Olivia Tapsall
Chinese History
Research paper

Cultures a world apart: Western Misunderstanding of Chinese Foot Binding

China has always been interested upholding tradition and avoiding influence from outside sources. The influence of other countries began when the Manchu’s took over the government to begin the Qing Dynasty. The failure of the Qing dynasty lead to major Western influences that changed the whole governmental structure. The change in the government began to bring on changes in cultural tradition in China. Foot Binding was a major Chinese custom that was attacked when outside influence came into China. The Qing Dynasty attempted to ban foot binding, but did not have enough influence to force the Han Chinese to forget the old and beloved tradition. It was not until the Communist government took over that binding became illegal and the ban was strictly enforced¹. The Chinese were so resistant to this particular change because the tradition had been around for so long. Not only did the western countries influence the change in governmental structure of China, but they also influenced cultural change. Based on the cultural norms in western societies, foot binding was looked upon as a disgusting and painful practice, but in China foot binding was a cultural tradition that women endured in order to be attractive, to obtain the best lives possible for themselves, and to survive in a patriarchal society.

Women in China saw foot binding as a norm and it was worth the pain if it meant finding a husband, and therefore a better life for themselves. Women in high-class society were originally the only ones who bound their feet because they wanted to show off their social status. The custom became more widespread because poor women saw an opportunity to marry upper class men. Therefore, the objective of bound feet was purely a selfish one that hopefully ended with a high status in society. Eventually however, foot binding became so abundant around the country that women bound their feet in order to find a husband period. In an article by Susie Lan Cassel, she states “that in all classes of society women’s feet became markers of their prestige, talent, and gender in a culture in which women’s economic security depended upon marriage, and a good marriage was determined, in part, by the quality of the bound feet”. A bound foot in Chinese society was the representation of beauty and if a woman’s foot was petite and perfect then she was beautiful. The ideal size of a woman’s bound foot was between three or four inches. It was also necessary for the bound feet to be narrow, so bone breakage was inevitable. The arch of the foot had to be broken and the only toe that remained in the same position was the big toe. All the other toes were broken and pushed into the side of the foot, but the pain did not matter. It was the result that came from the

2 Cassel, Susie Lan. "". . . the binding altered not only my feet but my whole character": Foot binding and First-World Feminism in Chinese American
4 Cassel, pg. 11
5 Sun-niang, Xiao Mai
pain that made it all worth it. A woman named Xiao Mai Sun-niang talked about her experiences with foot binging, “If a girl's family didn't have status, but she had three-inch or smaller feet, then she might be able to become an attendant in a lady's chamber. Then she might even get a chance to be married to a wealthy man or become a concubin.”6 The act of foot binding was indeed on in which the end justified the means. Women who did not bind their feet as tightly as possible did not have the best lives possible. Being that a woman with the smallest feet was seen as the most beautiful, it is safe to say that a women who endured the most pain through binding their feet as tightly as possible got the best lives and the richest husbands.

In the nineteenth century, most western societies were based on patriarchy and therefore woman were objectified. In China this was apparent as well, especially with foot binding. A woman was seen as an object and had no say in most aspects of her life. She could not choose who she was going to marry and could not choose not to bind her feet. Chinese women did not work and could not work because of their bound feet. Much like a woman in Western culture was responsible for domestic work, Chinese women were responsible for cooking and staying in the house. Many women could not even walk because they lost the ability through foot binding7. This left the women completely reliant on men economically and physically. A Chinese woman’s only goal in life was to look appealing to men and binding the most necessary aspect in looking beautiful in the time period. In Chinese culture a bound foot was seen as the most attractive and erotic part of the female body. “The feet

6 Sun-niang, Xiao Mai
7 Huang Sheng-pai
became the face and face closed the bride’s fate.”

A woman had to bind their feet and did not even think to question it because binding determined the quality of life that she was going to live. The women went through the pain and were objectified because it was the only way that they knew. A woman was made to please a man in Chinese culture, just like a woman was meant to please a man in Western culture.

In a patriarchal society, it is necessary for women to come together and support one another. The most significant support system that stemmed from the practice of foot binding was between a mother and a daughter. A mother had experienced the pain that her daughter had to go through to become beautiful, so they were brought closer together. Additionally, when a mother punished her child for taking off her bandages or refused to loosen a child’s bandages for her, it is an act of love. A mother only wants what is best for her daughter and in China at this time period a female would only have good life if she bound her feet. Lin Mo-he states, “my mother, who also had tiny feet, would take me in her arms and carry me outside for a walk around the village. This would help get my mind off the pain.” A mother did not want her child to feel pain. She just wanted her to be able to live the best life she could. The mother simply taught her daughter how to be a woman and the skills that she needed to survive in such a male dominated society. Mother’s also provided motivation through the painful process because all a child had to do is look at their mother’s life and see how beautiful and tiny her feet were. The mother was

---

8 Wang, Ping, pg 19
9 Wang, Ping, pg 22
10 Lin Mo-he
responsible for teach her daughter how to bind and wash her feet\textsuperscript{11}. This proved to be a bonding experience a well. The immense bond held between a mother and a daughter through foot binding helped each girl through the painful process and helped the daughter see that the pain would be worth is once a man was found.

Foot binding became a symbol for Han nationalism when the Manchu’s overtook the Ming Empire. The last Ming emperor was known as the last Han\textsuperscript{12} and therefore the Han’s felt the need to represent their country as they wanted, not as the foreigners wanted. The reason that foot binding thrived until the communist government took over is because the feeling of unity that the Han’s (the native Chinese) felt kept them from obeying the laws set for them. The tradition was important to the culture and although it involved pain, it was a custom that the Han’s could call their own. Additionally, the Han women were scared to stop binding their feet because the feet were the primary source of beauty. They had no other way of finding husbands or attracting men\textsuperscript{13}. The practice of foot binding did not only apply to the country in which they lived, it applied to the fact that the people were Han people. They were the original Chinese and felt that they should be distinguished as such. The fact that the minorities were changing the way that the Han’s lived traditionally was insulting to them. “There were many minority people who lived in or near the village, too - Yi, Hui and Miao people - but they didn’t bind their feet. They were all looked down upon by the Han, and not treated well at all. If a Han girl didn’t have bound feet everyone treated her just like they did the

\textsuperscript{11} Rupp, Joseph
\textsuperscript{12} Cassel, Susie Lan. Pg 5
\textsuperscript{13} Lu Zhen-Ian
Foot binding was so essential to both Han nationalism and traditional culture that women felt as if they were inferior if they did not participate in the custom. The unity and nationalism that the Han’s felt they needed to have in order to keep their cultural tradition alive thrived off of customs like Foot binding.

The Han Chinese people themselves did not see any issue with their traditional custom of foot binding because it had been involved in their way of life for so long. A woman was supposed to attract men based on the size of her feet and act as an object made for her husband. If a woman did not go through the pain of foot binding she simply did not have a good life. A women without bound feet was considered ugly and worked out in the field along with the other people of low status. Outside influences just saw the custom from the outskirts and did not understand the reasoning behind bound feet or what they stood for. Western influence essentially took away the Chinese woman’s beauty and the bond a daughter shared with her mother through the experience of binding. Bound feet were the only way for a woman in China in the nineteenth century it showed that she was a success. A woman with bound feet represented a woman who accomplished what she was meant to do in life. The western influence in China took away the only custom that provided Han women with a meaning and a goal in life.

---

14 Chen Gan-nian
15 Wang, Ping.
16 Wang, Ping.
Bibliography

