

# Footbinding

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## Footbinding

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Cultural Anthropology, History, Sociology, Gender Studies

### 1. Core Definition

Footbinding was a deeply entrenched and culturally significant practice in China, spanning over a millennium from the Song dynasty (960-1269) until its eventual prohibition in the 20th century. At its essence, it involved the severe and often excruciating compression of a young girl's feet, a process designed to achieve a diminutive and highly arched foot, ideally no more than three inches in length, famously known as the "Lotus Foot" or "Golden Lotus." This practice was not merely a cosmetic alteration but a profound physical transformation, intended to reshape the bones and soft tissues of the foot, fundamentally altering its structure and function. The aesthetic ideal it sought to achieve was one of extreme delicacy and fragility, which was believed to enhance female beauty and allure in a specific cultural context.

The ritualistic and prolonged nature of footbinding meant that it began when a girl was typically between the ages of four and nine, before the bones of the foot had fully ossified, making them more pliable and susceptible to permanent deformation. This age window was critical, as it allowed for the most severe and enduring reshaping. The process was not a one-time event but a continuous and painful regimen involving tight bandages, often steeped in astringent solutions, which were regularly reapplied and tightened. The goal was to break the arch, bend the four smaller toes underneath the sole, and pull the heel forward, creating a dramatic, crescent-shaped foot. The resulting physical disability was inherent to the aesthetic, rendering women effectively crippled and largely confined, reinforcing particular societal roles and expectations.

Beyond its physical manifestations, footbinding served as a complex cultural symbol. It was intertwined with notions of female modesty, social status, and marriageability. A woman with bound feet was seen as desirable, a testament to her family's wealth and status (as she could not perform manual labor), and a symbol of her refinement and obedience. The practice therefore transcended mere fashion, becoming a central aspect of female identity and social standing within traditional Chinese society, shaping the lives and experiences of millions of women across generations. Its cessation in the 20th century marked a significant societal shift, reflecting broader movements towards modernization and changing perceptions of women's roles and rights.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The exact etymology of "footbinding" as a term is straightforward, describing the physical act of binding the feet. However, its historical origins are shrouded in legend, with the most popular accounts tracing the practice to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907-960 CE), specifically to the court of Emperor Li Yu of the Southern Tang dynasty. Legend attributes its

inception to one of his concubines, Yao Niang, a dancer who reputedly bound her feet into the shape of a new moon with silk ribbons to perform a "lotus dance" on a golden pedestal adorned with gems. This story, whether entirely factual or apocryphal, highlights the early association of footbinding with performance, elite status, and a highly stylized aesthetic of beauty.

From its initial emergence in elite circles during the Song dynasty, footbinding gradually diffused across various social strata, eventually becoming widespread across much of China. Initially, it was a marker of imperial favor and aristocratic status, differentiating women of leisure from those who performed manual labor. However, over the succeeding dynasties--the Yuan, Ming, and Qing--the practice proliferated downwards through society, becoming common even among peasant families, particularly in regions where it was seen as a prerequisite for advantageous marriages. This diffusion was driven by a powerful social imperative, where unbound feet (often referred to as "big feet") were increasingly viewed as undesirable and even shameful, severely impacting a woman's marital prospects.

The evolution of footbinding was not uniform across all regions or time periods; variations existed in the severity of the binding and the specific ideal "Lotus Foot" shape sought. For instance, the practice was less common among certain ethnic groups, like the Hakka and the Manchu, with the latter officially attempting to ban it several times, though with limited success among Han Chinese women. The peak prevalence of footbinding occurred during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), when it was estimated that 40-50% of Chinese women had bound feet, with rates reaching nearly 100% among upper-class Han Chinese women in some regions. This enduring legacy demonstrates how a practice, possibly originating from an aesthetic whim, transformed into a deeply embedded social norm with immense cultural weight and psychological impact.

### 3. Key Characteristics

The process of footbinding was characterized by its early initiation, typically when a girl was young enough for her bones to be malleable, usually between the ages of four and nine. This age was crucial because it allowed for the most severe and permanent deformation before the foot fully matured. The actual binding began by soaking the feet in warm water, sometimes mixed with herbs or alum, to soften them. The four smaller toes were then bent underneath the sole of the foot and pressed tightly against the arch. The big toe was left unbound and pointed straight forward, creating a distinct "triangle" shape with the heel. This initial stage was incredibly painful as the bones were forced into unnatural positions.

Following the initial manipulation, long strips of cloth, often made of cotton or silk, were tightly wound around the foot, starting from the toes, looping around the heel, and then cinching the entire foot upwards and inwards. These bandages were typically several feet long and about two inches wide. The critical aspect was the continuous and increasing pressure applied during each re-

binding. The goal was to break the arch of the foot, causing the heel to be drawn closer to the ball of the foot, effectively folding the foot in half. This process was repeated every few days, with the bandages being removed, the feet washed and massaged to prevent infection and promote circulation, and then rebound even more tightly. The pain was constant and severe, often preventing girls from sleeping and causing distress.

Over several years, this relentless compression resulted in irreversible anatomical changes. The bones of the arch would fracture and fuse in a distorted position, the toes would become permanently folded under, and the heel would be pulled forward to create the desired "Lotus Foot" shape, typically measuring around three inches (about 7.6 cm) in length. The gait of a woman with bound feet was distinct, characterized by a hobbling, unstable walk, often described as a "tottering lotus step." This distinctive walk, while admired for its delicate appearance, further highlighted the physical confinement and dependence associated with the practice. The physical disfigurement also led to lifelong complications, including infections, gangrene, muscle atrophy, and immense difficulty in mobility, often requiring women to rely on assistance for even short distances.

#### 4. Significance and Impact

The significance of footbinding permeated multiple layers of traditional Chinese society, profoundly impacting women's lives and their roles within the family and community. Primarily, it functioned as a powerful symbol of social status and wealth. In a society where women of the upper classes were not expected to perform physical labor, bound feet became a visible marker of a family's prosperity, signifying that its women did not need to work. This allowed families to display their affluence, as the crippling nature of the practice rendered women largely immobile and dependent, thus reinforcing a perception of leisure and refinement. For aspiring families, footbinding their daughters was a crucial step in climbing the social ladder, as it signaled their adherence to elite cultural norms.

Beyond social display, footbinding was intricately linked to a woman's marriageability. In many regions, particularly among the Han Chinese, a woman with unbound feet was considered undesirable, even unmarriageable. The "Lotus Foot" was widely considered a paramount aspect of female beauty and sexual allure, a fetishized object within traditional Chinese aesthetics. Prospective mothers-in-law would inspect a bride's feet, and the size and shape of the bound feet could make or break a marriage alliance. This societal pressure created a formidable incentive for families to bind their daughters' feet, ensuring their future and upholding family honor, even at the cost of immense pain and lifelong disability for the girls.

The impact on women's lives was multifaceted and pervasive. Physically, it resulted in severe pain, chronic infections, and permanent disability, severely limiting mobility and independence. Women with bound feet often suffered from falls, hip fractures, and other health complications in later life.

Psychologically, the practice instilled a deep sense of obedience and conformity from a very young age, as girls endured years of pain under the watchful eyes of their mothers and grandmothers. Socially, it reinforced the patriarchal structure of society by physically confining women to the domestic sphere, making it difficult for them to engage in public life or productive labor outside the home. While it provided a peculiar form of social capital, it simultaneously imposed severe restrictions on women's freedom and autonomy, shaping their experiences and opportunities for centuries.

## 5. Debates and Criticisms

While footbinding was deeply ingrained in Chinese culture for centuries, it was not without its detractors, and debates surrounding its ethics and utility emerged over time, intensifying dramatically in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Early criticisms often came from within China, with some scholars and officials questioning its humane aspects and its role in weakening the populace. However, these voices were often marginalized against the overwhelming cultural acceptance of the practice. The most significant shift in public opinion began to materialize with increasing contact with Western societies and the rise of nationalist movements within China itself. Western missionaries, who found the practice barbaric, were among the first to systematically condemn it, viewing it as a symbol of China's "backwardness" and a violation of basic human dignity.

The true catalyst for the abolition movement came from Chinese intellectuals and reformers, particularly during the late Qing dynasty and the early Republican era. Figures like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, prominent advocates for modernization and national strength, argued that footbinding was a national disgrace that contributed to China's weakness by crippling half its population and hindering its ability to compete on the world stage. They founded anti-footbinding societies (*tianzu hui*), advocating for "natural feet" (*tianzu*). These movements gained momentum as part of a broader push for social reform, women's liberation, and national rejuvenation, recognizing that the practice undermined public health and China's international image.

The formal prohibition of footbinding came in stages. The Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) briefly banned it in areas under its control. The most decisive legal action came in the early 20th century, with the fall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. The new government formally outlawed footbinding, implementing strict penalties for those who continued the practice. However, enforcement was challenging, especially in remote areas, and the practice persisted clandestinely for several decades. It was only with the vigorous campaigns of the Communist Party of China after 1949, which utilized public education, social pressure, and stringent enforcement, that footbinding was finally eradicated across the vast majority of the country. Today, footbinding is widely recognized as a harmful historical practice, a complex legacy that reflects both the enduring power of cultural norms and the transformative potential of social

reform.

## Further Reading

[Footbinding on Wikipedia](#)

[Song dynasty on Wikipedia](#)

[Qing dynasty on Wikipedia](#)

[Kang Youwei on Wikipedia](#)

[Liang Qichao on Wikipedia](#)

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