

This text is about the concept and history of foot binding in China. Be aware that some of the details in this article may be difficult to process, as the practice of foot binding involved significant physical pain – some today would even call it torture. Reading about this painful practice might make us queasy, but it was widely practiced on Chinese women for centuries to gain social status and desirability. As you read, take note of the different points of view on foot binding.

Today, many women are no stranger to stylish yet painful shoes. Stiletto pumps, strappy sandals, and 6-inch heels have graced fashion runways for decades. But what if you were expected to stuff your feet into high-heeled, pointy-toed shoes that were only 4 inches long? For centuries, this was the expectation for millions of women across China, and they achieved it through a practice called “foot binding.”

Foot binding is the custom of wrapping a young girl’s feet tightly and painfully in strips of cloth to stunt future growth of the foot. The practice was popular in China for many centuries and may have started as early as the 9th or 10th century BCE. Originally a symbol of status among elites, the trend soon spread to all social classes and affected millions of women and girls over the next millennium.

History: There are many suggestions for the origin of foot binding. One story relates that during the Shang dynasty, the concubine¹ Daji, who was said to have clubfoot,² asked the Emperor to make foot binding mandatory for all girls in court so that her own feet would be the standard of beauty and elegance. However, the most common legend surrounding the origin of foot binding is the story of Emperor Li Yu around 970 BCE. The emperor asked his concubine, Yao Niang, to bind her feet into the shape of crescent moons and dance for him on the points of her toes. Her dance was so beautiful that word of it spread throughout the country, and elite women everywhere wanted to emulate her gracefulness. Foot binding became increasingly popular during the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279), first in the upper classes and then trickling down to the general population by the end of the 12th century.

In the 1630s Manchu³ leaders tried to end the practice through a series of laws, but the ban was hard to enforce, and no one paid it much attention. The government officially gave up in the late 1660s, and foot binding continued to grow in popularity. During this time, it became generally accepted that three Chinese inches (four western inches) was the ideal length for a woman’s foot – such an achievement was called the “Golden Lotus.” By the 19th century, more than half of all Chinese women had their feet bound. The number was much higher in northern areas of China, although some groups, particularly the Manchu and the Hakka, never engaged⁴ in the practice at all.

Why Bind? Women had many reasons for binding their feet despite the pain. First, small feet were a sign of wealth and social status. Small feet made a statement that a woman did not have to do any physical work to support herself. Second, it could symbolize a dependence on her husband and family, which were both valued in Chinese society. Third, small feet had quite a strong appeal for many men. The shape of bound feet and the pain they caused made women walk with a swaying gait,⁵ and men found this very attractive. Lotus shoes – special shoes designed to highlight the small size and unique shape of a bound foot – became a prized fashion accessory. Finally, in poor families, the oldest daughter would have her feet bound from a young age so she could marry into money, while her younger sisters trained to be maids in her future household.

In Practice: The physical realities of foot binding were extremely painful and sometimes dangerous for young women. Binding usually began between the ages of 4 and 9, before the bones in the arch of the foot fully developed. To begin binding, the foot was soaked in a mixture of herbs and animal blood to soften the skin and bones, and the toenails were trimmed down as far as possible. Next, the toes were curled under the foot so that all the toe bones broke. The foot continued to be bent under until the arch of the foot also broke. Cotton bandages were wound around the foot to keep the broken bones tightly in position. The bandages had to be unwound at least every other day to clean the foot and check for infection, then re-wound even more tightly.

After enough months and years of this agonizing process, the foot eventually went numb. This did not protect the girl from long-term consequences, however. The broken bones would usually not heal for several years, and when they finally did, they were prone to breaking again later in life. Despite careful maintenance of the toenails, sometimes a toenail could become ingrown and lead to a serious infection, which, if improperly treated, could spread through the blood or bones and in some cases become lethal.⁶ As the woman aged and her balance became impaired, the inconvenient shape of bound feet could cause her to fall often and lead to broken arms or hips.

The Decline of Binding: The earliest opposition to foot binding came in the 18th century, picking up more steam in the 19th century. The minority groups who had always stood against foot binding, the Manchu and the Hakka, became more vocal about their opposition. Christian missionaries⁷ joined forces with these groups and began lobbying in the courts to outlaw the practice. In 1883, the first Anti-Foot Binding Society formed. Chapters popped up all over the country, and the organization soon boasted nearly 300,000 members. The people involved in these groups argued that

abolishing⁸ the practice would lead to better health and more efficient labor. At the beginning of the 20th century, feminists⁹ also joined in, calling for an end to the mistreatment of women.

Public and private campaign efforts were largely successful, and of young girls born in the early 20th century, only a very small percentage still had bound feet. By 1912, many regional governments were sending inspectors out to fine women with wrapped feet. The 1949 communist regime¹⁰ harshly criticized the custom, and the last reported case of foot binding was in 1957.

1. A concubine is a type of female slave
2. Clubfoot is a birth deformity in which one or more affected feet appear to have been rotated internally at the ankle.
3. The Manchus are a Chinese ethnic minority
4. **Engage** (*verb*): to practice or participate in
5. **Gait** (*noun*): the way someone walks
6. **Lethal** (*adjective*): deadly
7. Missionaries are people sent on a religious mission, especially those sent to promote Christianity in a foreign country.
8. **Abolish** (*verb*): to get rid of or outlaw
9. Feminists are people who believe that women should be equal to men.
10. In the 20th century, China had a communist revolution, replacing old systems with communism, a social, economic, and political movement whose goal is to achieve a society without different social or economic classes.

1. What does the word “emulate” most closely mean as it is used in Paragraph 3?
 - A. To worship or praise
 - B. To outdo or rival
 - C. To copy or follow
 - D. To mock or make fun of

2. Which phrase from the paragraph best supports the answer to question 1?
 - A. “Her dance was so beautiful”
 - B. “elite women everywhere”
 - C. “her gracefulness”
 - D. “became increasingly popular”

3. Which of the following best identifies a central idea of this text?
 - A. Foot binding was a practice that started in China in 970 BCE, and spread all over the world.
 - B. Foot binding was a critical advancement in modern medicine, even though a lot of women had to suffer to acquire knowledge about it.
 - C. Foot binding was considered necessary for a woman to attain beauty ideals and social status, at the cost of tremendous pain and physical risk.
 - D. Foot binding was outlawed by oppressive governmental regimes that suppressed women’s freedom and right to her body.

4. Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to question 3?
 - A. “Foot binding is the custom of wrapping a young girl’s feet tightly and painfully in strips of cloth to stunt future growth of the foot.” (Paragraph 2)
 - B. “three Chinese inches (four western inches) was the ideal length for a woman’s foot – such an achievement was called the ‘Golden Lotus.’” (Paragraph 4)
 - C. “Women had many reasons for binding their feet despite the pain.” (Paragraph 5)
 - D. “The 1949 communist regime harshly criticized the custom, and the last reported case of foot binding was in 1957.” (Paragraph 9)

Discussion Question: Women’s feet were bound because it was a status symbol and because men found it attractive, even though it was painful to the women. Why does the lure of power and social status drive people to make harmful decisions? Why might someone trade physical mobility for social mobility?