

Foot binding



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For what reasons and results did mothers bind their daughter's feet in China? History 201 Historical Investigation Word Count: 2, 000 Julie Diep April 1, 2012 A. Introduction In contrast to a physically disabled child's question of "Why me?" left unanswered, the traditional Chinese had a cruel yet straight forward answer of "Because your childhood is over and it is time to grow into a woman." Which led to the merciless act of willingly breaking and forcefully binding a girl's foot at a ripe young age to the length of three inches, no longer than the length of a deck of cards.

Women who were seen inferior to men, were treated as objects exchanged in marriage for business or to tie two families together. They were expected to follow society's rules, foot binding being one of these rules to increase the value of a female. During the 19th century, "...40-50% of Chinese women had bound feet; for upper class women, the figure was almost 100%..." (William Rossi). The Chinese culture encouraged this foot binding process as it was highly desired from ancient China to the 20th century until the establishment of the new Chinese Republic officially banning the process, ceasing its use.

Mothers considered and inflicted the painful process of foot binding upon their daughters for reasons of marriage, status, and beauty with positive results or death from infection and a life-long physical disability. B. Summary Of The Evidence * The practices of foot binding were described as "San tsun gin lian," "Golden Lotus" or "Lily". By the 19th century, 40-50% of Chinese women had bound feet and for upper class women, the figure was almost 100%. * According to historical account, roots of foot binding lie in China in

the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 A. D.), during the rule of Emperor Li Yu in China.

The ruler's favorite concubine Yao-Niang performed a dance on the tips of her toes atop a golden lotus pedestal. * Another origin is of an Empress who had club-like feet, which became a desirable fashion. * Criteria for a well-bounded foot is three inches in length, a three inch deep clef between the heel and sole and that the appearance of the bounded foot is seen as a dainty extension of the leg. * The elder village women or mother was responsible for initiating and monitoring the binding process. * Foot binding was begun between the ages of two to five before the arch of the foot had a chance to develop fully. Toenails were cut back to prevent in-growth and infection. * Each foot would be soaked in a warm mixture of herbs and animal blood; this was intended aid the process by softening the tissue and bones of the foot to allow manipulation. * All the toes on the foot except for the big toe are broken and folded under the sole. * The broken toes were held tightly against the sole of the foot while the foot was then drawn down straight with the leg and the arch forcibly broken. * The foot was then bound in place with a 10'x2" silk or cotton bandage. The bandages were repeatedly wound, starting at the inside of the foot at the instep, then carried over the toes, under the foot, and round the heel, the freshly broken toes being pressed tightly into the sole of the foot. At each pass around the foot, the binding cloth was tightened, pulling the ball of the foot and the heel ever close together, causing the broken foot to fold at the arch, and pressing the toes underneath. * Each time the feet were unbound, they were washed, the toes carefully checked for injury, and the nails carefully and meticulously

trimmed. Immediately after this pedicure, the girl's broken toes were folded back under and the feet were rebound. * Process took approximately two years. * Toenails would often in-grow, becoming infected and causing injuries to the toes. * The tightness of the binding meant that the circulation in the feet was faulty, and the circulation to the toes was almost cut off. * As the girl grew older, the bones would begin to heal, although even after the foot bones had healed they were prone to re-breaking. * Septicemia and gangrene resulted from the bacteria. A 1997 study by researchers at the University of California at San Francisco found that women ages 80 and older with bound feet were more likely to have fallen in the previous year and to need assistance in rising from a sitting position. They also had lower bone density in the hip and spine than women with normal feet, increasing their risk of debilitating fractures. * Foot binding was first practiced among the elite and only in the wealthiest parts of China, which suggests that binding the feet of well-born girls represented their freedom from manual labor and wealth. In politics, a woman was kept from interfering if she was immobile, and a “kept” woman reflected a powerful man. * Mothers would endure binding their daughters’ feet as an investment in the future. The more attractive she could make her daughter, the better marriage prospects she had. * A bound foot signified that a woman had achieved womanhood, and served as a mark of her gendered identity. * Small bounded feet were seen as elegant, dainty, beautiful, erotic and a prerequisite for finding a husband. * Foot binding was eventually banned in the 20th century with the rise of the new Republic of China through educational campaigns. C. Analysis

From the birth of a baby girl, the status of the family determined whether her feet would be bounded or left untouched. If the family was wealthy and was of elite status, the girl's feet would be bounded. It represented the freedom the girl had from manual labor, as she would not be able to walk or work in her bounded state, which also maintained family honor and reputation. Bounded feet set the boundary between higher and lower class. The people of lower class needed everyone in the family to work on the farm and could not afford the luxury to tend to aesthetics or fashion, as bounded feet were seen as dainty, elegant and attractive.

The “Golden Lily” or bounded feet were a desirable fashion among women and signified the transformation of a girl into a woman. The process marked the end of her childhood and the beginning of womanhood, which was important to one's identity. By not being able to bind their daughter's feet, it was detrimental to her prospects of marrying into the higher class and raising her social status or having a more prestigious marriage. Zhou Guizhen, survivor of foot binding, 86 years old, states, "At that time everybody had bound feet. If you didn't, you'd only be able to marry a tribesman from an ethnic minority. The higher class glorified this painful process as aesthetically pleasing and as an investment in the girl's future marriage. In China pre 19th century, marriage was a crucial part of a woman's entire life. Woman had the purpose of being a wife and reproducing children. Without marriage, there would be no husband to rely on, children to tend her grave and no prosperity to her family. If a woman did not marry it equated to a life with no meaning. In marriage, wealth, status and physical

appearance were crucial. Marriage was a bond between two households or businesses.

Thus the mother would increase the value of her daughter by binding her feet to display the wealth, status of the family and the attractiveness of the daughter's physical appearance. Bounded feet increased marriage prospects and the likeliness for her to marry into another wealthy family, which would benefit her own family in return. They were seen as erotic and as a form of chastity, being the symbol of submission to the husband. An immobile wife would not be able to leave the house and is wholly dependent upon the husband, thus objectifying the woman and reflecting a more dominant man.

Bounded feet were only seen as attractive when concealed in the lotus shoes. Some men preferred to never see the bounded feet, so that they were concealed in their shoes as a beautiful mystery. " If you remove the shoes and bindings, the aesthetic feeling will be destroyed forever. " (Feng Xun). It was understood that the erotic fantasy of bounded feet did not equate to the unpleasant physical reality, which was therefore to be kept hidden. To an extent, foot binding was not considered a form of body mutilation but as a component of female attire or adornment.

If done correctly the girl would survive the process, only to live with the physical disability and further risks of medical problems. During the process, despite the meticulous care of trimming the toenails, they would often ingrow causing infections in the toes and feet. The tightness of the bindings would decrease blood circulation to the feet ceasing injuries to heal and gradually worsen to infection or rotting flesh. The girl would be susceptible to infections such as septicemia and gangrene due to the increase of bacteria.

The practice of foot binding was not only physically crippling, but it also produced physiological implications.

The abdomen would swell, the lumbar vertebra would curve forward and the back would be inflicted with increased muscle stress. This forced the woman to put all her weight on her lower body and pelvis. One's whole body was deformed as a result from foot binding. Simple acts such as squatting and bending were difficult. Large corns and calluses would appear on the bounded feet and had to be cut off. Instead of walking in a straight line, the woman would have to walk side to side in a swaying motion. As the years passed, the bounded foot would continue growing, but instead of growing longer the foot would grow crooked.

This would cause further injuries and deformities to the foot. The toes would curl deeper inwards causing potential infections, which inevitably followed with diseases. According to a 1997 study by researchers in the University of California found that women ages 80 and over with bound feet had lower bone density in the hip and spine than a woman with normal feet, suggesting that the bones were prone to re-breaking and fractures. Opposition to the foot binding first began in China during the Qing period (1644 – 1911) with Manchu rule.

When foreign missionaries began to gain footholds in China after the Opium war and the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, the new Nationalist government of the Republic of China banned foot binding. The Lotus feet were no longer a symbol of beauty but a symbol of oppression and were seen as a barbaric practice of the old China. Through modern education campaigns, it was explained that the rest of the world did

not bind women's feet and that China was seen as savage, making the nation subject to international ridicule. The advantages of natural unbound feet over bound feet were encouraged.

Natural feet societies were formed whose members pledged not to bind their daughter's feet or allow their sons to marry women with bound feet. These tactics succeeded in eradicating the use of a practice, which has survived for thousands of years. D. Conclusion According to an old saying in China, "There are a thousand buckets of tears for one who binds her feet." These woman's tiny feet sealed their tragic fate all for marriage prospects, status and beauty, ingredients for a good life of a woman in pre-20th China. Only to live with a self inflicted physical disability prone to infections, diseases and medical injuries.

With the rise of the 20th century and the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the era of foot binding had been abandoned leaving only fragments of the past that present day society view as a horrific mutilation of the human body. E. Bibliography Dehoff, Elizabeth. "Foot Binding", Ask, http://shoes.about.com/od/footwear/qt/foot_binding.htm Farlander. "Chinese Foot Binding", h2g2, <http://h2g2.com/dna/h2g2/A11558722> Holman, Jeanine. "Foot Binding", 2010, <http://www.josephrupp.com/history.html> Mao, J. "Foot Binding: Beauty And Torture", The Internet Journal of Biological Anthropology. 008 Volume 1 Number 2 Myfanawy, Evans. "The Painful Tradition of Foot Binding in China", Pattya Daily News, September 16, 2010, <http://www.pattayadailynews.com/en/2010/09/16/the-painful-tradition-of-foot-binding-in-china/> Wikipedia contributors, "Foot binding", Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=https://assignbuster.com/foot-binding/>

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