Throughout history, women have felt the pressure to conform to their society’s definition of beauty. Standards of beauty often reflect cultural values and beliefs, and women have gone to great lengths to meet these ideals. At times, women have had to take extreme measures to live up to these standards at the cost of their own well-being.

One of the most striking examples is the Chinese practice of foot binding. For centuries, small feet were considered very attractive and ladylike, and the Chinese believed they made a woman’s movements more feminine and dainty. In order to attain such a coveted feature, it was common practice for young girls to break and bind their toes with the intention of shrinking their feet—a process that kept them in excruciating pain for months. Foot binding was practiced for over a millennium, until the Chinese government officially outlawed the practice in 1911.
According to the legend, foot binding began when an ancient Chinese emperor’s dancer bound her feet to suggest the shape of a new moon or a flower. The emperor was impressed with her "lotus dance," and other women emulated the practice until it spread across the country. (Bound feet were also known as lotus flowers.)

Yet the Chinese foot binding tradition officially dates back to the Tang Dynasty. It gained popularity with the rise of neo-Confucianism and a hierarchical system of subservience. Scholars who reinterpreted ancient Confucian thought believed they discovered a "lost" philosophy focusing on nature, training the mind, and cultivating discipline. In neo-Confucianism, the subjects of a kingdom were expected to serve their rulers (who were considered mothers and fathers of the country) and in turn, wives were expected to defer to their husbands, sons to fathers, and the weak to the powerful.

Zhu-Xi, an influential scholar of neo-Confucianism, contributed to the acceptance of foot binding in China. According to Zhu-Xi, the practice reflected purity and discipline. He introduced it in Fujian as a way of spreading Chinese culture and teaching about the proper way for men and women to interact.

Another factor that led to the popularity of foot binding was women’s decreased involvement in civic life during the Song dynasty between 960-1279. During this period, a woman’s most important task was considered giving birth to sons. Women didn’t participate in politics and were infrequently seen on the streets, in comparison with the previous Tang dynasty. Some historians suggest that the diminished status of women during the Song Dynasty made foot binding more socially acceptable.

Binding usually began when a girl was between the ages of four and seven. First the foot was soaked in hot water and the toenails clipped. Then came the painful part: the four small toes were broken, and the foot was bandaged tightly with the toes turned under toward the bottom of the foot. (It was believed that young bones were soft, which is why binding started early.) In order for the girl to maintain her balance, the big toe was left unturned. Every few days, the foot was unwrapped and then wrapped again even tighter, until the foot shrunk to
about four inches long. The arches were also broken, which caused the foot to contract even more. The entire process could take three years or longer, and it was so debilitating that young girls from wealthy families would often receive a servant to care for her personal needs, carry her when her feet hurt, and look after her on sleepless nights when the pain was unbearable.

Foot binding wasn’t just painful. It could also be dangerous. Complications included ulcerations and gangrene, and infections caused by ingrown toenails or lack of circulation from tight bindings. Sometimes toes even fell off—though this was considered a good thing because it meant the feet could be wrapped even tighter. Bound feet also had a foul odor and left many young women hardly able to walk. Sadly, it’s estimated that up to 10 percent of girls died in the process of foot binding.

Even if mothers could have objected to putting their daughters through such a tremendously painful process, social pressure likely made them willing practitioners of foot binding. Virtuous women were prized according to the tenets of Neo-Confucianism, and foot binding was the ultimate symbol of a woman’s purity and discipline. The ability to withstand foot binding reflected a woman’s character, and her attractiveness was revealed not in her face or body, but in her feet. A girl learned that her family’s reputation was linked to the binding of her feet early in life. In fact, the process was so crucial to a woman’s status in China that a girl with natural, unbound feet had limited marriage prospects, while girls with tiny, well-bound feet increased their chances of marrying into a good family and moving up in society.

Although the practice was promoted as a way to increase health and fertility, foot binding was clearly detrimental to a woman’s well-being. It greatly limited a woman’s ability to walk, and some women became practically crippled. Bound feet forced women to hobble around and take extremely small steps. Many men found this shuffling sort of walk very attractive. Yet as a result of their compromised feet, women rarely participated in social or political life, often becoming very dependent on their husbands and families. Even this was seen as a virtue, for a woman who stayed at home was considered chaste and faithful to her husband.
At first glance, foot binding might seem to contradict Confucian thought, which forbids body mutilation. However, since the feet were considered a sort of accessory, foot binding fell into a different category altogether. Ironically, a practice promoted to achieve the ultimate symbol of beauty grossly disfigured women’s feet. The toes often became gnarled or fused together. Many men were unaware of the disfigurement caused by foot binding because women’s feet were always carefully concealed. During the day, feet were covered in a binder, socks and shoes, sprayed with perfume and scented powder, and then hidden beneath leggings and skirts. At night women wore special slippers, even while sleeping. Women were expected to wash their feet in private and separately from the rest of their bodies.

Not all Chinese practiced foot binding. It was less common among peasants and in poor communities because women were needed to work in the fields. Mongols, Hakka and Tibetans living in Chinese territory didn’t bind their feet at all. In Manchu province, foot binding was outlawed. Yet because the “hobble” associated with bound feet was considered attractive, a special type of "flower bowl" shoe was invented in Manchu to give women the same swaying small steps. The shoe sat on a high platform made of wood or had a small central pedestal.

By the 20th century, both native Chinese and Christian missionaries were calling the practice of foot binding into question. Anti-foot binding reformers created natural-foot societies for members who promised not to bind their daughter’s feet, or not let their sons marry women with bound feet. Many women’s rights groups attacked the practice because of the suffering it caused women. Educated Chinese felt that the practice made them seem uncivilized to the rest of the world. Yet even after the government banned the practice in the early 20th century, some girls continued to bind their feet because it was such a long-held status symbol and a way for a woman to marry into money.

Today, few women with bound feet are still alive. The tiny, intricately decorated special shoes made for bound feet will be all that remains of the painful practice.
1. How did women in China bind their feet?

   A. They broke their toes and wrapped the feet tightly.
   B. They wrapped their toes together with bandages.
   C. They broke their big toe and wrapped it under the foot.
   D. They broke their toes and arches but did not wrap them.

2. What does the author mostly describe in the passage?

   A. the rising popularity of neo-Confucianism
   B. the practice of foot binding and its effects
   C. how the bones in feet naturally grow
   D. why women accept painful beauty procedures

3. In China, having bound feet was a marker of wealth and status. What evidence from the passage supports this conclusion?

   A. “Although the practice was promoted as a way to increase health and fertility, foot binding was clearly detrimental to a woman’s well-being.”
   B. “Virtuous women were prized according to the tenets of Neo-Confucianism, and foot binding was the ultimate symbol of a woman’s purity and discipline.”
   C. “According to the legend, foot binding began when an ancient Chinese emperor’s dancer bound her feet to suggest the shape of a new moon or a flower.”
   D. “Girls with tiny, well-bound feet increased their chances of marrying into a good family and moving up in society.”

4. “During the day, feet were covered in a binder, socks and shoes, sprayed with perfume and scented powder, and then hidden beneath leggings and skirts. At night women wore special slippers, even while sleeping. Women were expected to wash their feet in private and separately from the rest of their bodies.”

   What is a probable reason for why women’s feet were always concealed?

   A. because women’s feet were considered dirty
   B. because only a woman’s husband could see her feet
   C. to preserve the illusion of ideal beauty
   D. because men did not like to look at feet

5. What is this passage mostly about?

   A. foot binding in China
   B. neo-Confucianism
   C. standards of beauty
   D. women in ancient China
6. Read the following sentences: “[Foot binding] greatly limited a woman’s ability to walk, and some women became practically crippled. Bound feet forced women to **hobble** around and take extremely small steps. Many men found this shuffling sort of walk very attractive.”

What does “**hobble**” mean as used in this sentence?

A to walk quickly and purposefully  
B to walk unsteadily or with difficulty  
C to glide forward smoothly  
D to move in a quick, jumping motion

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

________ foot binding was promoted as a way to achieve ideal beauty, in reality it horribly disfigured women’s feet.

A In conclusion  
B Initially  
C For instance  
D While

8. Describe the dangers to a woman’s health that were associated with foot binding.

______________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________
9. Explain how having tiny, bound feet affected a woman’s reputation and social standing during the height of foot binding in China.

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10. Explain why Chinese mothers allowed their daughters’ feet to be bound despite the pain and the dangers to their daughters’ health.

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Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1190

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8. Describe the dangers to a woman’s health that were associated with foot binding.

**Suggested answer:** Health dangers included: gangrene, ulcerations, infections from ingrown toenails or lack of circulation, loss of toes, and possibly death.

9. Explain how having tiny, bound feet affected a woman’s reputation and social standing during the height of foot binding in China.

**Suggested answer:** A woman with tiny, bound feet was considered more attractive and ladylike. Foot binding was a symbol of purity and discipline. A woman with bound feet had much better marriage prospects than a woman with natural feet: bound feet increased a woman’s chances of marrying into money and increasing her family’s status and reputation.

10. Explain why Chinese mothers allowed their daughters’ feet to be bound despite the pain and the dangers to their daughters’ health.

**Suggested answer:** Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage. For example, students may explain that Chinese mothers allowed their daughters’ feet to be bound despite the pain and dangers to their daughters’ health because of societal pressure. According to neo-Confucianism, bound feet were the ultimate symbol of purity and discipline. Mothers likely wanted the best social prospects for their children, and a woman with bound feet had a much better chance of marrying into a good family and moving up in society.