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UnBinding Bodies ***Lotos Shoes and Corset***

A project of TA T - Raum für forschende Ausstellungspraxis of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in cooperation with Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK).

September 9, 2022 – February 26, 2023

Over a period of a thousand years, Chinese girls had their feet bound to keep them small, to shape them, and to satisfy notions of feminine grace and social distinction. Europeans looked upon this practice with a mixture of fascination and alienation. The exhibition aims to break through this almost reflexive reading and tell an entangled history of body modification. "UnBinding Bodies" refers to the binding or constricting of bodies in both a real and metaphorical sense, while also addressing women's resistance ("Unbinding").

Body modifications are widespread in all cultures, they serve various social purposes, follow not only ideas of beauty, but also serve the assignment to social or ethnic groups and have an identity-forming effect. In the course of social changes, they go out of fashion or are fought by social movements as outdated traditions. The developments of foot-binding and corset-wearing are paradigmatic of this: both practices originated as a feature of social demarcation, but spread to all social classes in the 19th century. They were finally abandoned in the 20th century.

As much as the historical objects on display attest to the drastic manner in which girls' and women's feet were modified, the exhibition refrains from rash judgment and examines the concrete circumstances of bodily practices against the backdrop of social, medical, and colonial history.

The focus is on the period around 1900, in which the imperial powers (including Japan, France, England, Germany and Russia) asserted economic and territorial claims on China and at the same time various resistance and reform movements reached their peak. A large part of the collection objects of MARKK and other ethnological museums arrived in Germany in this constellation.

At the beginning of the examination of the topic was the confrontation with a display case from the foyer of the Center for Anatomy at the Humboldt University in Berlin: it contains the foot medicine (podological) collection of the anatomist Hans Virchow, including numerous preparations, casts, X-rays, and photographs of so-called "lotus feet," the bound feet of Chinese women. The question arose: When and how did they come to Berlin? Why was Virchow interested in this practice? And what might an appropriate approach to such sensitive objects look like today?

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In order to show the interweaving history of body modification, Chinese and European perspectives have to be crossed and the protagonist:s have to be given a voice. The focus is less on what the women could not do and more on what they made of their situation and what scope for action they opened up. The exhibition also examines how Chinese and European emancipation efforts intersected: parallel to the initiatives for "foot liberation" in China, women in Europe fought against the corset.

The cultural-historical perspective is complemented by various artistic explorations of the theme. The artists kate-hers RHEE, Zhang Gong and Zhang Rui developed new works that enter into a dialogue with historical exhibits and open up a perspective on beauty norms and the trimming of bodies in the present.

On display are objects from MARKK's collection and various loans, for example from the Centrum für Anatomie der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Ledermuseum Offenbach, the archive of the Berliner Missionswerk, and the Prague National Museum.

Among the most interesting exhibits are various dolls, feather footballs used by women to play with bound feet, paper shoes sacrificed to the goddess Guanyin before the first binding, and of course various types of lotos shoes and shoes with which Manchurian women tried to imitate the bound feet of Han Chinese women. Reminiscent of Western body practices are a wasp-waisted corset, a buttock pad designed to make the buttocks appear larger, and a reform shoe marketed in Germany at the very time that protest movements against foot-binding were emerging in China.

The cultural-historical exhibition was developed by the curators Jasmin Mersmann, Evke Rulffes and Felix Sattler, in close cooperation with Chinese researchers such as Prof. Dorothy Y. Ko (Barnard College, New York).

Partners: Museum am Rothenbaum, Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), Susanne Knödel, Barbara Plankensteiner, Gabriel Schimmeroth.

The exhibition is supported by the Kulturstiftung des Bundes as well as the Stiftung Preußische Seehandlung and the Alfred Toepfer Stiftung.

The exhibition will subsequently be on view at the Tieranatomisches Theater - Raum für forschende Ausstellungspraxis, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin from **March 23, 2023 to August 31, 2023.**