

How Footbinding Started

A Chinese Wonder Book

Chinese

Intermediate

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In the very beginning of all things, when the gods were creating the world, at last the time came to separate the earth from the heavens. This was hard work, and if it had not been for the coolness and skill of a young goddess all would have failed. This goddess was named Lu-o. She had been idly watching the growth of the planet, when, to her horror, she saw the newly made ball slipping slowly from its place. In another second it would have shot down into the bottomless pit. Quick as a flash Lu-o stopped it with her magic wand and held it firmly until the chief god came dashing up to the rescue.

But this was not all. When men and women were put on the earth Lu-o helped them greatly by setting an example of purity and kindness. Every one loved her and pointed her out as the one who was always willing to do a good deed. After she had left the world and gone into the land of the gods, beautiful statues of her were set up in many temples to keep her image always before the eyes of sinful people. The greatest of these was in the capital city. Thus, when sorrowful women wished to offer up their prayers to some virtuous goddess they would go to a temple of Lu-o and pour out their hearts before her shrine.

At one time the wicked Chow-sin, last ruler of the Yins, went to pray in the city Temple. There his royal eyes were captivated by the sight of a wonderful face, the beauty of which was so great that he fell in love with it at once, telling his ministers that he wished he might take this goddess, who was no other than Lu-o, for one of his wives.

Now Lu-o was terribly angry that an earthly prince should dare to make such a remark about her. Then and there she determined to punish the Emperor. Calling her assistant spirits, she told them of Chow-sin's insult. Of all her servants the most cunning was one whom we shall call Fox Sprite, because he really belonged to the fox family. Lu-o ordered Fox Sprite to spare himself no trouble in making the wicked ruler suffer for his impudence.

For many days, try as he would, Chow-sin, the great Son of Heaven, could not forget the face he had seen in the temple.

"He is stark mad," laughed his courtiers behind his back, "to fall in love with a statue."

"I must find a woman just like her," said the Emperor, "and take her to wife."

"Why not, most Mighty One," suggested a favourite adviser, "send forth a command throughout the length and breadth of your Empire, that no maiden shall be taken in marriage until you have chosen yourself a wife whose beauty shall equal that of Lu-o?"

Chow-sin was pleased with this suggestion and doubtless would have followed it had not his Prime Minister begged him to postpone issuing the order. "Your Imperial Highness," began the official, "since you have been pleased once or twice to follow my counsel, I beg of you to give ear now to what I say."

"Speak, and your words shall have my best attention," replied Chow-sin, with a gracious wave of the hand.

"Know then, Great One, that in the southern part of your realm there dwells a viceroy whose bravery has made him famous in battle."

"Are you speaking of Su-nan?" questioned Chow-sin, frowning, for this Su-nan had once been a rebel.

"None other, mighty Son of Heaven. Famous is he as a soldier, but his name is now even greater in that he is the father of the most beautiful girl in all China. This lovely flower that has bloomed of late within his household is still unmarried. Why not order her father to bring her to the palace that you may wed her and place her in your royal dwelling?"

“And are you sure of this wondrous beauty you describe so prettily?” asked the ruler, a smile of pleasure lighting up his face.

“So sure that I will stake my head on your being satisfied.”

“Enough! I command you at once to summon the viceroy and his daughter. Add the imperial seal to the message.”

The Prime Minister smilingly departed to give the order. In his heart he was more than delighted that the Emperor had accepted his suggestion, for Su-nan, the viceroy, had long been his chief enemy, and he planned in this way to overthrow him. The viceroy, as he knew, was a man of iron. He would certainly not feel honoured at the thought of having his daughter enter the Imperial Palace as a secondary wife. Doubtless he would refuse to obey the order and would thus bring about his own immediate downfall.

Nor was the Prime Minister mistaken. When Su-nan received the imperial message his heart was hot with anger against his sovereign. To be robbed of his lovely Ta-ki, even by the throne, was, in his eyes, a terrible disgrace. Could he have been sure that she would be made Empress it might have been different, but with so many others sharing Chow-sin's favour, her promotion to first place in the Great One's household was by no means certain. Besides, she was Su-nan's favourite child, and the old man could not bear the thought of separation from her. Rather would he give up his life than let her go to this cruel ruler.

“No, you shall not do it,” said he to Ta-ki, “not though I must die to save you.”

The beautiful girl listened to her father's words, in tears. Throwing herself at his feet she thanked him for his mercy and promised to love him more fondly than ever. She told him that her vanity had not been flattered by what most girls might have thought an honour, that she would rather have the love of one good man like her father, than share with others the affections of a king.

After listening to his daughter, the viceroy sent a respectful answer to the palace, thanking the Emperor for his favour, but saying he could not give up Ta-ki. “She is unworthy of the honour you purpose doing her,” he said, in conclusion, “for, having been the apple of her father's eye, she would not be happy to share even your most august favour with the many others you have chosen.”

When the Emperor learned of Su-nan's reply he could hardly believe his ears. To have his command thus

disobeyed was an unheard-of crime. Never before had a subject of the Middle Kingdom offered such an insult to a ruler. Boiling with rage, he ordered his prime minister to send forth an army that would bring the viceroy to his senses. "Tell him if he disobeys that he and his family, together with all they possess, shall be destroyed."

Delighted at the success of his plot against Su-nan, the Prime Minister sent a regiment of soldiers to bring the rebel to terms. In the meantime the friends of the daring viceroy had not been idle. Hearing of the danger threatening their ruler, who had become a general favourite, hundreds of men offered him their aid against the army of Chow-sin. Thus when the Emperor's banners were seen approaching and the war drums were heard rolling in the distance, the rebels, with a great shout, dashed forth to do battle for their leader. In the fight that took place the Imperial soldiers were forced to run.

When the Emperor heard of this defeat he was hot with anger. He called together his advisers and commanded that an army, double the size of the first one, should be sent to Su-nan's country to destroy the fields and villages of the people who had risen up against him. "Spare not one of them," he shouted, "for they are traitors to the Dragon Throne."

Once more the viceroy's friends resolved to support him, even to the death. Ta-ki, his daughter, went apart from the other members of the family, weeping most bitterly that she had brought such sorrow upon them. "Rather would I go into the palace and be the lowest among Chow-sin's women than to be the cause of all this grief," she cried, in desperation.

But her father soothed her, saying, "Be of good cheer, Ta-ki. The Emperor's army, though it be twice as large as mine, shall not overcome us. Right is on our side. The gods of battle will help those who fight for justice."

One week later a second battle was fought, and the struggle was so close that none could foresee the result. The Imperial army was commanded by the oldest nobles in the kingdom, those most skilled in warfare, while the viceroy's men were young and poorly drilled. Moreover, the members of the Dragon Army had been promised double pay if they should accomplish the wishes of their sovereign, while Su-nan's soldiers knew only too well that they would be put to the sword if they should be defeated.

Just as the clash of arms was at its highest, the sound of gongs was heard upon a distant hill. The government troops were amazed at seeing fresh companies marching to the rescue of their foe. With a wild cry of disappointment they turned and fled from the field. These unexpected reinforcements turned out to be women whom Ta-ki had persuaded to dress up as soldiers and go with her for the purpose of frightening the enemy.

Thus for a second time was Su-nan victorious.

During the following year several battles occurred that counted for little, except that in each of them many of Su-nan's followers were killed. At last one of the viceroy's best friends came to him, saying, "Noble lord, it is useless to continue the struggle. I fear you must give up the fight. You have lost more than half your supporters; the remaining bowmen are either sick or wounded and can be of little use. The Emperor, moreover, is even now raising a new army from the distant provinces, and will soon send against us a force ten times as great as any we have yet seen. There being no hope of victory, further fighting would be folly. Lead, therefore, your daughter to the palace. Throw yourself upon the mercy of the throne. You must accept cheerfully the fate the gods have suffered you to bear."

Ta-ki, chancing to overhear this conversation, rushed in and begged her father to hold out no longer, but to deliver her up to the greed of the wicked Chow-sin.

With a sigh, the viceroy yielded to their wishes. The next day he despatched a messenger to the Emperor, promising to bring Ta-ki at once to the capital.

Now we must not forget Fox Sprite, the demon, who had been commanded by the good goddess Lu-o to bring a dreadful punishment upon the Emperor. Through all the years of strife between Chow-sin and the rebels, Fox Sprite had been waiting patiently for his chance. He knew well that some day, sooner or later, there would come an hour when Chow-sin would be at his mercy. When the time came, therefore, for Ta-ki to go to the palace, Fox Sprite felt that at last his chance had come. The beautiful maiden for whom Chow-sin had given up so many hundreds of his soldiers, would clearly have great power over the Emperor. She must be made to help in the punishment of her wicked husband. So Fox Sprite made himself invisible and travelled with the viceroy's party as it went from central China to the capital.

On the last night of their journey Su-nan and his daughter stopped for rest and food at a large inn. No sooner had the girl gone to her room for the night than Fox Sprite followed her. Then he made himself visible. At first she was frightened to see so strange a being in her room, but when Fox Sprite told her he was a servant of the great goddess, Lu-o, she was comforted, for she knew that Lu-o was the friend of women and children.

"But how can I help to punish the Emperor?" she faltered, when the sprite told her he wanted her assistance. "I am but a helpless girl," and here she began to cry.

“Dry your tears,” he said soothingly. “It will be very easy. Only let me take your form for a little. When I am the Emperor’s wife,” laughing, “I shall find a way to punish him, for no one can give a man more pain than his wife can, if she desires to do so. You know, I am a servant of Lu-o and can do anything I wish.”

“But the Emperor won’t have a fox for a wife,” she sobbed.

“Though I am still a fox I shall look like the beautiful Ta-ki. Make your heart easy. He will never know.”

“Oh, I see,” she smiled, “you will put your spirit into my body and you will look just like me, though you really won’t be me. But what will become of the real me? Shall I have to be a fox and look like you?”

“No, not unless you want to. I will make you invisible, and you can be ready to go back into your own body when I have got rid of the Emperor.”

“Very well,” replied the girl, somewhat relieved by his explanation, “but try not to be too long about it, because I don’t like the idea of somebody else walking about in my body.”

So Fox Sprite caused his own spirit to enter the girl’s body, and no one could have told by her outward appearance that any change had taken place. The beautiful girl was now in reality the sly Fox Sprite, but in one way only did she look like a fox. When the fox-spirit entered her body, her feet suddenly shrivelled up and became very similar in shape and size to the feet of the animal who had her in his power. When the fox noticed this, at first he was somewhat annoyed, but, feeling that no one else would know, he did not take the trouble to change the fox feet back to human form.

On the following morning, when the viceroy called his daughter for the last stage of their journey, he greeted Fox Sprite without suspecting that anything unusual had happened since he had last seen Ta-ki. So well did this crafty spirit perform his part that the father was completely deceived, by look, by voice, and by gesture.

The next day the travellers arrived at the capital and Su-nan presented himself before Chow-sin, the Emperor, leading Fox Sprite with him. Of course the crafty fox with all his magic powers was soon able to gain the mastery over the wicked ruler. The Great One pardoned Su-nan, although he had fully intended to put him to death as a rebel.

Now the chance for which Fox Sprite had been waiting had come. He began at once, causing the Emperor to do many deeds of violence. The people had already begun to dislike Chow-sin, and soon he became hateful in their

sight. Many of the leading members of the court were put to death unjustly. Horrible tortures were devised for punishing those who did not find favour with the crown. At last there was open talk of a rebellion. Of course, all these things delighted the wily fox, for he saw that, sooner or later, the Son of Heaven would be turned out of the palace, and he knew that then his work for the goddess Lu-o would be finished.

Besides worming his way into the heart of the Emperor, the fox became a general favourite with the ladies of the palace. These women saw in Chow-sin's latest wife the most beautiful woman who had ever lived in the royal harem. One would think that this beauty might have caused them to hate Fox Sprite, but such was not the case. They admired the plumpness of Fox Sprite's body, the fairness of Fox Sprite's complexion, the fire in Fox Sprite's eyes, but most of all they wondered at the smallness of Fox Sprite's feet, for, you remember, the supposed Ta-ki now had fox's feet instead of those of human shape.

Thus small feet became the fashion among women. All the court ladies, old and young, beautiful and ugly, began thinking of plans for making their own feet as tiny as those of Fox Sprite. In this way they thought to increase their chances of finding favour with the Emperor.

Gradually people outside the palace began to hear of this absurd fashion. Mothers bound the feet of their little girls, in such a manner as to stop their growth. The bones of the toes were bent backwards and broken, so eager were the elders to have their daughters grow up into tiny-footed maidens. Thus, for several years of their girlhood the little ones were compelled to endure the most severe tortures. It was not long before the new fashion took firm root in China. It became almost impossible for parents to get husbands for their daughters unless the girls had suffered the severe pains of foot-binding. And even to this day we find that many of the people are still under the influence of Fox Sprite's magic, and believe that a tiny, misshapen foot is more beautiful than a natural one.

But let us return to the story of Fox Sprite and the wicked Emperor. For a number of years matters grew continually worse in the country. At last the people rose in a body against the ruler. A great battle was fought. The wicked Chow-sin was overthrown and put to death by means of those very instruments of torture he had used so often against his subjects. By this time it had become known to all the lords and noblemen that the Emperor's favourite had been the main cause of their ruler's wickedness; hence they demanded the death of Fox Sprite. But no one wished to kill so lovely a creature. Every one appointed refused to do the deed.

Finally, a grey-headed member of the court allowed himself to be blindfolded. With a sharp sword he pierced

the body of Fox Sprite to the heart. Those standing near covered their eyes with their hands, for they could not bear to see so wonderful a woman die. Suddenly, as they looked up, they saw a sight so strange that all were filled with amazement. Instead of falling to the ground, the graceful form swayed backward and forward for a moment, when all at once there seemed to spring from her side a huge mountain fox. The animal glanced around him, then, with a cry of fear, dashing past officials, courtiers and soldiers, he rushed through the gate of the enclosure.

“A fox!” cried the people, full of wonder.

At that moment Ta-ki fell in a swoon upon the floor. When they picked her up, thinking, of course, that she had died from the sword thrust, they could find no blood on her body, and, on looking more closely, they saw that there was not even the slightest wound.

“Marvel of marvels!” they all shouted. “The gods have shielded her!”

Just then Ta-ki opened her eyes and looked about her. “Where am I?” she asked, in faint voice. “Pray tell me what has happened.”

Then they told her what they had seen, and at last it was plain to the beautiful woman that, after all these years, Fox Sprite had left her body. She was herself once more. For a long time she could not make the people believe her story; they all said that she must have lost her mind; that the gods had saved her life, but had punished her for her wickedness by taking away her reason.

But that night, when her maids were undressing her in the palace, they saw her feet, which had once more become their natural size, and then they knew she had been telling the truth.

How Ta-ki became the wife of a good nobleman who had long admired her great beauty is much too long a story to be told here. Of one thing, however, we are certain, that she lived long and was happy ever afterwards.

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