Chinese Foot Binding

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Throughout history in all cultures a common ultimate goal is to achieve beauty. Just as all people look different, all people have a different outlook on the question, what is beautiful? For some time in the nineteenth century, in America a definition of beauty included corsets, making women's waists as small as possible. Over time beauty has resulted in a lot of pain and in this instance, resulted in broken ribs and damaged internal organs. Body piercing and tattoos fall under the same category although the consequences are not as severe. Great pain has been suffered for centuries for women to achieve perceived beauty. Probably the most detrimental act was one that approximately one billion women in China have preformed for nearly one thousand years. This act, foot binding, was an attempt to stop the growth of the feet. Foot binding is a bizarre and terrible custom, yet it is hard to understand exactly what foot binding was like with the modern outlook we have today. The reason for women binding their feet went deeper than fashion and reflected the role of women in Chinese society. It was necessary then in China for a woman to have bound feet in order to achieve a good life.

The exact way foot binding started is not fully known. Several legends have been passed down on how foot binding originally started. The most common legend is about the Chinese prince Li Yu in the Sung dynasty (AD 960-1280) (Nadine 2). The prince's concubine, Yao Niang walked so gracefully it appeared as if she was "skimming over the top of golden lilies" (Chinese Foot Binding 2). To follow that, the "lily footed" woman became a model for China. A variation of this legend was that Yao Niang was ordered to bind her feet in the shape of half moons (Nadine 2). She was to do this so that she could perform an early variation of ballet, also called toe dancing for the royal court. This legend is probably the least likely to be true, because women with bound feet could hardly walk, let alone dance. The most likely variation of this particular story is that Yao Niang danced on a platform shaped like a lotus, as well as toe-danced within a six-foot high golden lotus flower (Jackson 28). Many women began to perform this artistic dancing style, and the dance looked best with bound feet. There are so many variations that it is impossible to know which one is true. A whole other legend is about the last Empress of the Shang dynasty. This Empress had a clubbed foot and did not want to be known as having this condition. She asked her husband to make binding feet mandatory for all girls (Chinese Foot Binding 2). By doing so, her deformed foot could now be considered beautiful. The origin of foot binding may not be clear; however the powerful affects foot binding left are apparent.

Once foot binding began, it spread quickly from the north, where it begun, to all parts in China. In the beginning, the custom was practiced only by court dancers, followed by all the women in the court. In 1273, the Mongols took over the Sung dynasty and started the Yuan dynasty. The Mongols supported foot binding for all the women in China (Chinese Girl 2). They supported mainly because it made the women less likely to be able to succeed (Jackson 19). In the mid-1300s, the Ming dynasty took the place of the Yuan dynasty. Foot binding continued to spread from the royalty, to the wealthy (Levy 26). Eventually, all classes of people had their feet bound. Poor people did so in hopes of improving their social status (Cummings 2).

The process of foot binding started for the young girls anywhere from the age of four to six. It was done so early in her life so that the arch did not have much 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 necessary. Also, she was seen as an object to the men, to be observed and look pretty, therefore appealing to men mattered more to the girls than their health. The girl's life went on without having much control over it (Levy 42-46).

Foot binding sounds so terrible but it did not stay popular forever. In the mid-1600s the Manchus took over the Yuan dynasty to create the Qing Empire. The Manchus were strongly against foot binding. The Qing Empire began to charge people for having daughters with bound feet and prohibiting it in areas they could control. The practiced nevertheless continued. It had become so much part of the Chinese culture and family traditions, that the government could not stop it. The Chinese continued to see foot binding as a beautiful act although it was illegal (Jackson 48).

The nationalist revolution sparked the flame that was to destroy foot binding for good. The practice slowed down considerably from there. In 1911 after the revolution of Sun Yat-Sen, foot binding officially ended aside from a handful of women living in the countryside (Chinese Girl 2).

Foot binding was more than a fashion statement, it was a way of life for about one billion women as well as the men around them. It took much more than laws and protests to bring foot binding to an end. Foot binding had higher consequences, greater appeal, and is more desirable than any other practice
women implemented to be beautiful in history. It cannot be seen as a simple fashion statement. It was part of the society, the roots being buried under many parts of Chinese culture. It had roots in making a woman more desirable, marriageability, and higher social status. Foot binding not only crippled the women who went through the process but as well as crippled women in China for centuries. Being crippled by foot binding, they had such a little role in the government. It was a custom that started out to define beauty but ended up defining the way the society was.
Figure 3. Lady on the left has natural feet, the lady on the right displays one bound foot with bindings on and the other with bindings removed. Beverly Jackson, Splendid Slippers (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1997), 147.

Figure 4. Naked bound feet – Howard S. Levy, Lotus Lovers, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992), 259.

Figure 2. Bound feet showing binding cloth and embroidered shoes – Beverly Jackson, Splendid Slippers (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1997), 39.