

Choose Your Own Adventure: Chinese Foot Binding

You will be learning about the art and purpose of Chinese foot binding today. Warning: there are disturbing images and uncomfortable stories ahead. Read through each document and look through the assigned pictures (found in the ppt on my website) so that you can get a better understanding of foot binding in Chinese society.

Directions: Read the three documents below – one story and two poems. As you read, take notes in the boxes on the side. Be sure to focus in on words that 'define beauty' in Tang/Song China.

Doc. 1

Though this account derives from an early 20th century narrative, the custom seems to have begun with the dancers of the imperial harem during the Southern Tang Dynasty (837-975). At first the custom was followed by higher class women but trickled down into the mainstream. The Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi [Ci Xi] in 1902 issued a decree banning the custom, though the practiced continued well into the 1920s.

I was born in a certain district in western Honan Province, at the end of the Manchu dynasty. In, accordance with custom, at the age of seven I began binding. I had witnessed the pain of my cousins, and in the year it was to begin was very much frightened. That autumn, distress befell me. One day prior my mother told me: "You are now seven, just at the right age for binding. If we wait your foot will harden, increasing the pain. You should have started in the spring, but because you were weak we waited till now. Girls in other families have already completed the process. We start tomorrow. I will do this for you lightly and so that it won't hurt; what daughter doesn't go through this difficulty?" She then gave me fruit to eat, showed me a new pair of phoenix-tip shoes, and beguiled me with these words: "Only with bound feet can you wear such beautiful shoes. Otherwise you'll become a large-footed barbarian and everyone will laugh at and feel ashamed of you." I felt moved by, a desire to be beautiful and became steadfast in determination, staying awake all night. I got up early the next morning everything had already been prepared Mother had me sit on a stool by the bed. She threaded a needle and placed it in my hair, cut off a piece of alum and put it alongside the binding cloth and the flowered shoes. She then turned and closed the bedroom door. She first soaked my feet in a pan of hot water, then wiped them, and cut the toenails with a small scissors. She then took my right foot in her hands and repeatedly massaged it in the direction of

As you read, take notes here:

What was the author trying to convey?
What is each paragraph about? How does it make you feel? Address the author's tone.

the plantar. She also sprinkled alum between my toes. She gave me a pen point to hold in my hands because of the belief that my feet might then become as pointed as it was. Later she took a cloth three feet long and two inches, wide, grasped my right foot, and pressed down the four smaller toes in the direction of the plantar. she joined them together. bound them once, and passed the binding from the heel to the foot surface and then to the plantar. She did this five times and then sewed the binding together with thread. To prevent it from getting loosened, she tied a slender cotton thread from the tip of the foot to its center.

She did the same thing with the left foot and forced my feet into flowered shoes which were slightly smaller than the feet were. The tips of the shoes were adorned with threads in the shape of grain. There was a ribbon affixed to the mouth of the shoe and fastened on the heel. She ordered me to get down from the bed and walk, saying that if I didn't the crooked-shaped foot would be seriously injured. When I first touched the ground, I felt complete loss of movement; after a few trials, only the toes hurt greatly. Both feet became feverish at night and hurt from the swelling. Except for walking, I sat by the k'ang. Mother rebound my feet weekly, each time more tightly than the last. I became more and more afraid. I tried to avoid the binding by hiding in a neighbor's house. If I loosened the bandage, mother would scold me for not wanting to look nice. After half a year, the tightly bound toes began to uniformly face the plantar. The foot became more pointed daily; after a year, the toes began to putrefy. Corns began to appear and thicken, and for a long time no improvement was visible. Mother would remove the bindings and lance the corns with a needle to get rid of the hard core. I feared this, but mother grasped my legs so that I couldn't move.

Father betrothed me at the age of nine to a neighbor named Chao. and I went to their house to serve as a daughter-in-law in the home of my future husband. My mother-in-law bound my feet much more tightly than mother ever had, saying that I still hadn't achieved the standard. She beat me severely if I cried; if I unloosened the binding, I was beaten until my body was covered with bruises. Also, because my feet were somewhat fleshy, my mother-in-law insisted that the foot must become inflamed to get the proper results. Day and night, my feet were washed in a medicinal water; within a few washings I felt special pain. Looking down, I saw that every toe but the big one was inflamed and deteriorated. Mother-in-law said that this was all to the good. I had to be beaten with fists before I could bear to remove the bindings, which were

As you read, take notes here:

What was the author trying to convey?
What is each paragraph about? How does it make you feel? Address the author's tone.

congealed with pus and blood. To get them loose, such force had to be used that the skin often peered off, causing further bleeding. The stench was hard to bear, while I felt the pain in my very insides. My body trembled with agitation.

Mother-in-law was not only unmoved but she placed tiles inside the binding in order to hasten the inflammation process. She was deaf to my childish cries. Every other day, the binding was made tighter and sewn up, and each time slightly smaller shoes had to be worn. The sides of the shoes were hard, and I could only get into them by using force. I was compelled to walk on them in the courtyard, they were called distance-walking shoes. I strove to cling to life, suffering indescribable pain. Being in an average family, I had to go to the well and pound the mortar unaided. Faulty blood circulation caused my feet to become insensible in winter. At night, I tried to warm them by the k'ang, but this caused extreme pain. The alternation between frost and thawing caused me to lose one toe on my right foot.

Deterioration of the flesh was such that within a year my feet had become as pointed as new bamboo shoots, pointing upwards like a red chestnut. The foot surface was slightly convex, while the four bean-sized toes were deeply imbedded in the plantar like a string of cowry shells. They were only a slight distance from the heel of the foot. The plantar was so deep that several coins could be placed in it without difficulty. The large toes faced upwards, while the place on the right foot where the little toe had deteriorated away pained at irregular intervals. It left an ineffaceable scar.

My feet were only three inches long, at the most. Relatives and friends praised them, little realizing the cisterns of tears and blood which they had caused. My husband was delighted with them, but two years ago he departed this a world. The family wealth was dissipated, and I had to wander about, looking for work. That was how I came down to my present circumstances. I envy the modern woman. If I too had been born just a decade or so later, all of this pain could have been avoided. The lot of the natural-footed woman and mine is like that of heaven and hell.

Source: Howard L. Levy. Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom (NY: Walton Books, 1966); 224-227)

As you read, take notes here:

What was the author trying to convey?
What is the poem about? How does the author use imagery? How does it make you feel? Address the author's tone.

Doc. 2: 满族妇女生活与民俗文化研究

The following is an English translation of a Tang Era Chinese poem.

Get a carpenter's adze to make the shoe-bottoms
Get a carpenter to make the outside of the shoes
Use a card of yarn Eight lengths of fine cloth
Altogether it will take three years
To make a pair of embroidered shoes
Call a girl to try the shoes
Whether short or long
The girl stretches her foot to fit the embroidered shoes
The shoe small the foot large
Constrained and uncomfortable
Awkwardly and crookedly to the back wall
The left foot crushing eight tigers
The right foot crushing nine wolves

Source: Crossley, Pamela. 2002. *The Manchus: The People of Asia*.

As you read, take notes here:

What was the author trying to convey?
What is the poem about? How does the author use imagery? How does it make you feel? Address the author's tone.

Doc. 3: *On High-heels and Foot-binding* by Chengde Chen

The heel of a high-heel shoe is the binding of foot-binding
It has been the same road under different feet
The footsteps of the hundred year women's movement
is merely an aesthetic change from the Chinese to the
Western -
turning a compelled two dimensional restriction
into a freely chosen three dimensional bending
The social status is raised for a shoe-heel
while the price is walking on tiptoes for life
Oh, the ever-suffering feet, no matter how innocent you
are
the definition of 'feminine beauty' is to deform you
Because this is the base enabling men to stand firmly

Source: "Philosophical Poems." *Philosophical Poems*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Oct. 2013.

As you read, take notes here:

What was the author trying to convey?
What is the poem about? How does the author use imagery? How does it make you feel? Address the author's tone.