

# Foot Binding: Beauty And Torture

J Mao

---

## Citation

J Mao. *Foot Binding: Beauty And Torture*. The Internet Journal of Biological Anthropology. 2007 Volume 1 Number 2.

DOI: [10.5580/11bb](https://doi.org/10.5580/11bb)

## Abstract

Chinese foot binding is an ancient tradition of beauty and torture, passed from mother to daughter, generation to generation, that lasted for almost 1,000 years.

Foot binding was seen as a sign of beauty and attractiveness. Once a girl was of marriageable age, prospective mother-in-laws would come around and pick a wife for her son by the appearance of the girl's feet. Foot binding was the act of wrapping a three- to five-year old girl's feet with binding so as to bend the toes under, break the bones and force the back of the foot together. The bound foot was also a symbol of identity and virtue. A bound foot signified that a woman had achieved womanhood, and served as a mark of her gendered identity. Foot binding was not considered mutilation but a form of adornment, an embellishment to the human body.

According to historical account it was around 970 A.D., during the rule of Emperor Li Yu, the custom of foot binding began in China. The ruler's favourite consort Yao-niang performed a dance atop a golden lotus pedestal. She wrapped her feet in long strips of silk cloth. From that day on, foot binding was often associated with the term, golden lotus.

What made the author to take this topic is that my (Late) grandmother had small feet. In this paper the author traces the origin of foot binding, process of foot binding, reasons for foot binding, physiological implication, opposition and abolishment of foot binding.

## INTRODUCTION

The ancient custom of foot binding was practiced in China from about the 10th century and ended in 1911. The original wrapping of a woman's feet in China was not done with the intention of permanently deforming them. This was the custom in which young girl's feet were tightly bound in order to restrict and alter their growth. It was probably a fashionable practice among wealthy women.

There are many theories regarding the purpose of foot binding. One theory is that women who had their feet bound were less independent and more able to be controlled. In Chinese society it is said that women are ruled by their fathers, then their husbands and finally, by their sons. This was a way to ensure that women did not travel away from that control because literally the pain was too great and debilitating to allow them the freedom to be free. Another theory is that the smaller the women's feet the more desirable she would be in marriage. One story tells of a mother who tells her daughter that the size of the foot is more important than the attractiveness of the daughter's face in the eyes of a possible husband. Families needed the security of a daughter marrying "well" to ensure the families

place in society. Foot binding was a way to gain this security. A third theory is that foot binding was a way to show status. If a family had a daughter whose foot was bound then they were perceived by their neighbors to be able to have a capable and working member of their family not work. This implied success for the family<sup>1</sup>.

Several legends have been passed down on how foot binding originally started. The most common legend is about the Chinese Prince Li Yu in the Sung dynasty (AD 960-1280)<sup>2</sup>. This legend is probably the least likely to be true, because women with bound feet could hardly walk, let alone dance. Many women began to perform this artistic dancing style, and the dance looked best with bound feet. Once foot binding began, it spread quickly from the north, where it began, to all parts in China. In the beginning, the custom was practiced only by court dancers, followed by all the women in the court. In 1273, the Mongols took over the Sung dynasty and started the Yuan dynasty. The Mongols supported foot binding for all the women in China. They supported mainly because it made the women less likely to be able to succeed<sup>3</sup>. In the mid-1300s, the Ming dynasty took the place of the Yuan dynasty. Foot binding continued to

spread from the royalty, to the wealthy<sup>4</sup>. Eventually, all classes of people had their feet bound. Poor people did so in hopes of improving their social status<sup>5</sup>.

To an extent, foot binding was considered a component of female attire or adornment and, not a form of body mutilation, as the body was not necessarily viewed as an enclosed physical entity<sup>6</sup>. Correct attire was regarded as the ultimate expression of Chinese culture and identity, differentiating them from “inferior” foreign neighbors while marking social and gender distinctions within their society. The clothing of bodies was imbued with specific cultural meaning, with properly attired bodies reflecting order and control and unadorned bodies and feet serving as visible signs of disorder and dangerous nonconformity, with the individual risking association to barbarian outsiders<sup>7</sup>. Besides signaling femininity and gender distinctions, foot binding functioned as a marker of national boundaries.

Non-Han peoples occupying Chinese territory such as the Mongols, Hakka and Tibetans did not bind the foot, suggesting a long-standing or strongly-held institution linked to other practices, such as the work of Hakka women in the fields and their early employment in the tea industry. In the rice-farming areas of China, women played more part in field agriculture and were naturally resistant to the pressures of foot binding from north China<sup>6</sup>. In some peasant communities foot binding was never practiced, and usually among peasants the first foot binding took place later and was looser, as poor people could not afford the luxury of helpless women<sup>8</sup>.

Foot binding has various meanings and manifestations, from the wearing of tight socks for a slender look, to the more drastic contortion of the foot to make it physically smaller. Contrary to the myth that foot binding was only practised among women of the upper class, foot binding was in fact popular among all the Han Chinese in Northern China. The general purpose of foot binding, however, was to restrict the growth of the feet so that they would not exceed 3-4 inches. Small feet were considered beautiful and elegant. Thus the process normally began when a girl was between the age of three to eleven years old, the justification being that the pre-bone cartilage of the arch, which was predominantly water, would be more easily molded than matured bone. The mothers or more experienced female relatives who performed the foot binding were at least thoughtful enough to carry it out in late fall or winter when the foot was generally numb so that the pain would not be so severe.

## PROCESS OF FOOT BINDING

The process of foot binding was to make the feet narrower and shorter because it forced the big toe and the heel closer together. At a very young age, a girl's feet are bound, between 5 and 6 years. This is because the girls feet are still made of pre-bone cartilage. It can be easily broken and molded into the golden lotus shape.

Traditionally, the foot binding begins with the clipping of the toenails and the soaking of the feet either in hot water or in a concoction of ingredients ranging from various herbs and nuts. This is to soften the tissue and bones of the foot in order to facilitate manipulation, and the feet are massaged and doused with alum. All the toes on the foot, except the big one, are broken and folded under the sole. The toes are then bound in place with a silk or cotton bandage of size 10'x12". Every two days these wrappings are removed for washing and meticulous manicuring of the toenails to avoid infection. The arch of the foot is also broken and the foot is pulled straight with the leg. Gradually the sizes of the shoe are also reduced in order to accommodate the shrinking feet. To encourage the feet to achieve the desired conformation, the girls are made to walk long distances so that their own weight crushes their feet into shape. The flesh of the foot would also be lacerated, or sharp objects may be inserted in the bandage to encourage 'excess' flesh to rot away so that smaller feet may be achieved. In earlier years, the washing and binding is carried out by the mother. As time passes, the girls themselves tighten their bandages on their own. At the end of two years of excruciating pain a pair of tiny folded feet is seen. To make sure that the toes stay in place this foot binding process is carried out for an additional ten years.

A mother or grandmother started to bind her daughter's or granddaughter's feet when the child was around 4-7 years old. The process was started before the arch of the foot had a chance to properly develop. So that the feet were numb, meaning the pain would not be as extreme, binding usually started during the winter months.

## STUDY

The University of California, San Francisco made a study on foot binding in November 1997<sup>9</sup>. A sample of 193 women in Beijing (93 at 80 years or older and 100 between 70 and 79 years) were selected at random. The study shows that 38 per cent of women in the 80s age group and 18 per cent of those in the 70s age group had bound foot deformities. Women in the 80 years or older group with bound foot were more likely to have fallen during the previous year than women with

normal feet (38 per cent vs 19 per cent) and were less able to rise from a chair without assistance (43 per cent vs 26 per cent). It was also found that women with deformed feet were far less able to squat, an ability that is particularly important to toileting and other activities. Women with bound feet had 5.1 per cent lower hip bone density and 4.7 per cent lower spine bone density than women with normal feet, putting them at greater risks of suffering hip or spine fractures.

### REASONS

The most common reason is that foot binding is often thought of as a prerequisite for marriage. The second reason is family honour. Families with a great reputation, families wanting to maintain their good reputation, bind their daughter's feet<sup>10</sup>. For upholding this tradition for so long, the motive was for men to be able to dominate women.

### PHYSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATION

The practice of foot binding not only physically crippled women, but also crippled them mentally. There were many physiological implications. It created an outside swelling of the abdomen, a line down the back due to the muscle stress and the lumbar vertebrae would curve forward<sup>11</sup>. This forced a woman to focus her weight on her lower body putting pressure on her pelvis and eventually lowering it. It caused the sacrum to be longer and wider. Foot binding not only effected the feet with pain but it also effected her entire body causing it to become deformed as well. Squatting and bending were almost impossible. Large corns and calluses would appear and had to be cut off. The girls could barely walk straight. They walked from side to side in a swaying motion. As the years passed by the feet simply did not remain small. They continued to grow. Instead of growing longer they grew crooked and deformed. The toes would be curled downwards and inwards<sup>12</sup>. Infection was the most common ailment of bound feet. Inevitably disease followed infection. As the girl grew older, she is at risk from medical problems.

### OPPOSITION

Opposition to foot binding first began to appear during the Qing period and Manchu rule. The Manchus, who ruled China during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911)<sup>13</sup>, did not believe in the custom and sought to have abolished, their attempts failed, but they paved the way for others. When foreign missionaries began to gain footholds in China after the Opium war, foot binding began to be a symbol of something other than beauty. The bound feet of women began to symbolize their oppression. It was a practice of old

China and it was seen as barbaric to the rest of the world. In 1645, the first Shunzhi emperor mandated that foot binding be banned, but his successor, the Kangxi emperor, revoked the ban, apparently deciding that the practice was too firmly rooted in custom to be amenable to imperial dissolution<sup>14</sup>. Anti-Footing Binding societies were formed in 1895 growing in numbers. The members of these societies would refuse to bind their daughter's feet and only allow their sons to marry those who did not have their feet bound. In these societies the advantages of natural feet were taught as were the fact that other countries did not bind women's feet, and it makes the Chinese look like a barbaric and old fashioned culture. One of the main points of these societies was that the pain of the foot binding process that women must go through was an obstacle to their education. In the Qing period, opposition began to emerge, although it was both belated and weak. The Qing ruling nobility, who were ethnically Manchu, attempted to prohibit the custom among the conquered Han Chinese. In 1645, the first Shunzhi emperor mandated that foot binding be banned, but his successor, the Kangxi emperor, revoked the ban, apparently deciding that the practice was too firmly rooted in custom to be amenable to imperial dissolution<sup>14</sup>.

The work of the anti-foot binding reformers had three aspects. First, they carried out a modern education campaign, which explained that the rest of the world did not bind women's feet and that China was losing face in the world, making it subject to international ridicule. Second, their education campaign explained the advantages of natural feet and the disadvantages of bound feet. Third, they formed natural-foot societies, whose members pledged not to bind their daughter's feet, nor to allow their sons to marry women with bound feet<sup>15</sup>. These three tactics effectively succeeded in bringing footbinding to a quick end, eradicating in a single generation a practice which had survived for a thousand years. Young girls were thereafter spared the tortures of footbinding, although older women with bound feet may still be seen in China and Taiwan<sup>16</sup>.

### CONCLUSION

Foot binding was a ritual practiced in China that lasted almost 1000 years. Foot binding symbolized a girl's family was wealthy for not allowing their daughter to work. Foot binding is looked upon as an act of cruelty, but it was seen as a sign of wealth. This foot binding is not a means of torture but a ritual performed in respect to the Chinese culture.

The nationalist revolution sparked the flame that was to

destroy foot binding for good. The practice slowed down considerably from there. It was during the revolution of Sun Yat-Sen that foot binding was outlawed in 1911. It was a relief and an end to centuries of female repression and inequality. Today in China its last surviving practitioners are additionally handicapped by old age and arthritis, and these living anachronisms are all that remains of a vanished phenomenon. Foot binding is no longer practiced in Chinese societies because of successful resistance movements.

## References

1. Miles, N. Footbinding. UCLA Asia Institute. Available from <http://www.international.ucla.edu/shenzen/2002ncta/miles/index.html>.
2. Kam, N. Golden Lilies. Honolulu Star Bulletin.html, 06 November 2000. Available from <http://www.starbulletin.com/98/03/features/story1.html>.
3. Jackson, B. 1997. Splendid slippers. 1997. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press. USA.
4. Levy, HS. The Lotus Lovers: The Complete History of the Curious Erotic Custom of Footbinding in China. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York. 1992.
5. Cumming, SR, Stone, K. Consequences of foot binding among older women in Beijing, China. American Journal of Public Health. 1997. 87(10): 1677-1679.
6. Butler, KG. Footbinding, Exploitation and Wrongfulness: Non-Marxist Conception. Diogenes (International Council of Philosophy and Humanistic Studies). Fall 1985.
7. Goody, J. The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive. 1990. Cambridge University Press.
8. Davin, D. The Custom of the Country. Times Literary Supplement. 1992. p.28, April 24.
9. Chinese Girl with Bound Feet. The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco. Available from <http://www.sfmuseum.org/chin/foot.html>.
10. Smith, K. Chinese Foot Binding: The Truth Behind the Beauty. Available from <http://www.cds.charlotte.nc.us/History/China/05/smithA/index.html>.
11. Wang Guanhua, L. Footbinding in Traditional China. Spring, 2000. Available from [http://www.sp.uconn.edu/~gwan/teaching/footbinding\\_in\\_traditional\\_china.html](http://www.sp.uconn.edu/~gwan/teaching/footbinding_in_traditional_china.html).
12. Roberts, N. The Golden Lotus: a History of Footbinding in China. Available from <http://www.cyberport.uqam.ca/english/countries/china/HistAutumn2000R.html>.
13. Hoobler, D, Hoobler, T, Kort, M. China: Regional Studies Series. New Jersey: Globe Books Company. 1993.
14. Feng, J. The Three-Inch Golden Lotus. 1994. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
15. Mackie, G. Ending footbinding and Infibulation: Convention account." American Sociological Review, 1996. 61(6).
16. Paulshock, MD, Bernadine Z. Chinese Footbinding. Journal of the American Medical Association. 1992. August 12.

**Author Information**

**John Mao**  
Anthropologist