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 damaging 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. There are so many legends that it is impossible to know which one is true. For example, one 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 on Chinese are obvious.

Once foot binding began, it spread quickly from the north, where it began, to all parts of China. In the beginning, the custom was practiced only by court dancers, followed by all the women in the court. In 1273, the Mongols defeated the Song Dynasty and started their own dynasty in China, known as the Yuan dynasty. The Mongols supported foot binding for all women in China (Chinese Girl 2). They supported it mainly because it made the women less likely to be able to take power (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 gentry (Levy 26). Eventually, all classes of women had their feet bound. Peasants did so in the hopes of improving their social status (Cummings 2).

The process of foot binding started for 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, usually started the process late in the fall or winter, so that 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 so as not to allow 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) which 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 damaging 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 fold 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 to 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).

Foot 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 them 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 orders and have her feet bound. She was uneducated and considered foot binding necessary. Also, she was seen as an object to men, to be observed and to "look pretty" and appealing to men, which mattered more to Chinese women than their health. After her feet were bound, a girl's life went on without her having much control over it (Levy 42-46).
Foot binding sounds 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 fine 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 was more desirable than any other practice women have endured to be beautiful in history.

It cannot be seen as a simple fashion statement. It was a fundamental part of Chinese society, the roots being buried under many parts of Chinese culture. It had roots in making a woman more desirable, marriageable, and it also offered her and her family a higher social status. Foot binding not only crippled the women who went through the process but it also crippled women’s access to power in China for centuries. Due to the crippling effects of foot binding, Chinese women would have very little influence in the Chinese government until the practice was phased out of existence in the early 20th century.