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Female Body Modification through Physical Manipulation: A Comparison of Foot-Binding and Corsetry

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Female Body Modification through Physical Manipulation:
A Comparison of Foot-Binding and Corsetry

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SIGNATURE PAGE

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ABSTRACT

Over the past fifty years, with the continuing contributions of many Gender History scholars, historians are now presented with an opportunity to explore an often overlooked area within the physical manipulation of women’s bodies. There are a variety of means by which the female form is shaped by the cultural and societal norms, including the pressures to look young and beautiful. However, few connections have been made between two well-known and well-researched areas: foot-binding and corsetry. The first was practiced by women for one-thousand years in China, ending in the early years of the Communist revolution. The second were tightly-laced garments worn by middle- and upper-class women in Europe and, later, America from as early as the fifteenth century until the present. This thesis argues that they share a connection that other scholars have overlooked: both were fetishized and sexualized for the pleasure of men. This research is important in the modern era because women around the world continue to alter their bodies in increasingly controversial and radical ways.
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Chapter One

In 1909, the Empress Dowager of China, Ci-xi, sat in her palace with a small group of foreign and Chinese women. A Chinese woman, whose husband was a diplomat in Europe, was dressed in western-style clothes. She said to the Empress Dowager, “The bound feet of the Chinese women make us the laughing-stock of the world.”

“I have heard,” said the Empress Dowager, “that the foreigners have a custom which is not above reproach, and now since there are no outsiders here, I would like to see what the foreign ladies use in binding their waist.” The woman showed the Empress her daughter’s corset and Ci-xi ordered that both daughters wear proper Manchu outfits thenceforth. She said, “It is truly pathetic what foreign women have to endure. They are bound up with steel bars until they can scarcely breathe. Pitiable! Pitiable!”

Figure 1: Photograph of Empress Dowager Ci-xi with a group of European women. Beverly Jackson, Splendid Slippers, 1997, 151.

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Due to the advancement of Gender History in the past fifty years and the contributions of many scholars, historians have been presented with an opportunity to explore a previously over-looked subject, the physical manipulation of women’s bodies. Although many historians have researched the various means by which the female form is shaped by cultural and societal norms, few connections have been made between two well-known and well-researched areas. The first, foot-binding, was practiced by women for one-thousand years in China and the echoes of its impact lived on in the women who lived through it. The second, corsets, were tightly-laced garments worn by middle- and upper-class women in Europe from as early as the fifteenth century until the present. Research on these two forms of manipulation is important in the modern era because women around the world continue to alter their bodies in controversial and radical ways. This paper argues that both Europe and East Asia have fetishized parts of the female body through physical modifications and that the scholarship has remained largely silent on this explicit connection.

David Kunzle defines fetishism as “the individual displacement of private erotic feeling onto a non-genital part of the body, or onto a particular article of clothing by association with a part of the body, or onto an article of clothing in conjunction with its effect on the body.”\(^2\) This thesis will use Kunzle’s definition for its central argument that both foot-binding and corsetry constitute a desire to control the female body for erotic or fetishistic purposes. Various words have been used to describe foot-binding and corsetry. For example, in ancient China, bound feet were also referred to as “lotus feet,” “the golden lotus,” “club feet,” and simply “bound feet.” Corsetry had many transformations

and each was called something different, such as “the S-bend,” “tight-lacing,” and “stays.” The introductory story highlights one of the few explicit comparisons of foot-binding and corsetry I found during my research. Numerous works have been published on each subject, but a direct comparison of the two has yet to be the focus of a major study. When one researches the origins, fetishization, and eventual fate of these forms of female body modification, one can see a number of compelling parallels. The varieties that can be found across cultures and across time are plentiful and, frequently, violent. But the question arises, where do these customs come from? Did a single woman begin binding her feet or was it a group of women; did the corset arise from previous fashion trends, or did it simply appear on a dress for a French queen?

**Origins of Foot-Binding**

The origins of foot-binding are difficult to track to a specific dynastic period in ancient China. It is important to note that “[b]ehind the uniform label of ‘footbinding’ lay a colorful variety of local traditions and distinct practices.” Dorothy Ko explains: “local variations in method of binding, desired length and shape, age of initiation, required paraphernalia [sic], public and private rituals, shoe patterns, and terminologies of footbinding”\(^3\) varied too greatly; thus a single chronicle of its origins and practice could not be produced. The most well-known custom involved using cloth binders, with which four of the toes were bent down, toward the heel so as to achieve the desired arch shape.

Many sources discuss a concubine named Da Ji – or Daji, as she is known – who is claimed to have had a clubfoot and asked the emperor of the Shang Dynasty (1600-

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1046 B.C.E.) to impose foot-binding on all women as a way of making her own feet appear more beautiful. Many claim that Daji was an extremely violent woman, though there are few sources remaining that prove this. Possibly because of how infatuated the Emperor was with her, or possibly because it is true, all record of Daji portrays her as malevolent, telling stories of her supposed evil deeds. She is portrayed as an evil fox spirit in Xu Zhonglin’s fantasy novel, Fengshen Yanyi [Creation of the Gods] from the 1550s.⁴

Gerry Mackey claims that foot-binding began during the Sung dynasty (960-1279 C.E.); he explains that, during this particular dynasty, the “status of women declined... Concubinage [sic] expanded, upper-class dowries increased, and a neo-Confucian ideology including tenets of female chastity, seclusion, and subordination, emerged and came to reign.”⁵ Many scholars concur that the roots of foot binding lie in the Sung dynasty in China. A story tells of Emperor Li Yu having a sexual fetish for tiny feet; he made his concubine perform a dance similar to ballet, called ‘toe dance,’ while her feet were bound. The concubine’s name was Yao Niang.⁶ The emperor expressed admiration for her and said “Look! A golden lotus springs up from her every step!”⁷ If this story is accurate, it indicates where the namesake comes from.

Gerry Mackie also refers to a document from the late fourteenth-century that cites a document from the early twelfth-century which discusses foot-binding as a recently

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⁵ Ibid. 1000.


occurring practice. The same discussion notes that “footbinding was invented by a favorite dancer in the palace of Southern T’ang (937-976 C.E.) Emperor and love poet Li Yu and then spread by imitation until people were ashamed not to practice it.”

The popularity of this dancer made the practice more and more common. Another possible origin of foot-binding is suggested by an eleventh century poem, praising a dancer whose feet were the “palace style.”

Whoever she was, the woman who began this phenomenon was a sex symbol, written about in poems and epic fantasies, which then spread across the region. Wherever she went, women followed in her dainty footsteps to be found more attractive. After the late twelfth-century, offhand references to the practice become more common and it was ordinary by the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The practice was so fashionable that, when the Mongols invaded China and created the Yuan Dynasty in 1271, they forbade their women from binding their feet. This led to the creation of new shoes that gave Mongolian women the same walk as traditionally bound Chinese women.

An interesting side note regards the possible visit of Marco Polo to China from 1275 to 1292. In The Travels of Marco Polo, he wrote about Chinese sexuality in depth, but did not mention foot-binding. However, according to some scholars, the lack of discussion of foot-binding or even the Great Wall of China in his work has led some to question whether he truly did travel there, or whether foot-binding was as prominent as

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many sources suggest.\textsuperscript{11} According to Mike Edwards and Li Zhengyu, on their own travels of the Silk Road, for example, they noted that the Great Wall was visible for miles along their journey, but Polo never mentioned it either.

An interesting source was found in Beverly Jackson’s *Splendid Slippers*, where she discusses an eighteenth century writer, named Li Ju-Chen and his novel *Ching-Hua Yuan*. It is a criticism of the practice of foot-binding, set in the seventh century, and in it, an Empress ruled with male concubines. All gender roles were reversed and boys’ feet were bound; the author argues against the practice through his male character, Lin Chi-yang, who is a cosmetics salesperson, whom the Empress has imprisoned and whose feet are ordered to be bound. The detailed process is excruciating and he is guarded twenty-four hours a day to make sure he does not attempt to unbind them. His flesh decays, his ankles and legs atrophy, and afterward, he can only walk with the help of an attendant. The author uses his story as a social critique of China; his final analysis was that “footbinding was a demonstration of male lewdness.”\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} Mike Edwards, “Marco Polo part II: In China,” *National Geographic*, June 2001.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{12} Beverly Jackson, *Splendid Slippers*, 142-143.
\end{flushleft}
Beverly Jackson cites a story of a British woman who travelled to China in the nineteenth century with her husband and became friendly with a wealthy Chinese woman. “At one point, [the British woman] asked her friend, ‘What would you like to be if you come back after death?’ Looking at her tiny bound feet, the Chinese woman replied, ‘I would like to come back as a dog. Then I could roam wherever I pleased’.”13 Jackson explains that “millions of Chinese women had endured the unimaginable pain of

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13 Beverly Jackson, 140.
the footbinding process, and in doing so, had sacrificed forever their ability to move about freely and normally."\(^\text{14}\)

![Figure 3: A Manchu lady wearing high, cork-soled shoes. From Beverly Jackson, Splendid Slippers: a Thousand Years of An Erotic Tradition, 50.](image)

The process of foot-binding was extremely painful and that pain never went away. It was propagated against women for nearly one-thousand years, from ancient China until the early twentieth century. In his film series, *The Human Sexes*, Desmond Morris describes one of the ways that young girl’s feet were systematically crushed in order to form the small, hoof-like lotus feet:

As a small girl, maybe only six or seven, her mother would have insisted on her going to the footbinder and there, she’d have had her foot crushed. It was done with a long tape, about two inches wide and about ten feet long, and it was wrapped ‘round and ‘round her tiny foot. The toes – the four smaller toes were curled underneath, the big toe was left straight, and

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid, 24.

*Figure*: A Manchu lady wearing high, cork-soled shoes. From Beverly Jackson, *Splendid Slippers: a Thousand Years of An Erotic Tradition*, 50.
then in a figure of eight, it was wrapped ‘round and ‘round the heel, pulling the soul and heel together until the foot was crushed up tight. It is clear that this process was a means by which society hobbled women and created a specific body shape to which Chinese women and girls adhered for centuries.

![Figure 4: Dorothy Ko, Cinderella’s Sisters, Fig. 3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUj0116sucU&feature=share&list=PL_IllrxtPPr9a5dofY-AX6ZJ4aXbAC)

**Figure 4:** Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, Fig. 3

These women lived in a culture that said that small feet were the pinnacle of status for them, that their tiny feet made them desirable, made their daughters marriageable, and offered their granddaughters the opportunity for a better life, possibly, than they had for themselves. Gerry Mackie states that “footbinding originated in

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**Figure:** Dorothy Ko *Cinderella’s Sisters*, Fig. 3
aesthetic appreciation of the small foot and was maintained by male erotic interest.”

Fred Blake discusses the allocation of female labor in an era in Chinese history when women’s feet made working nigh impossible. Of course, low-class women who worked on farms did not bind their feet, and these women would be hard-pressed ever to marry above their class.

![Figure 5: “Woman with Bound Feet Reclining in Chaise Lounge, China,” Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b27200](image)

### Origins of Corsetry

David Kunzle states, “[In] the nineteenth century comparisons were always being drawn between European tight-lacing and Chinese foot-binding.” Corsetry and ‘tight-lacing’ may not have been a practice focused on women’s feet, but it had similar effects on women’s mobility and health. Unlike normal fashions, tight-lacing continued as a

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16 Gerry Mackie, “Ending Footbinding and Infibulation,” 1002.

social practice, even though it was rallied against throughout the nineteenth century.

According to W. B. Lord, as of the year 1810, corsets were no longer made of whale bone or hardened leather, but of iron bars or steel, three to four inches wide, and as long as eighteen inches. She also explains that, “[from] periods of very remote antiquity, and with the gradual increase of civilisation [sic], much attention appears to have been paid to the formation and cultivation of the female figure.”


This statement helps to explain the growth of female body modification through various forms of manipulation around the world and it pertinent to this discussion of corsetry. Valerie Steele is a Fashion Historian and museum curator at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. Her work, *The Corset: A Cultural History* is a historical text, but it is obvious that her agenda is more to focus on the corset as a fashion piece. In the first chapter, she discusses the palace at Knossos, which was believed to be

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**Figure:** Corset of Messrs. De La Garde, Paris, front and back.
the origin point for the corset, in Minoan Crete. She says, “[It] is true that in the third millennium BCE, wall paintings and statues depicted female figures wearing tight bodices that expose their breasts.” She continues, “[M]osaics and wall paintings also show that women of ancient Rome and Pompeii wrapped cloth around their breasts.” Steele agrees that these garments are forerunners of corsets, but claims that there was no such thing as a corset until the sixteenth century.

The predecessors of the corset can be traced far back into antiquity, with hunters fashioning stiff belts, including the use of bones to stave off creasing in the waist. Early in civilization, there is evidence of various methods employed to reduce the female figure, including those of a lost people from South America, called the Polenqui. Among the very few pieces left from this civilization, there is a bas-relief of a woman, heavily ornamented, with a “complicated and elaborate waist-bandage, which … confines the waist from just below the ribs to the hips as firmly and compactly as the most unyielding corset of the present day.” Similarly, there were a people who lived in the islands of Eastern Archipelago where young women wore a “spirally arranged rattan cane” around their waists, which “when made sufficiently broad to fit without undue friction, and stiff enough to prevent folding together” while performing various tasks, they “became in effect corsets.” This garment was not removed until the marriage ceremony. Moving forward in history, it should be noted that Homer wrote of a corset-like garment. Its wearer is most important to this paper: Venus, the goddess of love and sexuality wore a

\[\text{Valerie Steele, } \textit{The Corset}, 4.\]

\[\text{W.B. Lord, } \textit{The Corset and the Crinoline}, 1-2.\]

\[\text{Ibid, 2.}\]
girdle, which Juno borrowed to increase her own personal attractions. Roman women often wore girdles, as well as a bandage around their breasts, a *stophium*, like a stay or a bodice.\(^23\) Homer also spoke of the *peplus*, which was a decorated garment that he mentions often in his epics, but always with an epithet to distinguish its ornamentation.

Health issues that arise from the corset depend on the model. As mentioned previously, the more extreme S-bend, or Straight Front corset caused back pain, hyper-extension, and many other issues. Valerie Steele discusses the modern tight-lacer Catherine Jung, the Guinness World Record’s “Smallest Waist – Living Person.”\(^24\) Her x-rays “indicate clearly that a tight corset does indeed push the ribs significantly in and up, altering the position of internal organs.”\(^25\) Jung, herself, claims that she wears the tight corset “because her husband finds it attractive.”\(^26\)

Similar to foot-binding in China, corsetry was associated with higher class status and sexual attractiveness. In a letter published in *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* in September, 1867, one man asserts:

> Now there can be no doubt that gentlemen admire those figures the most which have attained the greatest slenderness. I think there is no more deplorable sight than a large and clumsy waist; and as nature, without assistance from art, seldom produces a really small waist, I think those mothers and schoolmistresses who insist upon their daughters or pupils between the ages of ten and seventeen wearing well-made corsets, and having them tightly laced, confer upon the young ladies a great benefit.

\(^23\) Ibid, 30.


\(^25\) Valerie Steel, *The Corset*, 69.

\(^26\) Ibid, 91.
The same letter states that “a waist that two hands can easily clasp is certainly a marvel.” Measuring the waist by clasping one’s hands around it could make it eighteen inches, even fifteen inches or less. In her autobiography, Josephine DeMott Robinson discusses the first time she came in contact with a woman wearing a tight-laced corset. The woman was embroidering while Josephine watched. “After a while she dropped her thimble, pushed a bell, and when Jane came in, she asked her to find her thimble and give it to her. Perhaps my surprise was a little too open-mouthed, for she explained that she disliked to bend. It made her short of breath, and besides it broke the bones in her corset, and the new one was such a beauty and cost so much, she never stooped in it.” It was immediately after this encounter that Josephine herself, a circus acrobatics star, went to be measured and get her own corset. She was able to get her own waist down to eighteen inches. She told her friends, “‘Good strong laces and a bed post. Hold in your breath.’ And I paraded my wasp waist proudly before them.”

The link between corsetry and social status becomes more prominent in my research. The connection between corsetry and sexuality was enhanced because of societal standards of beauty and eroticism. But corsetry, like foot-binding, was physically disabling and led to decreased mobility in the name of feminine beauty and sexuality.

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29 Josephine DeMott Robinson, 186-187.

**Figure:** “Vintage Corset Ad Print.” Zazzle. Originally published in *The Designer*, Oct. 1906. http://www.zazzle.com/vintage_corset_ad_print_4_poster-228806321217063099
Chapter Two

Turning Manipulated Bodies into Fetishized Objects

Foot-Binding

Dorothy Ko discusses the sexual gratification that came from foot-binding: “it rendered [women] sex objects to satisfy certain perverted erotic fantasies of men.” 30 This point only begins to touch on the eroticism that scholars associate with the practice. According to Desmond Morris, “during love making, men would touch it, caress it, kiss it, suck it, and even put the whole foot inside their mouth as part of the erotic foreplay of love.” 31 Gerry Mackie notes that bound feet carried strong assumptions of the woman’s


modesty, as well as her sexual prowess; the woman’s feet “became a sexual fetish; they were said to be conducive to better intercourse, but this claim was medically false.” As mentioned above, a story asserts that Emperor Li Yu, of the Southern Tang dynasty, had a sexual fetish for tiny feet. It claims that he made his concubine, Yao Niang, perform a dance similar to ballet, called the ‘toe dance,’ while her feet were bound. The emperor expressed admiration for her and called her feet golden lotuses. Gerry Mackey states:

> The Chinese offered various explanations for footbinding. It was said to distinguish the Chinese from the invading Mongols and other barbarians and to enhance the difference between men and women. It was believed to promote good health and fertility. For Chinese men, bound feet were universally associated with higher-status love and sex, and so carried strong connotations of both modesty and lasciviousness. Bound feet became a sexual fetish.

In the twelfth century, Chu Hsi, the neo-Confucian philosopher, forced foot-binding on a province in southern China believing that it would reinforce female chastity. “The historical record contains several explicit statements over the centuries that the purpose of footbinding was to hobble women and thereby promote their seclusion and fidelity. Finally, the record is abundantly clear that the immediate explanation always given for footbinding in its heyday was to secure a proper marriage.” Beverly Jackson explains that the pressure to have one’s feet bound was very complicated; “it had to do with marriage; it had to do with sex; it had to do with status; it had to do with beauty; it

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36 Gerry Mackie, “Ending Footbinding and Infibulation,” 1002.
had to do with duty.” She also explains that ancient Chinese erotica nearly always featured women with bound feet. She claims that there is art depicting men masturbating to a pair of “lotus shoes.” It was not uncommon for Chinese men to go to great lengths to get a pair of lotus shoes that belonged to a woman that they desired. “The shoes themselves, I learned, could be the most potent stimulus of all.” Of course, those shoes which were covetted the most would be the red silk shoes that women wore to bed – these would be the most difficult to obtain.

Centuries ago, there lived a lotus foot “connoisseur” named Fang Xun. He attempted to identify and rank various types of bound feet and found fifty-eight strong variations. The plumpest were ranked as the best, “as it implied voluptuous beauty;” followed by the softest. Those at the bottom included a woman whose heel was very large, “she gave the impression of a climbing monkey.” He catalogued the varieties he found and even gave them names in order to distinguish the differences. “There was the Long Hairpin Lotus, which was shaped like a bamboo shoot but was too long and thin to satisfy critical aesthetic standards. Herring Feet was another unflattering name for feet that were too long and thin.” He also cautioned men to never remove the bindings, because the foot beneath was not at all what they had fantasized about. “If you remove the shoes and bindings, the aesthetic will be destroyed forever.” Fang Xun found that

37 Beverly Jackson, Splendid Slippers, 24.
38 Ibid, 104.
41 Ibid, 107.
the most erotic experience of bound feet was to hold one in the palm of his hand; he also found the imprints the shoes left in the snow to be very sexually exciting. Beverly Jackson explains:

Of particular sexual importance was the crevice of the foot that was created by the breaking of the arch during the original binding process. This crevice was sometimes treated like a second vagina. The man could utilize this crevice while gazing upon the woman’s genitals...Or he could enjoy viewing her genitals unobstructed while holding and caressing her feet, or rubbing the feet against his own genitals. Handling the feet during lovemaking was a very important factor.\(^{43}\)

Jackson goes on to note that this was not practiced everywhere, as in some provinces, it was considered bad luck to see a woman’s genitals. During intercourse, it was also common practice to squeeze a woman’s feet tightly.

The positioning of a woman’s feet was very important as well. If she were seated in the man’s lap, cross-legged, in the lotus position and placed her feet in his hands that was highly erotic. Or if her feet rested on his shoulders, while wearing her red silk sleeping slippers, that was also popular. If she wrapped her legs around his back, it was very arousing because he would be forced to reach around to feel them. “Just thinking of the feet, or calling them by one of their special, erotically related names was adequate stimulus for many men to achieve full arousal.”\(^{44}\)

In my research, I found a wood-cutting of erotic images of men and women having intercourse that featured a section similar to the positions described previously. It shows the woman on top of the man and he is gripping her small foot which has a red silk

\(^{43}\) Ibid, 108.
\(^{44}\) Ibid, 108.
shoe on it. This image lends credence to many sources that discuss the sexualization of bound feet and how they were seen by men in China.

**Corsetry**

According to David Kunzle: “[The] socio-sexual symbolism of tight-lacing and its ritual components reveal its essentially ambivalent purpose – to enforce the sexual taboo by objectively oppressing the body, and simultaneously to break that taboo by enhancing the body.” Kunzle also discusses the term “tight-lacing” as a variation of the corseted look, beginning in the mid-fourteenth century. He claims that it was an “erotic [form] of dress” and that the crusade against it was essentially a crusade against sexuality. In the mid-fourteenth century, tight-lacing was a mostly middle- to upper-class activity. Those of the lower classes that engaged in this “erotic display” were criticized by members of their own class for exploiting their sexuality to attain upward mobility. While it is not true, according to Leigh Summers, that women of lower classes went “uncorseted [sic],” it is true that wearing corsets was a middle- and upper-class fashion. She explains that both classes were complicit in the production of corsets and that women as

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47 David Kunzle, 559.

48 Ibid, 559.


**Figure:** Thomson, Langdon, & Co.’s New Style: Glove-Fitting Corsets.” *NYPL Digital Gallery,* 2011. http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchdetail.cfm?trg=1&strucId=703309&imageId=818149&total=77&num=60&parent_id=703277&s=&notword=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&sScope=&sLevel=&sLabel=&lword=&lfield=&sort=&imgs=20&pos=64&snm=&e=w.
well as men promoted the garments as more feminine. European women, in fact, promoted it for their class and their daughters.

![Thomson's New Styles Glove-Fitting Corsets](image)


According to Devendra Singh: “The popularity of the corset, in spite of internal injury it caused to women, and fashionable clothing that stressed tiny waists and exaggerated hips are testimonials for the relationship of waist to hip as an erotic symbol.”\(^{50}\) Sarah Bendall claims that the emergence of the corset “not only ushered in a new era of body discipline but changed the way that the female form was viewed.” She explains:

> No longer were women’s bodies composed simply of the flesh that early Renaissance artists had so lovingly painted … women’s bodies came to be replaced with other bodies – constructed ‘bodies’ of whalebone, horn and busks.\(^{51}\)

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Corseted forms, without lumps, imperfections, or dress malfunctions, quickly began to replace women’s natural bodies. Imperfect female bodies were easily corrected with the use of a corset and tight-lacing. Jill Fields quotes the Treasurer and General Manager of the Kalamazoo Corset Company (1921), G. B. Pulfer’s reason why women wore corsets: “Fear! Fear of ill health, fear of sagging bodies, fear of lost figure, fear of shiftless appearance in the nicest of clothing, fear of sallow complexion. Fear sends them to the corsetiere, trembling.”

Valerie Steele claims that the supporters of corsetry approved of its role in the “creation of a stylish and sexually attractive image of femininity.” She explains that the slender, elongated waist of a corseted woman was a means of flirtation, as it appeared both delicate and enticing at the same time. “The corsetière makes the woman – a living statue carved by Nature – into a statuette of gracious fragility, of conventional form, but so seductive… A narrow waist between tasty hips and proud bosom’ was always admired, but even a ‘splendid form’ was often ‘transformed according to the fantasies of fashion.’ Separately, the corset was erotic because it was also an item of lingerie and thus was associated with sexuality. The act of unlacing the corset, before sex, or lacing it up, after sex, was the subject of many erotic images and stories. In fact, “the pushing of the stay lace through the holes of the corset was itself a kind of symbolic enactment of

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54 Valerie Steele, Fashion and Eroticism, 174.
For example, La Vie Parisienne published a story, “La Corbeille de Mariage” [The Wedding Presents] from 1884, which directly links the unlacing of the new bride’s corset with the act of sexual intercourse:

Trembling, happy, your husband unlaces you with an uncertain and clumsy hand, and you laugh, mischievously, joyously ascertaining that his confusion is caused by the sight of your beauty. You are happy to feel your omnipotence: you take care not to help him untie the knots or find his way among the lace-holes; on the contrary, you take pleasure in prolonging his tentative gropings [sic], which tickle you deliciously.56

Figure 9: Vintage ad for “s-bend” corset. http://lucycorsetry.com/research-corset-brands/guided-galleries/s-bend-edwardian-corsets/

In the early twentieth century, a new corset was created, one that would force women’s bodies into the most restrictive and uncomfortable shape: the S-Line, or S-Bend. Steele explains that this corset was meant to create a healthier design, though it had the opposite

55 Ibid, 175.

effect: “... with the abdomen pushed back, the breasts thrown forward, and the back
arched. The fashionable waist was still small, and the modern woman was no longer
supposed to have a stomach.” She also notes that, because this new corset no longer
supported the breasts, it led to the creation of the modern brassiere. This claim is very
interesting as, the change in the corset may have led to the sexualization of women’s
breasts.

Steele claims that, while World War I led to a decline in the usage of metal and
bone in corsets, the sale and wearing of corsets did not slow down much. By that time,
there were already alternatives, such as rubber girdle. “Meanwhile, the war crinoline gave
way to the barrel line, and the fashionable waistline gradually dropped from just below
the bosom almost to the hips.” Regardless of the fact that feminists and doctors fought
against wearing corsets due to the health risks, the fashion did not end as dramatically as
foot-binding did in China. In Europe and America, corsets gave way to girdles and young
women were changed dramatically by the time the war ended. The “new woman” was
one without a waist and a more masculine sexuality. Men associated women’s loss of
corsets with losses of propriety and purity, which is ironic as men had previously
associated corsetry with eroticism. The removal of the corset meant that women were no
longer immobile sexual objects to be controlled.

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58 Valerie Steel. The Corset, 151.
Chapter Three

The Abolition of Foot-binding and the Evolution of Corsetry

Foot-Binding

The well-known Chinese feminist, Qiu Jin, was born in 1875. Though her feet were bound, her parents encouraged her to pursue her education and actively allowed her to participate in non-traditional activities. When she married, at first her husband gave her a great deal of freedom, but after a few years, their relationship changed. She wrote her brother that her husband treated her more like a slave than a wife and she resolved to
leave him and her two children to pursue her education in Japan. There, she became friends with exiled Chinese intellectuals and, when she returned, she began teaching Japanese in various schools to wealthy girls. She did not last long at each job, because it was discovered that she was also teaching her revolutionary ideas to the girls. Jackson claims that at one point, she nearly blew up a classroom by experimenting with explosives. By that point, she had unbound her feet. She founded a feminist newspaper, began speaking against footbinding and arranged marriages and gathered a small army of female students. They had planned to capture Hangzhou, the capital of her province, but her plans were discovered and she was beheaded on July 15th, 1907, at thirty-two years old.59 It was around this time that westerners had begun to involve themselves in the anti-foot-binding movement.

The English writer, Alicia Little, was a well-known leader in this movement. Having come to China at forty-one years old to marry an important merchant, she lived in the province of Sichuan. She famously wrote, “Instead of a hop, skip, and a jump, with rosy cheeks like the little girls of England, the poor little things are leaning heavily on a stick somewhat taller than themselves, or carried on a man’s back, or sitting sadly crying.”60 In 1885, she founded the Natural Foot Society, or Tian Zu Hui. Each time she returned to England, she worked to raise money and gather media attention for her cause. She also worked with a group of Western women living in Shanghai, whose husbands were various foreign counsels and she hoped to gain international groups to aid her cause. These efforts were supposedly effective, regardless of the distance, and thus influenced

59 Beverly Jackson, Splendid Slippers, 143.
60 Ibid. 144.
Chinese diplomats and scholars. In 1896, the viceroy of Hebei ordered his officials to
discourage binding girls’ feet in each of their districts; then the governor of Hunan
actively banned foot-binding. Kang Yu Wei, of Guangzhou, formed the No Bind Feet
Society, which urged fathers not to allow their sons to marry girls with bound feet. “In
June, Kang Yu Wei sent a memorandum to the Empress Dowager in which he stated:
‘For some time now, foreigners have taken photographs to circulate among themselves
and laugh at our barbaric ways. But the most appalling and the most humiliating is the
binding of our women’s feet. For that your servants feel deeply ashamed.’” Kang’s
daughter appeared in Shanghai as one of the fashionable ladies working in support of
unbinding, as her feet had never been bound at her father’s insistence. The work to end
foot-binding continued, as more and more came out in support of its abolition, including
the lineal descendent of Kong Fuzi (Confucius), Duke Gong Hui-zhong. He claimed to
have been uncomfortable with the practice and pitied the women on whom it was
inflicted. In 1897, a high school for young Chinese ladies was opened in Shanghai and
the majority of the sixteen girls had kept their natural feet. Education and unbinding were
already beginning to intermingle. The Empress Dowager, Ci-xi, was as much opposed to
foot-binding as other women, but refused to force her people to change their social
customs because of westerners. As more and more Europeans arrived in China, the
movement grew to end the custom.

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61 Beverly Jackson, Splendid Slippers, 146.
As the Communist movement in China grew in power, foot-binding began to die off. Though the two are not connected, the current government of China has taken credit for ending the practice. According to a government document from 1994, titled “Status of Chinese Women:”

[The] Taiping Rebellion enacted and promulgated a series of policies of gender equality; [the] Hundred Days Reform Movement advocates and ignited the [end] foot-binding and schools for women; Revolution arose in order to achieve equal rights for men and women, for women’s participation in politics as the main objective of the feminist movement. These movements promote the Chinese women’s awakening, but ultimately failed to change the Chinese women [who] have been oppressed, enslaved tragic fate fundamentally.62

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This document was commissioned following the decision by the United Nations to hold the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing. It claims that Communism in China led to the end of foot-binding, equality of the sexes, and even increased women’s access to education. I did not investigate these claims further, but my research shows that the movement to end foot-binding was in full-swing long before the Communist revolution occurred in China.

**Corsetry**

As previously discussed, throughout history, fashion innovations led to new versions of the corset. While there have been many campaigns to end its iconic status and put a stop to its destructive power, the corset as a fashion has continued into the present. Corset advocates became extremely defensive against “enemies of the corset” and mocked feminists and doctors alike for declaring that corsets caused ill health. According to *Les Desous Elégants*, in 1904, women who went un-corseted “abandoned the majority of good manners.” It claimed that “emancipated” women were vulgar, smoked in public, and would cross their legs like men. It also showed caricatures of women, without corsets, that showed them as masculine and ugly. In this way, corsets were linked to women’s sexuality and sexual attractiveness, as well as to the women’s character. If a woman chose not to wear a corset, she was too masculine, too ugly, non-sexual.

The new S-bend, or straight-front corset caused far more medical issues than previous ones, even though it had supposedly been made to counteract previous corset issues. The issues it caused were not only skeletal, but it impacted internal organ functions.

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63 Valerie Steel, *The Corset*, 145.
... the straight-front corset threw the shoulders forward, the hips and buttocks back, and caused downward and backward pressure on the pelvis. The S-Bend was achieved through lordosis (anterior curvature of the spine); pressure on the pelvic bones distorted the connection between the pelvis and the spine, which would have caused lower back pain in many cases. [It] also caused hyperextension of the knees, resulting in knee and gait abnormalities. [It] probably causes more uterine and bladder pressure and symptoms than earlier...models.\(^4\)

Summers argues that corset manufacturers perceived the New Woman to be more interested in her education and, to advertise to this character, used a pair of glasses as the academic signifier as an appeal. “Y&N advertisements usually featured a line drawing of a corseted young woman whose bespectacled face turned in contemplative profile not to a nearby mirror, as many corseted advertising subjects were wont to do, but rather into the distance toward her presumably academic career.”\(^5\) These ads were an attempt to regain lost customers as educated women had begun to abandon restrictive undergarments by the 1890s.

\[\text{Figure 12: Illustration of a woman’s skeleton, corseted and un-corseted, from Valerie Steele,}\ Corset: A Cultural History, 68.\]

\(^4\) Valerie Steel, \textit{The Corset}, 84-85.

\(^5\) Summers, Leigh. \textit{Bound to Please}, 174-175.
Figure 13: X-rays of Catherine Jung’s fifteen-inch waist. Valerie Steele, *Corset: A Cultural History*, 69.
Figure 14: Dr. Followell’s vintage “x-rays” of the effects of the corset. Image from http://www.ecouterre.com/vintage-x-rays-reveal-shocking-extent-of-corset-imposed-body-deformation/corset-x-ray-6/
Valerie Steele claims that corsets were reinvented in the early twentieth century, from a steel cage to the more accessible girdle-corset. Along with these items, the emphasis on the body changed from lacing it up to hide imperfections to exercising and losing fat. Steele quotes one writer in a 1918 article, which states: “‘In days gone by, women of leisure did not exercise,’ and died by the time they were forty-five. ‘Why? Because they were so frail, so delicate, that when illness assailed them they were as susceptible to it as a drunkard is to pneumonia.” A pamphlet from 1926 called *The Joy of Looking Slim* focused on “corrective exercises” and then focused on finding the perfect corset, with an image and caption, which read: “YOUTH AND SLENDERNESS NOT A MATTER OF YEARS.” The ideal figure of the 1920s looked similar to Twiggy, a popular model of the 1960s – “not so much ‘boyish’ as youthful.” “Although their breasts were smaller than today’s beauty contest winners, their waist-hip ratios were much the same.” By the 1930s, corset manufacturers were forced to update their products in order to maintain business as the ideal of beauty was changing. However, by 1931, corset departments were “the biggest profit-maker in virtually every department store” in the United States.

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66 Ibid, 153.
67 Ibid, 154.
68 Ibid, 154.
69 Ibid, 154.
According to Steele, the post-war era signaled a changed in the way women looked. She quotes historian James McMillan: “Probably the main reason for the new image of women in the post-war period was the fact that, thanks to changes in fashion, they looked different…and contemporaries can hardly be blamed if they took fashion to be only the external manifestation of more profound changes.”\textsuperscript{70} Steele quotes the Duchess of Westminster, saying:

\begin{quote}
Bosoms and hips were definitely \textit{out}. A lovely figure meant a perfectly straight figure and the slightest suggestion of a curve was scorned as \textit{fat}. The ideal woman’s vital statistics would probably have been something like 30-30-30.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

But, according to Steele, this was an exaggeration. Other sources she quotes demand a “well-rounded form…Round, firm, well-modeled breasts of medium size…the hips

\textsuperscript{70} Valerie Steel, \textit{Fashion and Eroticism}, 237.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 237.
should not be broader than the shoulders.” The anonymous author of *Le Nouveau Bréviere de la Beauté* explained that the ideal female figure must be “deliciously undulating.” Another source describes “the ideal type of the present” is “slim and muscurally perfect” with a “slim waist” but “rounded hips” but “It is no fault if the breasts are only small.” The Y&N advertisement advises that any girdle-corset a woman buys should be “two to four inches smaller than the original waist measurement.” Steele quotes an ad for College Girl Corsets from the 1920s, which argues that “wearing these scientific corsets is like making a daily habit of healthy exercise… within a month [you will see] health and figure improvement.”

The shift from physically manipulating the female body, with a corset or girdle, to advertising a variety of means for women to change their bodies through empowering language shows the evolution of societal control over female bodies.

**Conclusion**

In every culture, there are an array of garments and jewelry used to enhance, shrink, lengthen, or manipulate female bodies. Not all of these are connected in the same way that this thesis argues tight-lacing and foot-binding are. The main goal of this paper was to examine the two systems of modification and show parallels between them, including the way that they were fetishized practices were meant to limit women’s

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72 Ibid, 238.

73 Ibid, 238.


75 Ibid, 153.
mobility. Now, it has been nearly one hundred years since foot-binding was outlawed in China, though it did not end overnight. A connection between foot-binding in China and the wearing of high heels throughout the rest of the world has been made by Desmond Morris in the documentary, *The Human Sexes*. Could it be that small feet are still attractive to modern societies? It may be a stretch to suggest, but there is a possible connection between the sexual gratification many Chinese men experienced from bound feet and the modern foot fetish, as some people are attracted to women’s shoes as well as their feet.

Similarly, corsetry is still a form of fashion, though not as widespread or restrictive as it once was, and it remains a modern fashion as well as a form of sexual costume for both men and women in Bondage/Discipline/Domination/Submission/Sadomasochism (BDSM) fetishes. Though the tightly laced corsets of the early twentieth century were replaced with garters, girdles, and brassieres, their usage has become fetishized in a variety of taboo sexual subcultures, such as Domination-Submission, BDSM, and S&M. Due to the lack of scholarly sources on this subject, my research led me to a number of personal blogs, written by women who practice these fetishes. One was titled “The Submission of Elle,” with a tagline: “Having fun with the sexy, smart, sensual, and sumptuous side of a D/s marriage with a BDSM lifestyle.”⁷⁶

The term “D/s” implies a Dominant/submissive relationship. Each of the blogs I researched have been written by married women, or a married couple which shows that the BDSM, D/s lifestyle is often conducted in a familiar, every day environment. “The Submission of Elle” discusses the couple’s use of corsets in their sexual play and has a

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few images of women, tied up, handcuffed, or posing sexually – all wearing very tight corsets. It also shows a screenshot from *Gone with the Wind*, when Scarlet O’Hara’s character is being laced into a corset. The caption explains that women were “sporting 18 [inch] waists, or smaller with those corsets!” Although, it has been adopted as a form of sexual costume, the use of corsetry in sexual play is not necessary for the culture of BDSM, as another D/s personal blog I researched showed.

There are many different forms of female body modification to be found throughout history as well as in the modern world. Among the many forms of manipulation worth noting are Burmese neck rings, the Mursi lip plates, and a more oppressive example of this is Female Genital Mutilation, which is an extremely violent and deadly form of female body modification, often found in cultures in the Middle East and Africa. Interestingly, Female Genital Mutilation is considered to be abhorrent while vaginal cosmetic surgery is often accepted as a voluntary, state-of-the-art medical procedure. The female body is considered a work-in-progress in many cultures, regardless of race or class, and this has been the case throughout much of human history. Many forms of modification are crippling and lead to life-long agony, and some are even deadly.

It is rare that women subjected to various forms of body modification, were able to discuss their pain and rarer still that these struggles should be documented. For women today, it is more common that discourse on their experiences is encouraged. This change

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77 Hispetitelle, “Corset Waist Training | The Submission of Elle.”


79 The practice of FGM is declining in many places, though not all.
will surely aid in future research on these topics and, possibly, an increased understanding of the ways that the female form continues to be shaped and reshaped by societal pressures, beauty standards, and ideals.

Bibliography


