

Food binding essay sample



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Introduction

In China, foot binding was a tradition that was applied on young females, which started in the 10th century and ended in the early 20th century. The feet of young girls who are usually at the age of six were wrapped in tight bandages so that they could not develop normally. The feet would then break and become highly deformed and would not grow past 4 to 6 inches. As girls reached adulthood, their feet would still be small and dysfunctional as well as be prone to paralysis, muscular atrophy, and infection. The practice of foot binding was common only in the wealthiest parts of China, specifically in the areas of Northern China. During the late Qing Dynasty, foot binding had become popular and common among people of all social classes. However, it did not include the poorest people, who needed able-bodied women to help work in the fields. Today, the practice of foot binding has been a prominent cause of disability among some elderly Chinese women.

The Process of Foot Binding

As early as the age of three, a Chinese girl's feet would be bound where four toes on each foot would break within a year. The first toe or the big toe would be the only one remaining to be intact. The arch had to be well-developed to form the perfect "lotus foot." [1] As such, some women would bind their girls' feet during a later age. The ideal "lotus foot" was usually three inches and referred to as gold lotuses. Silver lotuses, on the other hand, were no longer than ten centimeters. Bound feet would normally bend, thus, becoming hollowed out. This idea was described as "lotus

hooks.”[2] Because of the binding process, phalanges were prone to fracture easily.[3] More so, bound feet had caused intense pain and unsteady fashion of walking commonly referred to as “ lotus gait.”

As mentioned earlier, the process of foot binding starts for young girls ranging from ages three to seven. Foot binding was done so early in a girl’s life that the arch did not have much chance to develop. The mother was the one to bind the feet of her daughter. Foot binding had usually occurred during fall or winter in order for the foot to be numb as well as to lessen the pain. Initially, the feet of the daughter would be immersed in warm water or animal blood and herbs.[4] The special potion, which was used for this caused any dead flesh to fall off.[5] The daughter would have to cut her toe nails as short as can be so as not to allow them to grow into the foot. After receiving a foot massage, the daughter’s four smallest toes on each foot were broken.[6] However, this was not considered as the worst of pain a girl can experience in the practice of foot binding. The mother had to soak cotton or silk bandages in the same liquid the daughter’s feet were immersed. The bandages were wrapped around the smallest toes and pulled tightly to the heel. These bandages were ten feet long and two inches wide. The binding was removed and rebound every two days. This part of the process of foot binding lasts for two years. By the time the feet of the daughter were three to four inches long, the ritual is continued for at least ten more years.[7]

Sociology of Foot Binding

The earliest recorded opponent of foot binding was a writer from the Song Dynasty known as Ch'e Jo-shui. In the 17th century, the Manchus who had conquered China tried to abolish the practice of foot binding; however, the Manchus had failed. Manchu women were prohibited from binding their feet or even the feet of their daughters. Instead of binding their feet, Manchu women had worn “flower bowl” shoes, which presented them with the illusion of having tiny feet.[8] Foot binding had become a significant distinction between the Manchu and Han.

Foot binding had been applied in wealthy families in China. Later, every social class except the poor had also practiced foot binding. In the beginning, the practice of foot binding was only applied to court dancers, and was followed by all women in the court. The Mongols took over the Sung dynasty in 1273 and started the Yuan dynasty. The Mongols had supported the practice of foot binding for all the women in China.[9] The Mongols had supported the practice primarily to make women less likely to be able to succeed.[10] Foot binding had continued to spread from the royalty to the wealthy.[11] Poor people had done so in hopes of improving their social class.[12]

In this view, the dominant people and institutions of China had overwhelmed the weaker groups marking the concept of one of the major theories in Sociology, which is the conflict theory. Conflict theory claims that conflict pervades all of society, which includes the family, the economy, education, and polity. In relation to foot binding, the wealthiest people, who were dominant, had been influential in spreading the practice, thus, gaining power over the weaker groups, having no choice but to follow the practice.

Effects of the Practice of Foot Binding (Positive and Negative)

Foot binding was considered passionately erotic. During the Qing Dynasty, sex manuals had listed at least 48 different methods of playing with a woman's bound feet. Some men even had preference of not seeing a woman's bound feet, which were concealed within tiny "lotus shoes." Feng Xun had stated, "If you remove the shoes and bindings, the aesthetic feeling will be destroyed forever." Men had found the erotic effect of bound feet as a function of the lotus gait, swaying walk of a woman, and her tiny steps. Men were sexually induced in a woman's bound feet, which were concealed from their eyes. Foot binding became a symbol of power and wealth for men as a woman could not work with bound feet.[13]

The process of foot binding was very painful as the woman's feet were rebound with bandages that were pulled tighter. However, apart from the pain of the process, many other effects of foot binding should have been considered long before since most of these effects were detrimental to a woman's health. The pain of the bound feet never stopped. The most usual effect was infection.[14] There were many methods a woman could get infection through foot binding. One was the ball of the foot would fold directly into the heel. Next was that the toenails had continued to grow and therefore curled into the skin. This led to the rotting of the flesh and sometimes the rotting of the toe as well. More so, the feet being dead would imply that a woman had carried with her a terrible smell everywhere she went.[15] Diseases had followed infections and death could even result from the process of foot binding.[16]

Some women had made it through their youth without having to experience any medical or health problems caused by foot binding. However, the time when majority of women had health problems caused by foot binding was in their later years. Women who had their feet bound during their youth were more likely to fall, less able to rise from a sitting position, and less able to squat in their older years. The combination of the lower hip bone density and the fact that women were more likely to fall, put women with bound feet at an extremely high risk of hip fractures.[17] Although foot binding had presented outer beauty, it had effects that were immensely severe.

There were many reasons why mothers during the popularity and fashion of foot binding at the time of its inception, had made their decision to bind their feet and their daughter's as well. In China, men in that period would not want to marry a woman who did not have bound feet. The mother of a man was always responsible for ensuring that the woman her son was to marry had bound feet. If the mother of the man had lifted up the dress of the woman and discovered that she had "clown feet," the mother would not allow her son to see or speak to that woman again. As the mother of the man that she loved had found out that she does not have bound feet, the woman could be so embarrassed for the rest of her life.[18] Foot binding had also divided men and women. The practice had also upheld old Chinese beliefs. Foot binding had kept women weak, dominated by men and gave them no power. As a woman bound her feet, men could most likely dominate her more easily without the worry of the woman taking his power. The process of foot binding had taken place in the early stage of a woman's life; a young girl was not given the choice but to follow the order of her

family, what was told of her and had her feet bound. Thus, being uneducated, a woman with bound feet was viewed as an object to the men, to be seen and look pretty, therefore, appealing to men was what mattered more to the woman than her health. Foot binding was considered necessary during its era. A life of a woman went on without having much control over it.[19]

Foot Finding No More

Although foot binding was a terrible thing, it did not stay as popular for a long time. During the mid-1600s, the Manchus had taken over the Yuan dynasty in order to establish the Qing Empire. The Manchus were strongly against foot binding. The Qing Empire had started to charge people who had daughters with bound feet. Later on, the Qing Empire had also prohibited the practice of foot binding in areas under their control. The practice of foot binding had nevertheless pursued. Foot binding had become very much a part of the Chinese culture and traditions in families. Even the government had no way to stop the practice. The Chinese had continued to practice foot binding as a beautiful act in spite of it being illegal.[20]

The nationalist revolution was the one that initiated the eradication of the practice of foot binding for good. In 1895, the first society committed against foot binding was established in Shanghai. It was followed with branches of anti-foot binding societies forming in other major areas of China. The objective of these societies was to focus on the pain of a woman who went through the process of foot binding and through her life, a hindrance to her education. Members of the society had not bind the feet of

their daughters and registered the names and ages of all their children with the society. In this way, all members who were registered were able to find mates for their children. Registered members were not permitted to let their children marry women with bound feet. They were only allowed to marry non-members only if they did not have bound feet.

The practice had slowed down significantly from there. In 1911, the practice of foot binding had officially ended after the revolution of Sun Yat-Sen, aside from a number of women living in the countryside. (Chinese Girl 2) One of the objectives of the Taiping Rebellion was to establish gender equality through ending foot binding. However, the practice had continued into the 20th century as a combination of Chinese, Western missionaries had called for reform, and a true anti-foot binding movement was established.

Educated Chinese had begun to understand that foot binding had made them appear barbaric to other societies and countries. More so, social Darwinists had regarded foot binding as weakening the nation for enfeebled women inevitably produced weaker sons. Feminists had also fought against foot binding due to the fact that the practice had made women suffer.

In 1911, the new Republic of China government had banned foot binding. Women were told to unwrap their bound feet or else they will be killed. Some feet of women had grown $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch after the unwrapping. On the other hand, some women found the new growth process extremely painful emotionally and culturally devastating. Societies had developed in order to support the eradication of foot binding through contractual agreements between families that promised their infant son in marriage to an infant

daughter who would not have to go through the practice of foot binding. In 1949, as the Communists had ruled over the nation, they had maintained the strict prohibition on foot binding, which is still applicable to these days.

Conclusion

Foot binding was considered more than just a fashion statement during its era. It was a way of life for about one billion women as well as men surrounding them. Foot binding had finally ended but it had taken more than laws, rules, and protests to finally put the practice to rest. The practice of foot binding had increased consequences other than any practice that women had applied for the purpose of beautification in history. Foot binding had greater appeal and considered more desirable as compared to other methods of beautifying women. However, it cannot be simply viewed as a simple fashion statement. The practice was a significant part of the society where the roots were buried under many areas of the Chinese culture. Foot binding had its roots in making a woman more likable, inclined to marriage, and higher social status.

The practice of foot binding had not only disabled the women who went through its painful process. It also had disabled the women in China for centuries. Women in China had never given a significant role in the government as they were disabled by the practice of foot binding. Foot binding was a practice that had been conceptualized and begun for the improvement of status and beauty; however, the practice had ended up defining the way the society was. Foot binding is rarely practiced in these times. Many people would treat the behavior as child abuse and punish it as

soon as possible. Foot binding has been commonly viewed by anthropologists and sociologists as a violation to human rights as well as an example of extreme deformity. Foot binding can therefore be seen as beauty where extreme human suffering can be inflicted in the pursuit of a standard of beauty.

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