while her legacy is evidently well-preserved through the use of her name, most people have never

seen depictions of Mao Nü and she is therefore often ignored or misidentified by specialists.

3. Iconography of Mao Nü

Despite Mao Nü's popularity in Chinese literature, few artifacts explicitly identify "Mao Nü" in their title. One of these rare works is a hanging scroll painting from the Song dynasty in Taipei's National Palace Museum (Fig. 2). The scroll's cover is inscribed with the title "*Li Gonglin Mao Nü painting*" (Fig. 3), suggesting that both females painted on the scroll are Mao Nü. One is carrying herbs in a basket, holding a large leaf overhead as a parasol. The other is riding on a deer, bearing a weapon. Both have long hair and wear clothes made from leaves and feathers, which are especially indicative of Mao Nü.

Figures 2 and 3: Mao Nü hanging scroll painting, Song dynasty.
National Palace Museum, Taipei

Figure 4: Female Immortals, 14th century painting.
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Previous research by Asian scholars including Xie Yuzhen (7), Hsu Wen-Mei (8), and Yang Zhishui has also contributed to identifying works depicting Mao Nü. Some 'female immortals' have been identified as Mao Nü for their hair-covered bodies, unembellished clothing, herb foraging, and possession of sacred animals as companions (Fig. 4). Yang's (2016) paper published in *Yamato Bunka* (9) suggested that Mao Nü's most recognizable features were the bamboo basket, reishi (or lingzhi) mushrooms (which were thought to bestow longevity if ingested), leaves covering the body like clothing, and bare feet.

Yang's analysis, although detailed, also contradicts her primary source, *Shan Hu Wang*. A collection of praises and criticisms of various calligraphy works and paintings, authored by Wang Keyu (1587-?), a Ming dynasty literary figure and book collector. Wang's *Shan Hu Wang* is widely recognized by art historians and cited in earlier Mao Nü iconography studies as Wang claimed to have glimpsed paintings of Mao Nü from the Tang (618-907), Song (960-1279), and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties. Tang dynasty paintings of Mao Nü, for instance, are said to depict twin immortals, one has rounded feet and wears grass sandals, while the other Mao Nü wears gaiters and shoes made of bristle-like awns (10). In contrast, Mao Nü paintings of Song dynasty depicted the immortal as four entities in distinct styles. All figures were full-bodied and beautifully adorned with feathers, brocades, sage grasses and leaves, with some wearing open-toe footwear (11).

Wang allegedly possessed a collection of paintings from the Yuan dynasty in which female immortals were lined up in several rows. All of the female immortals are wearing attire characteristic of Mao Nü. Viewers of the paintings were understandably shocked to see so many depictions of Mao Nü since there was only one in the original myth. Wang refrained from responding to comments on

this anomaly, instead composing several paragraphs about the classification of Mao Nü icons into six categories with varying degrees of immortality in the *Mao Nü Nü Pu* (Pedigree of Mao Nü). Legend held that Mao Nü had gradually transformed from mortal to immortal, and each of her states throughout the evolution was considered beautiful and radiant (12).

Most importantly, according to Wang's record, Mao Nü could be veritably identified by the following characteristics:

1. Visible feet or toes.
2. Clothes made from natural materials (leaves, feathers and leather).
3. The carrying of a bamboo basket filled with flowers and herbs, sometimes with an open parasol overhead, or other items such as farming tools (shovels, sickles), auspicious items (books, precious stones, reishi mushrooms), or other tools (musical instruments, fans, handscrolls).
4. Sacred animals nearby (cranes, deer, monkeys, phoenixes).
5. Multiple Mao Nü figures in a group, on occasion.

Wang reserved special praise for the immortal's beautiful feet and toes in grass sandals and shoes made of natural materials. This point complicates the image of a classically barefoot Mao Nü presented by Yang (2016). Within Wang's classification scheme, the different types of Mao Nü present in group illustrations naturally take on various forms, thus not every depiction embodies the full range of features and activities traditionally associated with her.

Based on the features outlined in *Shan Hu Wang*, more depictions of Mao Nü were discovered in other artworks. Below is a typical example, an embroidered work at the National Palace Museum in Taipei named "*The Gods of Happiness, Longevity, and Prosperity*" that features five depictions of Mao Nü (Fig. 5).

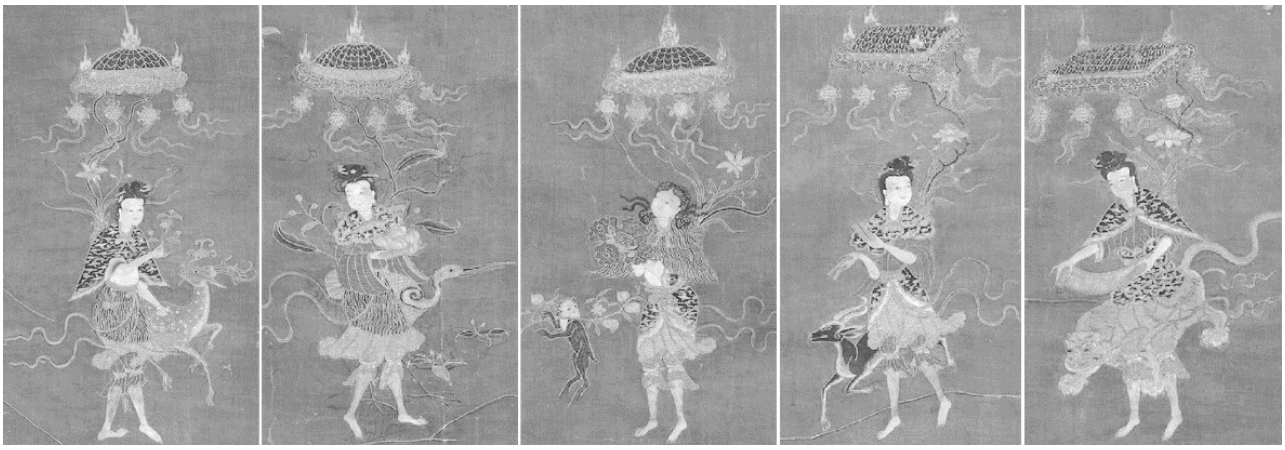

Figure 5: *The Gods of Happiness, Longevity, and Prosperity* (Partial)
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (c. 907-960)
National Palace Museum, Taipei

4. Qing Dynasty Foot Binding and the Disappearance of Mao Nü

Stories and legends of Mao Nü have been written since the Han dynasty (BC 23-220) while poems and artistic lemmas called 'gasan' have praised her beauty and mythical seclusion throughout the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Images of Mao Nü could be found in paintings, jewelry, porcelain and lacquer wares until the end of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), with the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) heralding the immortal's decline in popularity. This research suggests that one of the reasons for this change lies in the depiction of female feet and the custom of foot binding that grew popular thereafter.

Foot binding was a Chinese custom widely practiced between the 10th century and the 19th century involving breaking down and tightly binding the feet of young girls in order to change the shape and size of their feet. Feet altered by foot binding were known as lotus feet, and the shoes made for these feet were known as lotus shoes. In Chinese history, women with tiny feet were considered both beautiful and desirable, and foot binding had therefore become fashionable. In this period, feet were newly regarded as the most intimate part of a woman. Artistic representations of a woman's feet, even with shoes or socks on, were considered risqué and inappropriate. Reflecting this cultural change, Mao Nü's feet were often hidden in later images of her, despite having been one of her defining features.

Records from the Song and Yuan dynasties like *Mo Zhuang Man Lu* by Zhang Bangji, *Jiao Qi Ji* by Che Ruoshui (c. 1209-1275), *Lao Xue An Bi Lu* by Lu You (1125-1210), and *Nan Cun Chuo Geng Lu* by Tao Zongyi (1329-1410) suggest that it is unclear when the practice of foot binding first began, but it seemed to be in fashion during the Song dynasty. The eroticization of women with small feet by men during this period has been noted in studies such as *Zhong Hua Fu Nu Chan Zu Kao* (A study on the foot binding of Chinese women) (1926) by Jia Yi Jun (1906-?) (13), *Cai Fei Lu* (1936) by Yao Lingxi (c. 1899-1963) (14), and *Chan Zu Shi* (History of foot binding) (1995) by Gao Hong Xing (15). Women with tiny feet were considered to be highly skilled at providing sensual pleasure, which was also viewed as an important quality for a wife to possess. As such, the custom of foot binding reached its peak during the Qing dynasty.

Another less conspicuous reason for the boundless adoption of foot binding during this period was steeped in politics. The nomadic Manchu of northern China ruled during the Qing dynasty, yet the majority of China's population was ethnically Han. The Manchu had different clothes and customs from the Han that conflicted with the latter's traditional long gowns with wide sleeves and their practice of keeping their hair long. At the beginning of the Qing dynasty, many Han men resisted the adoption of the Manchu queue, a hairstyle that involved shaving the hair off the front of their heads. The hairstyle was compulsory for all males (except for monks) and the penalty for non-compliance was execution for treason. As a result, Han men reluctantly shaved their hair and expressed their submission by matching their appearance to that of the Manchu.

Foot binding, in this context, was considered an important tradition for Han women to continue, even if it was a harmful one. Since Manchu women did not bind their feet, they could never wear the tiny lotus shoes that signified Han beauty. Recognizing the symbolic value in doing so, Han women continued to bind their feet in secret in order to separate themselves from Manchu women and resist Manchu rule. It was quietly regarded that "men surrendered but women did not."

Although this truth was prevented from being leaked publicly throughout China, it was known and recorded by scholars aboard. Joseon dynasty scholar Bak Jiwon (1737-1805), for example, wrote *The Jehol Diary* in classical Chinese. Bak made an extensive tour of what was then the northern Chinese territory of the Qing Empire in 1780. A partial English translation of the record was published in 2010 (16). During the journey, Bak communicated with Chinese scholars by writing Chinese characters. Crucially, it was recorded that Manchu women did not bind their feet. In a discussion about foot binding between Bak and a Chinese scholar named Hu Ting, it was learned that the preservation of the foot binding custom among Han women was interpreted as confirmation of the women's strength, and Bak wrote that, "Han women feel ashamed to be confused with Tartary (Manchu) women." In their conversation, Hu Ting insisted that, "we won't change this [custom] even if we die," and also mentioned that, "Tartar women mock foot binding, call Han women lewd." Embedded within this observation was the tacit acknowledgement that the Manchus were aware that tiny feet were sexually fetishized by men.

In the *Qing Shi Lu (Factual Record of Qing Dynasty)*, the official record of the Qing government, the Jiaqing Emperor (1760-1820) received a report that 19 Han girls were binding their feet (17). These girls were preparing for their anticipated selection as brides or concubines by the

Manchu royal family. The emperor was furious that Han girls were binding their feet and announced thereafter that all Han people must obey the Manchu laws. Thus, girls with bound feet were no longer qualified to become members of the royal family, and the older male family members of those girls would be punished according to the law. The Jiaqing Emperor also mentioned that it was easier to regulate men's attire (including hats and shoes) than women's since women rarely left their homes. Despite the emperor's acrimony towards foot binding, the custom persisted. Records from the *Qing Shi Lu* also mentioned that both the Daoguang Emperor (1782-1850) and the Guangxu Emperor (1871-1908) who followed found it difficult to enforce the ruling against foot binding, and reiterated that everyone should obey the Manchu laws.

According to early studies on foot binding, bound feet were deemed intensely provocative, and erotic manuals from the Qing dynasty listed 48 different ways to play with women's bound feet. For a woman to show her feet, or to allow a man to touch her feet or shoes, was considered a prelude to sex. Such situations were only hinted at in the erotic art of the Qing period, with bound feet never fully exposed in the same images as genitalia. Such examples can be found in *Liao Zhai Quan Tu* (*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio with Full Illustration)* (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: *Liao Zhai Quan Tu,* around the Guangxu period (1875-1908), Qing dynasty
Pictures from Book 33 (p.26), Book 23 (p.10), Book 47 (p.15), Austrian National Library

In this context, the custom of foot binding essentially reached its peak during the Qing dynasty and spread across China among Han girls and women. Originally a body modification designed to please men, the practice had become a symbol of patriotism and loyalty to Han traditions. Tiny feet were the prerequisite of feminine beauty and a bare female foot could not be depicted, even in pornography. This explains why images of Mao Nü lost popularity during this specific period.

Nonetheless, one illustration of Mao Nü from the Qing dynasty is known, titled *Lie Xian Jiu Pai (Drinking Cards with Illustrations of Daoist Immortals)* (Fig. 8). In the image she is covered by leaves, showing no trace of her feet. The defining features of Mao Nü were thus not fully captured, as they had been in previous images of the immortal (Fig. 7).

The prohibition against depicting women's feet in China was also observed by Maezaki (2013), who reported on the designs of Japanese ceramics produced for the Qing Empire during the Meiji period (1868-1912) and noted that, "Images of women showing their bare feet signify shunga (pornography), [and] should be avoided" (18). Mao Nü, who did not bind her feet, contradicted the "tiny feet aesthetic" of the time and, as a result, Chinese artists who wanted to preserve her iconography had no choice but to conceal hide her legs.

This body of research found that Mao Nü was also depicted in Japanese paintings and ceramics from the Edo period (1603-1868) to the Meiji period. In the British Museum's collection, *The*

Immortal Mao Nu (Mojo), attributed to Eitoku Kano, is a rare work that quotes the *Ressen Zen Den* (*Biographies of Immortals*) in its commentary and identifies the depicted figure as Mao Nü. The collection includes porcelain decorated with the immortal created by the first-generation Kyoto potter Miyagawa Kosai (1819-1865) who made Makuzu-yaki from the end of the Edo period. Blue-and-white Kaseyama-yaki with Mao Nü illustrations, likely copied from imported Zhangzhou ware, are included (19). The presence of these depictions in Japan, where foot binding was not practiced and women's feet were not seen as a symbol of lust, shows how the image of Mao Nü was readily adopted into artwork.

Figure 7: Mao Nü,
You Xiang Lie Xian Quan Zhuan, p.62
Wanli Period (1573-1620), Ming dynasty

Figure 8: Mao Yujiang,
Lie Xian Jiu Pai, p.6
Guangxu Bingxu (1866), Qing dynasty

5. Conclusion

It is highly likely that the hermit depicted on the Ming dynasty Zhangzhou ware dish in the Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka is Mao Nü. Feet were considered the most intimate part of a woman during the Qing dynasty when foot binding reached the height of its popularity. Depictions of Mao Nü became less and less visible after that, and her iconic legs and feet were also hidden. Gradually, she disappeared from Chinese art and became harder to identify thereafter. Earlier works featuring images of Mao Nü were imported to Japan, however, and copies made by Japanese artists preserved the immortal's iconography in its original style. Since there was no foot binding custom nor prohibition against depicting women's feet on the island country, Mao Nü's image survived in Japan.

In conclusion, the characteristic features of Mao Nü can be summarized in the following six points: 1) Her lower legs are visible (gaiters are sometimes worn), 2) Her feet or toes are visible (sometimes in sandal-like shoes), 3) Her clothes are made of feathers or leaves (natural materials), 4) She carries large flowers as parasols, bamboo baskets, farming tools (or arms), and auspicious possessions (reishi mushrooms, pine needles, gourds, peaches, etc.), 5) Sacred animals are her companions, and 6) She is sometimes depicted as multiple forms in a group. Authentic depictions of the immortal do not necessarily need to fulfill all six conditions, yet the visibility of her legs, feet, or toes are a strong prerequisite. These essential features are what ultimately separate Mao Nü from other similar immortal figures.

Until recently, Mao Nü was almost forgotten in the sands of time. She was sometimes mistaken for a man because she walked through the forest wearing huntsman-style clothes with

visible legs, feet or toes. The force that led to her decline was the rise of foot binding, which sustained itself under added political pressure. In the Qing dynasty, bound feet remained the standard of feminine beauty among the Han Chinese and evolved into a symbol of resistance to their Manchurian rulers. The iconology of Mao Nü, whose characteristic feature was her bare legs and feet, declined when it no longer suited the social milieu. In Japan, on the other hand, where there is no cultural injunction against female feet, artists continued to depict Mao Nü. This fact strengthens the theory that Mao Nü's disappearance from Chinese art was associated with the rise of foot binding and the Qing social prohibition against showing bare female feet.

Notes

1. The Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka, *The Beauty of Asian Ceramics -from the collection of The Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-Sha, Ltd., 2014), 251.

2. "A similar dish is included by Jorge Welsh in Zhangzhou Export Ceramics, The So-called Swatow Wares, 2006, no. 26, pp. 124-127, where he notes the figure depicted may represent the Daoist immortal Lan Cai-he or Han Xiang-zi." *MARCHANT EST 1925*, Exhibition of Chinese Ceramics Tang to Qing, 2014, 42.

3. https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/sakamoto-n09336/lot.41.html（2023-06-03）

4. Liu Xiang (77-8 BC), *Liexian Zhuan*, sometimes translated as *Biographies of Immortals*, is assumed to be the oldest extant Chinese hagiography of Daoist Immortals.

5. Ge Hong (283-343), *Baopuzi, Neipian (Inner Chapters)*, discuss topics such as techniques to achieve immortality.

6. *Taiping Guangji*, translated as the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*, or *Extensive Records of the Taiping Xinguo Period,* is a collection of stories compiled in the early Song dynasty.

7. Xie Yuzhen, *Ming Chu Guan Fang Yong Qi De Ren Wu Wen*, Master's Thesis, Department of History, Soochow University, 2007.

8. Hsu Wen-Mei, *Bi Qin Gong Ren Cheng Nü Xian-Yuan Cang Er Fu "Mao Nü Tu" Hua Yi Tan Tao. The National Palace Museum monthly of Chinese art No.321* (2009), 78-87.

9. Yang Zhishui, Yamamoto Takako, Taki Asako, *Mojo Koji Zukou*, Yamato Bunka No.129 (2016), 4.

10. Wang Keyu, *Shan Hu Wang, Siku Quanshu (Complete Library of the Four Treasuries)*, Juan 25, (Taiwan: The Commercial Press, Ltd., 1983-1986), 514-515.

11. Wang Keyu, *Shan Hu Wang, Siku Quanshu*, Juan 31, 594.

12. Wang Keyu, *Shan Hu Wang, Siku Quanshu,* Juan 36, 683.

13. Jia Yi Jun, *Zhong Hua Fu Nu Chan Zu Kao (A study on foot binding of Chinese women*) (Beijing: Beiping Wen Hua Xue She, 1926).

14. Yao Lingxi, *Cai Fei Lu* (Tianjin Shu Ju, 1936).

15. Gao Hong Xing, *Chan Zu Shi (History of foot binding)* (Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1995).

16. Pak Chi-wŏn (translated by Yang Hi Choe-Wall), *Jehol Diary* (Global Oriental, 2010).

17. *Qing Shi Lu* of Jiaqing Period, Juan 126.

18. Maezaki Shinya, "Japanese Export Ceramics for the Chinese Market in the Meiji Era (1868−1912)−II−," *Journal of the Japan Society of Design 62* (2013), 69-82.

19. *Blue and White Ceramics of China and Japan —Kaseyama-yaki of Kyoto*, (Nara: Yamato Bunkakan, 2021), 29-30.

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