For thousands of years, in all parts of the world, women and men have gone to dramatic lengths to change how they look. Anthropologists, who study different cultures, say that adults as well as young people often alter their bodies to conform to what’s considered more attractive in their culture, to get attention or be envied, and to show off their wealth and status in society. What is considered beautiful varies at different times in history, and in different cultures. For example, tattoos were totally unacceptable for young women in most Western countries 50 years ago, but they are much more common now.

The desire to alter one’s appearance for beauty is so universal that it may be an “inborn” trait. Each morning when we get up, we style our hair, we choose certain clothing, we may put on makeup, and we may wear jewelry—all for beauty. Sometimes people will engage in extreme practices to alter their natural appearance—practices that often can be extremely painful and damaging to the body. Yet these practices may seem perfectly normal at the time and place where they are practiced, even though other cultures may find them quite unacceptable and not beautiful.

**Binding Female Feet**

One such custom is foot binding. In China, foot binding was a common practice for women from the 10th century onward, and did not fully end until the mid-1900s. Some people tried to ban the practice in the 1600s and at other times, but the custom was so established that it was impossible to enforce the ban. Even though it seems strange to us, women and their families thought that binding female feet until they were tiny enough to be called “lotus feet” was very “ladylike” and attractive.

Achieving the “perfect” lotus foot was very painful, and began when girls were between 2 and 5 years old. Here’s how it happened. First, the girl’s feet were softened in a warm brew of animal blood and herbs. The toenails were cut back to prevent infections. After a girl’s feet were massaged to relax the ligaments, her toes were curled under and pressed into the sole of the foot until the toes broke. As the feet were bent back, the arches were broken. Cloth strips soaked in the same herbal mixture were wrapped to hold the girl’s toes against the sole of the foot. The binding-cloth ends were sewn tightly to prevent the girl from undoing them, and the girl was required to stand on her bound feet to further press them into shape.

The girl’s broken feet required a lot of attention—they would be unbound frequently for washing, nail-trimming, checking for wounds, soaking to remove dead skin, and more massage. Sometimes infections caused

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**How We Change Bodies Now**

Plastic surgery procedure rates continue to rise in the US, with 13.8 million surgeries done in 2011—nearly twice the number done in 2000. The most popular surgeries last year were breast augmentation, followed by nose reshaping, liposuction, eyelid surgery, and facelift, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. Compared to 2000, men make up more of the total surgeries, but women still account for 82% of procedures. In 2010, nose reshaping was the most often performed surgery for 13-19-year-olds; over 8,500 breast enlargements were also done on teens that year.
the toes to fall off—a welcome move, because that meant the feet could then be bound even more tightly.

Take a look at the X-ray to see how the broken, bound feet would change a girl’s daily life. Foot binding prevented her feet from growing, and kept her from standing and walking properly. Foot binding caused lifelong disabilities for millions of women. They could not put weight on the front of their feet, and were forced to walk slowly and unsteadily on their heels.

**Modern Versions of Foot Binding?**

Sociology is the scientific study of human social behavior and societies. Many sociological studies of different beauty practices have found that customs such as foot binding can be a form of “social control” that shapes people’s behavior to conform to what is expected of them within their society. Girls and women with bound feet couldn’t walk well, so they couldn’t participate in many activities. They stayed at home much of the time, and could not go far without depending on their families, particularly fathers and brothers.

So why did they do it? Social control was at work: foot binding was considered important for marriage and family honor, so there was pressure for families and girls to conform. If they didn’t, they’d be seen as outcasts.

If you think social control ended with foot binding, think again. Find pictures of how girls and women used to look and dress 100 years ago in old books, magazines, photos, and online. Think about what types of beauty practices have been popular in the past few centuries. Consider the corsets that squeezed women’s ribs and internal organs all day long, and the tight girdles that followed corsets. Look at the bathing suits women wore in times past. How do you think the “acceptable” clothing of that time affected the movement of girls and women? Could they play outdoor games and sports very well?

Now think about the beauty norms of today. What effect might popular fashions such as high-heeled shoes, tight clothes, and tiny bathing suits have on girls and women? Are the clothes marketed to us a form of social control? If so, in what way?

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Ultra-high heels: modern footbinding?

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**Feet First**

- Look at the pictures of the bound feet and make a list of the possible effects the practice would have. Consider everything from spine position to blood circulation.
- Compare your feet to the feet of your friends and family members. Notice the differences in toe shapes, toe and feet sizes, and arch position. Chart whose feet are similar and different.

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**Melissa, 11, goes to a music-focused school in Ontario, Canada. She enjoys music (especially playing the piano and violin), ringette (a game played on ice with sticks and a rubber ring), skiing, swimming, reading, and writing.**

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**CAGIS is a science club for girls ages 7-16 with chapters across Canada and members around the world! Chapters look behind the scenes at science in action with adult scientists, and try it out for themselves with fun, hands-on activities. Learn more at www.cagis.ca.**