

Footbinding in China

Ida Pfeiffer, An Austrian Lady who was a professional traveler and writer, her book, 1851 CE

Although I had heard a great deal about the small feet of Chinese women, I was greatly astonished at their appearance. Through the kind assistance of a missionary's lady (Mrs. Balt) I was enabled to behold one of these small feet in naturâ. Four of the toes were bent under the sole of the foot, to which they were firmly pressed, and with which they appeared to be grown together; the great toe was alone left in its normal state. The fore-part of the foot had been so compressed with strong broad bandages, that instead of expanding in length and breadth, it had shot upwards and formed a large lump at the instep, where it made part and parcel of the leg; the lower portion of the foot was scarcely four inches long, and an inch and a half broad. The feet are always swathed in white linen or silk, bound round with silk bandages and stuffed into pretty little shoes, with very high heels. To my astonishment these deformed beings tripped about, as if in defiance of us broad-footed creatures, with tolerable ease, the only difference in their gait being that they waddled like geese; they even ran up and down stairs without the aid of a stick. The only persons exempted from this Chinese method of improving their beauty are girls of the lowest class—that is, those who live in boats; in families of rank they are all subject to the same fate; while in those of the middle classes, as a general rule, it is limited to the eldest daughter. The worth of a bride is reckoned by the smallness of her feet. This process of mutilation is not commenced immediately the child is born, but is deferred until the end of the first, or sometimes even third year, nor is the foot after the operation forced into an iron shoe, as many have affirmed, but merely firmly compressed with bandages.

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