

Portrayal of footbinding in snow flower and the secret fan



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In the 19th century China, the custom known as “ footbinding” was prevalent; it was traditional that young girls had their feet bound as early as age three and the goal was to achieve a pair of perfectly bound feet, which made a girl more marriageable, since it showed her discipline, obedience to the natal family and the ability to endure pain. However, not every girl survived this procedure, many of them died of an infection. In some respects, there are correlations between known historical facts and textual evidence of footbinding in the novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, where the main character Lily tells us her life story and guides us through the process of her feet being bound.

A custom called footbinding was a practice used on young girls, where the four small toes were twisted underneath the foot’s sole until the bones in them were broken. The arch of the foot was broken as well and pushed as close to the heel as possible. The feet were being bound at least for two years straight in order to prevent them from growing. (Wilson 2013, 18) Still, there is not a lot of knowledge as to how the footbinding began, although as early as late Han Dynasty (847-850) there are textual references where the likeness of the small feet can be seen. There are stories about an empress in the Shang Dynasty who was born with a club foot and since she did not want her feet to be out of place, she asked emperor to order court ladies to bind their feet, so she would not be the only one with the deformation. Another legend claims that the empress was a fox and she ordered that every woman must have her feet bound, so that nobody could tell the difference between her paws and human feet. The last legend says footbinding originated from a dancer, although later when the practice became more popular and was

exaggerated, it was impossible to walk normally, let alone dance. At the time of urbanization footbinding emerged in the early Sung Dynasty (960-1279). The routine flowed from imperial palace to court, then to upper, middle and lower class. The higher that the social status of the woman was, the bigger was the desire for her to have small feet. Footbinding also became associated with marriage; girls with smaller feet were more marriageable than those with bigger ones. (Wilson 2013, 18) By the late twelfth century footbinding was widely spread throughout the whole country. The practice became more popular and accepted, it had also increased in its severity. A drop of practice happened in the seventeenth century, as the Qing Dynasty took control. They forbade the tradition of footbinding and threatened with death penalties for anyone who would not unbind their feet. However, the ban was three years later revoked by the Ministry of Rites who were saying that they should not forbid such an old and respected tradition. In 1835 it was measured that footbinding affected 50-80% of women, with an exception of women amongst the lower classes, as they worked in agriculture or manufacturing and would not have been able to do so with their feet being bound (Mackie 1996, 1001). The first example taken from the novel is showing us exactly what the life of women amongst the lower classes was like.

Their bones are not broken, their bindings are always loose, and, once married, their feet are set free again so they can work in the fields alongside their husbands. The poorest girls don't have their feet bound at all. We all know how they end up. They are either sold as servants or they become "little daughters-in-law" – big-footed girls from unfortunate families who are

given to other families to raise until they are old enough to bear children.

(See 2005, 17)

The first anti-footbinding society (the Anti-Foot Binding Society) was started in 1895 by missionaries, who did not want to bind their daughter's feet, neither did they want their son to marry a girl with such. Gradually the society acquired 300, 000 members with the same beliefs. After the Chinese Revolution (1911) footbinding was banned in 1912, but despite the ban it still continued being a practice in isolated regions.

Although anti-footbinding activities began in the late nineteenth century, the practice lingered in rural areas well into the twentieth. (See 2005, 256)

It is predicted that over the period of time during the years 950-1949, over two billion women had their feet bound (Mao 2007, 1).

The goal of footbinding was to achieve the perfect foot which would not exceed 3-4 inches. Mao (2007, 1) believes that the only way for a girl to climb up the social ladder was through having tiny feet; they were the one thing that mattered which can also be seen in the example below.

The girl is indeed very lovely, but golden lilies are far more important in life than a pretty face. A lovely face is a gift from Heaven, but tiny feet can improve social standing. (See 2005, 21)

The process began when a girl was very young, the explanation being that the arch of the foot was not yet fully developed and would be more easily moulded into a golden lotus shape (which was the goal) than matured bone, the same goes for small toes.

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Footbinding was performed in late fall or winter when due to the cold weather the foot would be naturally numb and the pain would not be as severe. It was carried out by the girl's experienced female relatives, usually her mother and aunts. The custom was not approved by these women and yet they were the ones performing it, because they knew that otherwise their daughters would have no future. The process tried to make feet narrower and shorter, the big toe had to be as close to the heel as possible. First, they had to clip of the toenails. Then, the feet were soaked in hot water containing herbs and nuts so the tissue got softened. All toes on the foot, except the big one, were broken and curled under the sole and tightly bound with a bandage or silk. Every day they needed to change the bandages, wash the foot and cut the toenails in order to prevent infection. The arch of the foot was also broken and the foot was pulled straight with the leg. (Mao 2007, 1) The following two examples are expressing the same ideas as Mao, the process described in the novel can be considered as credible.

Mama washed my feet and rubbed them with alum, to contract the tissue and limit the inevitable secretions of blood and pus. She cut my toenails as short as possible. During this time, my bandages were soaked, so that when they dried on my skin, they would tighten even more. Next, Mama took one end of a bandage, placed it on my instep, then pulled it over my four smallest toes to begin the process of rolling them underneath my foot. From here she wrapped the bandage back around my heel. (See 2005, 26)

On the fourth day, we soaked our bandaged feet in a bucket of hot water. The bindings were then removed, and Mama and Aunt checked our toenails, shaved calluses, scrubbed away dead skin, dabbed on more alum and <https://assignbuster.com/portrayal-of-footbinding-in-snow-flower-and-the-secret-fan/>

perfume to disguise the odor of our putrefying flesh, and wrapped new clean bindings, even tighter this time. (See 2005, 29)

Girls were in a lot of pain during the process not only from having their bones broken, but also because they had to walk long distances for their feet to be crushed with their own weight into a proper shape. This event was probably the most memorable one from the novel *Snowflower and the Secret Fan*, since Lily just had her feet bound, bones broken and still she had to stand up and walk across the room.

I tried to fulfill their expectations for me – to attain the smallest bound feet in the country – so I let my bones be broken and molded into a better shape. When I knew I couldn't suffer another moment of pain, and tears fell on my bloody bindings, my mother spoke softly into my ear, encouraging me to go one more hour, one more day, one more week, reminding me of the rewards I would have if I carried on a little longer. In this way she taught me how to endure – not just the physical trials of footbinding and childbearing but the more torturous pain of the heart, mind and soul. (See 2005, 3)

In this example we can see how footbinding shaped a girl's personality. One of the reasons why it was connected to marriage is that small feet meant that girl can endure pain, is disciplined and respects her family. In earlier years the washing and binding is executed by the mother; later when the girl gets older, she does it on her own. After two years of constant binding, a pair of tiny feet is achieved.

The practice was performed on young girls and it served as an important social function, since it determined marriageability and was important for <https://assignbuster.com/portrayal-of-footbinding-in-snow-flower-and-the-secret-fan/>

family honour. Although it was socially mandated, it was not legally required. Footbinding was meant to enhance female's aesthetic and sexual appeal to men and control female reproductive power. Bound feet had erotic appeal to men, the smaller the feet, the better, which can also be seen in the novel, where Lily's husband is completely obsessed with her tiny lotus feet. The process can be fatal, as there is a possibility of an infection. Girls are experiencing a lot of pain and procedures are done without the recipient's consent.

Now I know there were many things no one said. No one said I could die. It wasn't until I moved to my husband's home that my mother-in-law told me that one out of ten girls died from footbinding, not only in our country but across the whole China. (See 2005, 25)

Another example from the novel can be considered correct, since approximately 10 percent of girls did not survive the treatment. (Mackie 1996, 1000)

Footbinding was a painful custom of elegance and torture. It was an ideal of beauty for years and young girls were the victims. After a thousand years it was stopped, but there are still other kinds of violence present that affect women all over the world. In the novel *Snowflower and the Secret Fan*, footbinding is described in great detail and the goal of this essay was to find out how much of the data is trustworthy. The procedure was described correctly, all details describing the beginning, the end of footbinding and its role in the society are plausible. It is safe to conclude that See's novel is regarding the process of footbinding more than credible. All the data used in

the novel was compared with the actual historical facts and there were no disparities, the novel is consistent with the findings of the people mentioned in references.

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