

Status of Women in Tang and Song China

DOCUMENT 1

Women in Song China

During the Song dynasty, life for women in China began to change. While some changes were positive, others resulted in a loss of status for women. In the following passage, writer Patricia Buckley Ebrey describes some of these changes for women.

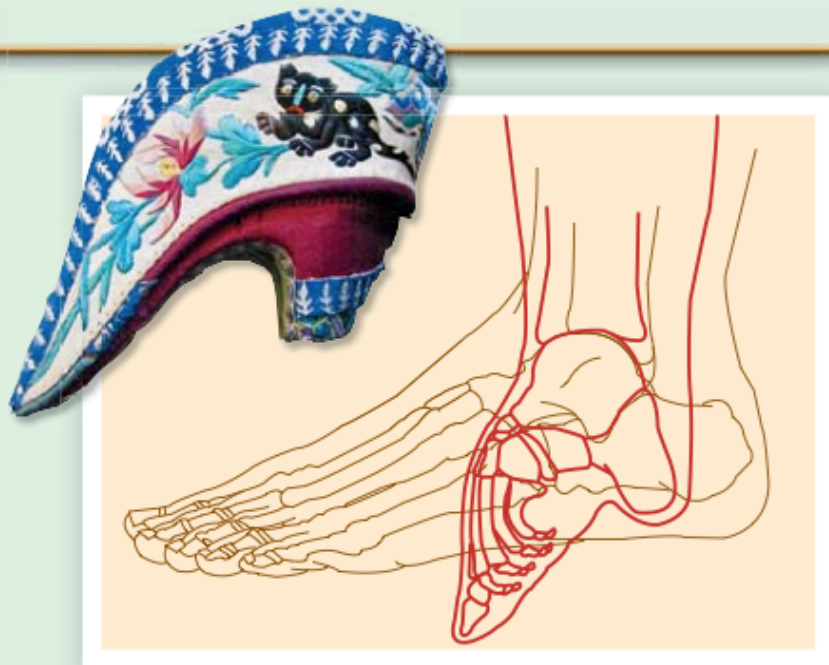
With printing and the expansion of the educated class, more women [in Song China] were taught to read and write ... In the Song period women's legal claims to property were improved ... These changes can all be classed

as favorable ... But there were concurrent [simultaneous] changes in Song times that are generally classed as detrimental [harmful] to women ... In the Tang [period], ... physical activity was fashionable enough that palace women played polo. In Song times, standards of beauty shifted to favor the delicate and restrained woman. Notions of female modesty became more rigid ... By the [1100s], ... doctors who called on women in elite households could neither view the woman nor question her; all they could do was take the pulse of a [woman's] hand extended through the bed curtains.

DOCUMENT 2

Foot Binding in China

Perhaps as early as the late Tang dynasty, the practice of foot binding began to spread among women in China. At a young age, girls' feet were tightly wrapped with pieces of cloth. The purpose of foot binding was to restrict the growth of the feet so that they appeared small and dainty. Foot binding was extremely painful and over time deformed the bones of the foot, as shown in the drawing at right. Above the drawing is a shoe that a Chinese woman with bound feet once wore.



1. What positive changes did women experience during the Song dynasty?
2. In what ways did women lose status?
3. How did the size of a bound foot contrast to that of an unbound foot?
4. How do you think having bound feet affected daily life for women in China?