

CHINESE FOOTBINDING

One of the most bizarre and painful customs of old China was the binding of women's feet. It began with the dancers of the imperial harem of the Tang dynasty sometime in the 10th century. At first it was only practice by women of the upper class, but footbinding gradually spread down to the rest of the female population. The custom lasted until the early 20th century.

In the following selection, a middle-aged maidservant named Chang, probably born around the turn of the century, recalls her painful footbinding experience for her master. The story is told sometime in the early 1930s.



I was born in the district of Hunan at the end of the Manchu dynasty. At the age of seven, like all girls, I began binding my feet. I witnessed the pain of my cousins and I as very frightened. That fall, I became really scared. The day before my binding was about to begin 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 until 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 difficultly?" She then gave me a piece of fruit to eat and showed me a new pair of phoenix-tip shoes. She said "Only with bound feet can you wear such beautiful shoes. Otherwise, you'll become a large-footed barbarian and everyone will laugh and feel embarrassed for you." I wanted to be beautiful and suddenly became excited about binding my feet. I couldn't sleep 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 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. She also sprinkled powder between my toes. She then gave me a pen point to hold in my hands and said she hoped that my foot would become as pointed as it was. Later she took a cloth three feet long and two inches wide, grabbed my right foot, and pressed down the four smaller toes toward the bottom of my foot. She did this five times and then sewed the binding together with thread.

She did the same thing with the left foot and forced my feet into flowered shoes with were smaller than my feet were. 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 tries, only the toes hurt. But bother feet became feverish at night and hurt from the swelling. Mother rebound my feet weakly, 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 loosed the bandage, mother would scold me for not wanting to look nice. After 6 months, the tightly bound toes began to curl down towards the sole of my foot. The foot became more pointed daily; after a year, the toes began to rot. Mother would remove the bindings and cut off the corns that were growing on my foot with a knife and hot needle. I was afraid of this, but my mother grabbed my legs so that I couldn't move.

Father arranged for my marriage at the age of nine to a neighbor name 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 bout my feet much more tightly than mother ever had, saying that my feet were still not small enough. She beat me severely if I cried. If I untied the binding, I was beaten until my body was covered with bruises. Also, because my feet were sort of fat, my mother-in-law insisted that the foot must become infected and swollen for the proper results. Day and night my feet were washed in a chemical solution; within a few washings I felt horrible pain. Looking down, I saw that every toe but the big one was infected and the skin had begun to shrivel. Mother-in-law said that this was great! I had to be beaten with fists before I could bear to change the bindings, which were sticky with pus blood. To get them loose, such strong force had to be used that the skin often peeled off, causing further bleeding. The smell was

disgusting, but the pain was even harder to bear. My body shook with pain and fear. But mother-in-law did not care. She put hot tiles inside the binding to speed up the infection. 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 forced to walk on them in the courtyard; they were called distance-walking shoes. I tried to cling to life, suffering from immense pain. In cold weather, the blood did not circulate to my feet, causing extreme pain. The change in the weather between frost and thawing caused me to lose one toe on my right foot. Rotting of the flesh was so bad that within a year my feet had become as pointed and dry as new bamboo shoots with the tips pointing upward towards the sky. The foot surface was curved downward, while the four remaining toes were imbedded in the soul of my foot. There was only a small space between the head of my foot and the toes. The soul was so deep that several coins could be placed in it without difficulty. The large toes faced upwards, with the place on the right foot where the little toe had fallen off hurt me all the time. It left a terrible scar.

My feet were only 3 inches long, at the most. Relatives and friends praised them, not realizing the tears of blood that they had caused. My husband was delighted with them, but two years ago he died. The family wealth was gone and I had to wander around looking for work. That was how I came to my present situation. I envy the modern woman. If I had been born just 10 years later, all of this pain could have been avoided. The fate of the natural footed woman and mine is the difference between heaven and hell.

Directions: Use what you learned about footbinding in the story above to fill out the Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How Chart Below:

Who	
What	
Where	
When	
Why	
How	