

The Mystery of High-Heeled Shoes: the Past and the Present

投稿類別：英文寫作

篇名：

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I. Introduction

A. Abstract

The objective of the research on high-heeled shoes is to unveil the long-standing mystery behind high-heeled shoes through literature overview and historical development. In order to probe into whether some common myths of high-heeled shoes still prevail in today's society, we conducted a questionnaire on subjects ranging from aged 11 to 50. The questionnaire analysis leads to the conclusion that the myths concerning high heels don't generally exist in Taiwan nowadays, mostly because of the gender equality widely accepted in our current society. Today, high-heeled shoes are no longer a symbol of sex, a by-product of hierarchical social system and representation of power and status, all of which used to be dominant concepts of high-heeled shoes. But according to several subjects, the motive to wear high-heeled shoes still implies women's desire to attract the attention of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, with a relatively small amount of data, we advise further research on high heels be carried out so as to find out how social factors have impacts on the definition of high-heeled shoes.

B. Motivation

As high school girls, we all experienced the attraction of high-heeled shoes – peeking at high-heeled shoes on the shelves and secretly putting them on when adults were out. The memories of the joy and excitement of wearing high-heeled shoes without mother's permission have been lingering in our heart. Through wearing them, our dream to be grown-ups seemed to be realized. Although we still wear sneakers most of time, we plan to wear high-heeled shoes (lower than the officially high heels of 3 inches high) on some important occasions, such as class reunions, public performances and go shopping. That is, wearing high-heeled shoes seems to be the rite of passage for girls like us. For the purpose of exploring why high-heeled shoes attract us and whether their position in girls and women's hearts is unshakable, we set out to investigate into how high-heels shoes stand the test of time as opposed to some other fleeting objects.

C. Objective of the Research

Historically, from a real privilege to a humble standing, from obscurity to popularity, high heels with its controversial shape and height as well as magic charm, have been around for centuries, with no signs of dying off. Myths of high-heeled shoes abound. At the physical level, as is widely known to people, women wearing high-heeled shoes appear to have attractive figures. On top of that, an ordinary woman could be transformed into a sexy one, revealing an irresistible sexy allure. On the psychological side, wearing high-heeled shoes has the implication of pursuing power and status. Actually, looking back in history, they serve as the status symbol for power with their height! They are also used as a tool for restraining the freedom of the women or a “scarlet letter” of those not faithful. In Chinese history, the Chin dynasty were overthrown and ushered in a new era of modernity and democracy. Among the reforms, the abolishment of wrapping up women’s shoes signals the women’s independence of men’s control. Not confined to the so-called “footbinding lotus shoes¹”, women have more freedom of moving around.

Whether those myths mentioned above exist in our society, the research aims to look into the following three categories.

1. The mysterious charm behind high-heeled shoes
2. The myths behind high-heeled shoes
3. The motives to wear high-heeled shoes

D. Techniques

In this research, we present a literature overview on high-heeled shoes. Based on the literature, we designed three questions in a questionnaire and distributed to subjects aged from 11 to 50 on the Internet.

The aim of the three questions is to explore the issues induced from literature overview.

¹ footbinding lotus shoes: A Chinese idiom , describing the women in ancient China whose feet tended to be wrapped as small as possible in order to become beautiful.

II. Context

A. Literature Overview

The literature on high-heeled shoes is briefly summarized with regard to three aspects – the symbol of ultimate social status, the alluring sexual nature and males' domination over females.

1. The Symbol of Ultimate Social Status

"The higher the heels, the closer to the heaven," inscribed on the Rosetta Stone, 196 B.C.

Historically, monarchs boasted their leadership by heightening their stature—wearing high heels. Among them are Catherine de Medici 1(1519-1589) and Mary Tudor, or "Bloody Mary." (McDowell 1989). In the early 1700s, for example, France's King Louis XIV was known for wearing red high-heels called "Louis heels," as tall as five inches. He went so far as to order that nobility be honorably entitled to wear colored heels and that no one's heels be higher than his. In his rein, high heels represented not only a fashion for a selected few, but also ultimate social status.

Not until 1791 did the "Louis high heels" become history due to the French revolution. Given that high heels were synonymous with aristocracy and monarch, Napoleon abolished high heels in an attempt to show equality. Even so, in 1793, Marie Anotoinette went to the scaffold in two-inch heels, showing his resistance to the revolutionary concept that man is created equal. The association of high heels with aristocracy and monarch came to an end here, a remarkable chapter in history.

2. The Alluring Sexual Nature

'Your Ladyship is nearer to heaven than when I saw you last by thee altitude of chopine.'- Hamlet (Act2, Svenve2) in 1600, Shakespeare.

At some point, high heels implicitly and unwittingly take on sexuality. Historically, they once represented sex explicitly and intentionally. In ancient Rome, sex trade was imposed legally, so high heels were used to identify prostitutes (Wilson 2005) The footwear acted as the “scarlet letter,”² the stigma of society.

As research on the charm of high heels show, they have the power to transform a plain woman into a sexy one, making her figure appear more charming, refined, and desirable. Such sexual nature was noted by the Puritans in the New World. As a result, the Massachusetts Colony even passed a law ban on women’s wearing high heels.(Murstein 1974)

In Chinese folk stories, those women who have the tendency to seduce men shared the very characteristic physically—walking like a butterfly or a snake by wearing high heels. Jin Lien Pan(a character appears in the story Water Margin which is regarded as one of the Chinese four classical novels) is a perfect example.

3.Males’ domination over Females

Lotus shoes of China have always been a good example of males’ domination over females. In fact, the West and the East, historically, shared the same process through manipulation of high heels.

In the 1400s, since chopines, the earliest version of exaggeratingly high heels, were invented in Turkey, they had gained popularity throughout Europe until 1600s. Their height could measure up to seven to eight or even 20 inches, thereby requiring women to use canes or servants to help them walk. As a result, chopines were worn exclusively by women.(Rexford 2000) According to an account of women wearing chopines, they were “invented by husbands who hoped the cumbersome movement [that] entailed would make illicit liaisons difficult” (McDowell 1989). Such was the phenomenon that scholars speculate if heels were used not only for aesthetic reasons but also to prevent women from escaping the harem (Kunzle 2004).

B. Questionnaire and Analysis --The Myth or the Truth

In order to confirm whether the concepts on high heels in Taiwan correspond to previous literary documents, we designed a questionnaire with three questions related to our research. Copies of the questionnaire were released on the Internet and 148 copies were returned back in effect. For the purpose of analyzing the questionnaires, we divided the subjects into three age groups: 11~20, 20 ~ 30 and above 30. These three age groups roughly represent three different generations respectively: teenagers, young adults and middle-aged adults. The number of each group is not the same, so percentages of their opinions are analyzed.

Debate1: The height implies social standing and power.

Q1. Do you think that the height of high-heeled shoes implies social standing and power?

1: strongly disagree 2: disagree 3: no comments 4: agree 5: strongly agree

	1	2	3	4	5	Bar chart ↓
Female 11-20	24%	49%	12%	15%	0%	
Male 11-20	9%	42%	30%	15%	3%	
Female 21-30	0%	63%	0%	38%	0%	
Male 21-30	0%	40%	20%	40%	0%	
Female above31	19%	45%	13%	21%	2%	
Male above31	13%	75%	0%	13%	0%	
Total	16%	48%	16%	19%	1%	

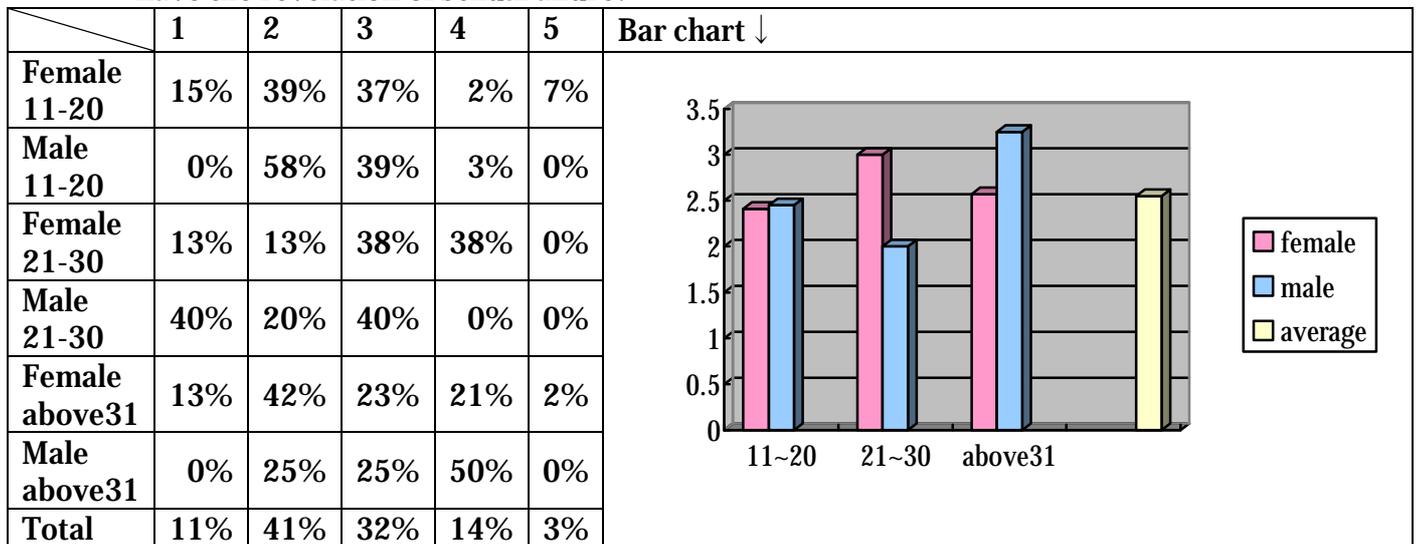
The statistics indicate that the majority of people show negative answer toward this question. As far as most of them are concerned, which is not corresponded to what have been mention in the historical document, high-heeled shoes and their height do not symbolize power and social status. Thanks to people nowadays compared to the ancient live in democratic society, they enjoy equal rights. Instead of obedience, they follow their own will. No matter what occupation they do or how wealthy are, they can put whatever kinds of shoes they prefer. Therefore, people rarely associate the height of high-heeled shoes with power and status.

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In addition, we found that the prestigious these days show their power and social status through name-brand products such as watches and jewels instead of high-heeled shoes. As time changes, prestigious men nowadays no longer wear high-heeled shoes to show off, and women have abundant choices. Hence, people mostly find high-heeled shoes as well as their height almost has nothing to do with power and social status.

b. Debate2: The shape has the revelation of sexual allure.

Q2. Do you think that women who wear high-heeled shoes with particular shape have the revelation of sexual allure?



In spite of the fact that the percentage of people who hold positive answer do increase followed by the ages, the result remains a denial.

Nevertheless, the movies, series, along with the music videos, especially occidental ones often take high-heeled to be their material, mostly as a symbol of sex and affair, and without a doubt the films in Taiwan is no exception. Take the series *The Fierce Wife*² for example, on its premiere, the young attractive lady who eventually had an affair with her sister's husband appeared with a pair of bright red high-heeled shoes. Since the color "red" is eye-catching, it enables women's limbs which are in a slim shape to be noticed by the opposite sex more easily, and even arouse their desire. In the end, everything went back to the right track as she was regretful and decided

² The Fierce Wife: Taiwan's drama, produced by Taiwan Television Enterprise in 2010

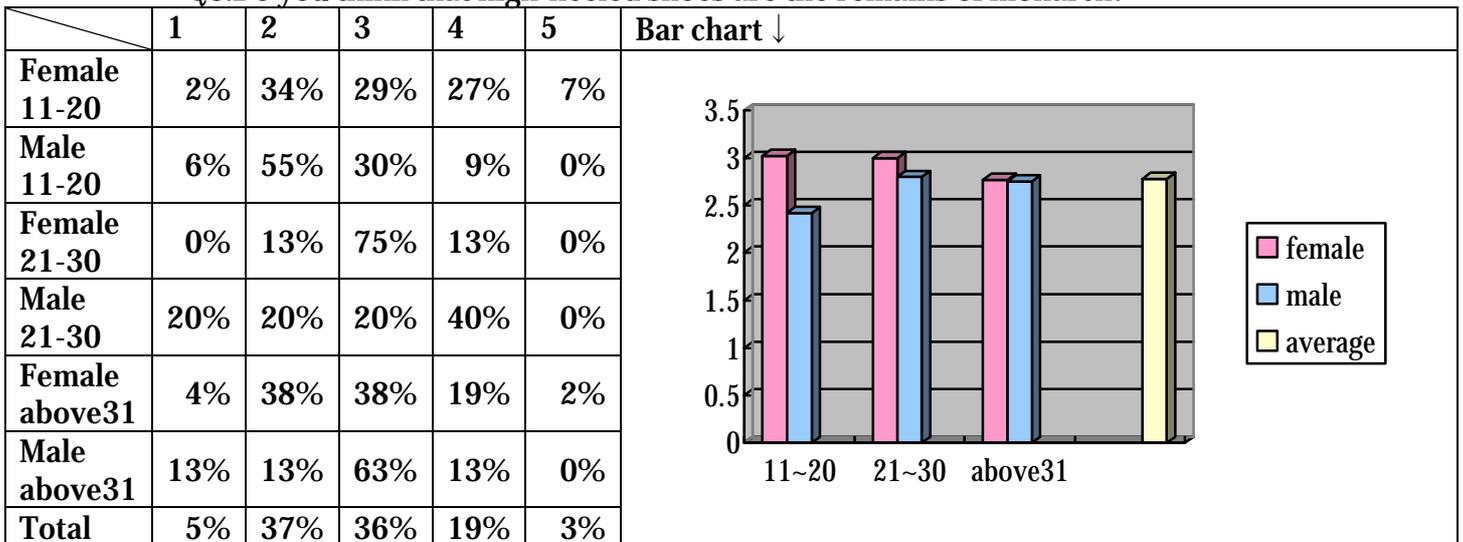
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to leave, putting off her red high-heeled shoes, and then putting on a pair of sneakers.

We infer that what has shown by the chart can be result from two factors. On one hand, with punctilious personality, Asians, most of who probably do not get used to expressing their own opinions may find it embarrassing especially when it comes to answering this controversial issue. Since it is daunting for them, their answers might be far from agree either consciously or unconsciously. On the other hand, although the directors would not present this kind of scene without any association of realistic life, they might exaggerate the plot of the series as well as the movies with the intention of spicing them up. Hence, the audiences who are realistic could hardly be affected.

c. Debate3: The object is the remains of monarch

Q3. Do you think that high-heeled shoes are the remains of monarch?



The chart shows that the opinion from male to female do not have apparent difference. That means the sex distinction do not affect the way people see high-heeled shoes. In this chart, the percentage of answer 2 are close to that of answer 3 and beyond 2.5. About that, we have some inferences: First, maybe people in 21st century do not really understand what the feudal society is and how the life of women under male-dominated world like. Second, high-heeled shoes are the fashion nowadays, there are no longer the fetters for women. Women wear high-heeled shoes voluntarily now.

III. Conclusion

As we dig deeper and deeper to the mystery behind those fascinating heels, things get more intriguing than ever. We are still fond of the heels and willing to learn more, but the more we explore, the more we realize how humble we are. As Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, once ended with his significantly impressive speech at Stanford University, “Stay hungry, stay foolish.” Every time we seem to untie one mystery, another emerges. For example, while exploring the mystery of the sexual representation, we seem to disclose the answer to why high-heeled shoes take on sexual charm. But it turns out that the sexual charm is more than just man’s dominant force. In women’s heart exists the underlying force—to attract man by wearing high-heeled shoes.

A. Reflections

Through doing this mini-dissertation, we have learned to search information, design the questionnaire and analyze the data. Moreover, we will take this as an incentive of exploring the academic circle but a philosophy of life.

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