

Foot binding. These two words bring up images of twisted deformed feet, pain and torture. It seems that everyone has heard of foot binding. The words are self-explanatory. However, what do we really know about it? What was actually done? Why was it done and how could such a thing have been tolerated? When and where did this take place and is this custom still practiced today? These are some of the questions that I had and in the following pages I will attempt to answer these questions and give us a better understanding of this bizarre custom.

So exactly what is foot binding? In a nutshell it was an attempt to stop the growth of the feet. It usually began somewhere between the ages of four and seven. Possibly even later if the family was poor and needed their daughter to do work around the house or farm. A bandage, ten feet long and two inches wide was wrapped tightly around the foot, forcing the four small toes under the sole of the foot. This made the feet narrower but at the same time it made the feet shorter because it also forced the big toe and the heel closer together by bowing the arch of the foot. The bandage was tightened each day and the girl was put into progressively smaller and smaller sized shoes. The entire process usually took about two years at the end of which the feet were essentially dead and utterly useless. Binding the feet was the easy part, being bent so out of shape the feet required lots of care. The feet had to be washed and manicured on a daily basis. If they weren't manicured properly the toe nails could cut into the instep and infection could set in. If the bindings were too tight they could cut off circulation which could lead to gangrene and blood poisoning. The feet had to be massaged and given hot and cold compresses to help relieve the pain and help improve circulation. If all this isn't bad enough, corns would develop on the toes that were bent under and would have to be cut off with a knife. But wait! It gets worse! With the lack of circulation flesh would rot and fall off and sometimes the toes would ooze pus. The pain was said to have been excruciating especially if this process was begun at a later age. The ideal foot would fit into a shoe only three to four inches long. A Chinese saying says, "Every pair of small feet costs a bath (kang) of tears". It is difficult to imagine the suffering that these women had to endure. Here is an account from a woman that went through this ordeal:

"When I was seven my mother....washed and placed alum on my feet and cut my toenails. She then bent my toes toward the plantar with a binding cloth ten feet long and two inches wide doing the right foot first and then the left. She...ordered me to walk but when I did the pain proved unbearable, that night...my feet felt on fire and I couldn't sleep; mother struck me for crying. On the following days I tried to hide but was forced to walk on my feet...after several months all toes but the big one were pressed against the inner surface...mother would remove the bindings and wipe the blood and puss which dripped from my feet. She told me that only with removal of the flesh could my feet become slender...every two weeks I changed to new shoes. Each new pair was one to two tenths of an inch smaller than the previous one....In summer my feet smelled offensively because of puss and blood; in winter my feet felt cold because of lack of circulation...four of the toes were curled in like so many dead caterpillars...it took two years to achieve the three inch model...my shanks were thin, my feet became humped, ugly and odoriferous. "

Foot binding began late in the Tang Dynasty (618-906) and it gradually spread through the upper class during the Song Dynasty (960-1297). During the Ming period (1368-1644) and the Ching Dynasty (1644-1911) the custom of foot binding spread through the overwhelming majority of the Chinese population until it was finally outlawed in the 1911 Revolution of Sun Yat-Sen. In fact, the only peoples to avoid this custom were the Manchu conquerors. The Hakka Chinese migrant groups in south China and the mean people, the lowest class of people in China who were below the social norms. The practice of foot binding lasted for approximately one thousand years. During this time, approximately one billion women had their feet bound.

There are several legends that endeavor to account for the inception of this custom, one is that the concubine of a Chinese prince named Yao Niang walked so gracefully that it seemed as if she "skimmed over the top of golden lilies. " At that time the "lily footed woman" or a woman with bound feet became the model in China. A second legend says that this concubine, Yao Niang, was ordered to bind her feet so that her feet would look like new moons. A third legend says that women bound their feet out of sympathy for an Empress with club feet. Another account is that foot binding was made stylish by court dancers. However this seems somewhat unlikely because women with bound feet had a hard time walking let alone dancing. The origin of foot binding may not be clear, however the results or after affects are apparent. Foot binding stopped concubines and wives of the rich from straying or running away from beatings. Confucian teachings at this time stressed the superior status of men over women as a basic element of social order and this was certainly an effective method of restraint.

Foot binding began as a luxury among the rich; it made the women more dependant on others and less useful around the house. This was especially hard on the poor who needed help around the house or farm. It soon became a prerequisite for marriage. It was even a just reason for a man to call off marriage if he found out that the woman that had been arranged for him to marry did not have bound feet. It came that foot binding was the only right thing to do for a daughter, Many lower class families who really could not afford to bind their daughters feet, due to the loss of labor she would have contributed to the family, did so anyway in hopes that she would be able to "marry up" into the middle class. It is sad because there are very few accounts of women who were successful. These women would end up suffering trying to work in the fields tottering on their bound feet. A mother was obligated to bind her daughters feet or she almost certainly would never get married. The bound foot woman had to walk with all of her weight on her heels and tottered as she walked. This was considered very charming, since a bound foot woman was largely restricted to her home, bound feet became a symbol of chastity. The thinking was that the bound foot, once it was formed, could not be unlocked like a chastity belt.

In 1895, the first anti-foot binding society was formed in Shanghai. Soon after branches of the anti-foot binding society began to form in other major cities and across the country. The main point of the anti-foot binding society was that the pain a woman went through in the foot binding process and through her life was an obstacle to her education. Society members would not bind their daughters feet and would register with the society the names and ages of all their children. This way all registered members were able to find mates for their children. Registered members were not allowed to let their children marry women with bound feet. They were allowed to marry nonmembers but only if they did not have bound feet. Finally in 1911 with the revolution of sun Yat-Sen foot binding was officially outlawed. Thus, the end of foot binding was at hand.

In conclusion, we do not know exactly how the custom of foot binding began. We do know that it is remarkable that it began at all and that it lasted as long as it did, about one thousand years. The fact that this custom began is curious but even more curious is the fact that it permeated so deeply into all social and economic classes of Chinese society. The effect that foot binding had on women is plain to see. Women became more dependant on others. They were not able to journey far on their own and thus were more controllable. This goes hand in hand with the Neo-Confucian teachings of the time which preached a hierarchical social order starting in the family with women being subservient to their husbands. However, let's not condemn this practice for we cannot judge it in respect to our own culture. To fully understand a practice such as foot binding we have to practice cultural relativism. That is we must suspend our own personal judgment and attempt to understand this custom in China's own cultural terms. About a generation or two ago in America it was also fashionable for women to have small feet. Their feet would not be bound but it wasn't uncommon for a woman to buy a pair of shoes one or two sizes down to make her feet appear smaller. This could not have been a pain free experience either. In addition, let us not forget those spine-deforming corsets that were fashionable for so many years in Europe and America. Now a days with Tattoos and body piercing ever so popular in America who are we to judge or say what is the norm. The extent to which these women went to in order to have the ideal image may seem unbelievable to us today, but what will people one thousand years from now think about our cultures breast implants, lipo-suction and nose jobs?....Barbaric?.....Cultural relativity. :)

#### Bibliography

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