

What was life like for women in China?

Source E

How sad it is to be a woman!
Nothing on earth is held so cheap.
Boys stand leaning at the door
Like gods fallen out of heaven.
Their hearts brave the four Oceans,
The wind and dust of a thousand miles.
No one is glad when a girl is born;
By her the family sets no store.

This poem was written in the third century AD. What do you learn from it about attitudes to girls and boys? Do these attitudes surprise you?

Foot-binding

In north and central China foot-binding was performed from about the age of five. The feet were bent back and very tightly bandaged until the bones of the instep were broken. It was agonising. The effect was that girls and women could only hobble. A fashionable foot was only eight centimetres long. This idea lasted until this century.

Why was this done? It began amongst court dancers as a way of performing light steps, though it eventually killed the art of dancing because it was too painful and the feet were too tiny. The rest of society copied it, except for the lowest class of women and the most southern parts of China. Was it to distinguish Chinese ladies from the 'barbarians' who

surrounded China? What do you think?

It certainly prevented women from being active. Before it was popular there is evidence of travelling women traders, female polo players, and businesswomen like the Daoist nun Huang who pioneered the Lower Yangtze cotton industry. But not after this torture began.

Girls, the family and marriage

A boy was highly valued, whereas girl babies were often drowned at birth by the midwives or sold as servants if born to a poor family. After marriage a young woman transferred her loyalty to her in-laws. She might never see her parents again. Marriages were arranged. It was rare for a bride to have seen her future husband before marriage. A wife was subordinate to her husband and to older women like her mother-in-law. Obedience to them and the new family was a most important virtue.

Marriage occurred early for women, at about the age of 17. The age of the husband varied depending on his wealth, though the age gap could not be too great because the crossing of generations was not accepted. A wealthy man could take more wives. However, a woman with a strong personality could have a lot of influence over the family. The household budget and organisation were her responsibility, as was the upbringing of her children, and in time, her grandchildren. All of them were taught to obey her and never dispute her decisions. She chose punishments for them if they misbehaved. After death, women were worshipped as wives and mothers, not as individuals.

Poor women

After marriage poor women were often engaged in small businesses like dressmaking and midwifery. The labour of peasant women was required throughout the year, and all processes in silk manufacture needed the active participation of women. The river women of the south and of the coast, who were engaged in work like transport and fishing, were never foot-bound. They ran the boats, rowed, cooked, sailed, and so on. Northern women referred to them as 'big-footed women' which was meant as an insult.

Two stories about women

- In many novels and operas women were depicted as strong. For example, Mulan was a popular opera heroine in the fifth and sixth centuries. Her family had to supply a soldier in a war against the barbarians, but with an old father and a young brother, she chose to go instead, dressed as a man. She became a general! When the war ended she changed back into her women's clothes to her soldiers' amazement.
- The Tang Emperor Xuanzong fell in love with Yang Guifei. She could play the lute and danced in a ballet called 'The Rainbow Skirt, Kingfisher Jacket', and the Emperor accompanied this on his drums. She loved lichi which could only be obtained 2400 kilometres from the

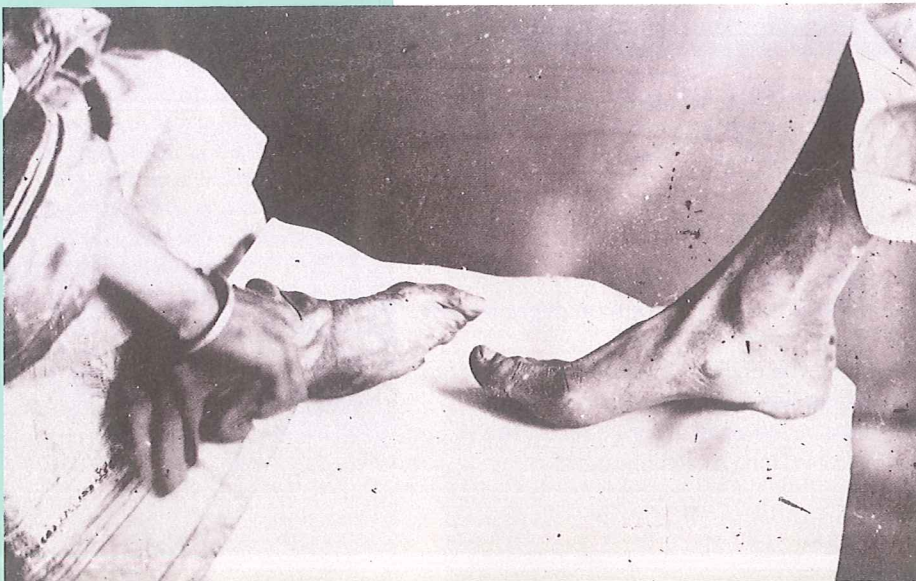
How did the people live?



Women musicians

capital. He had them brought fresh by fast relays of horses, and in this way the postal system began because people sent messages with these fast horses. The Emperor spent too much time with her and neglected his duties. Her relatives and favourites were given high and important positions. The Emperor trusted one of them as a frontier commander, but this caused a revolt against the Emperor in 756. The guards who escorted the Emperor on his flight from the capital persuaded him that it was Yang Guifei's fault, and they hanged her by a roadside temple. A poet retold this story, *The Everlasting Sorrow*, with much sympathy for her.

Here a Chinese woman in 1871 has unbandaged her foot, which had been bound since she was small, to compare it with a normal foot for the photographer.



WOMEN IN CHINA

- 1 As a lord write an introduction to a book justifying the position of women in China.
- 2 Use the evidence to answer these questions:
 - a Who had more freedom – a married lady or a single woman?
 - b Who had the happier life – a married lady or a single woman?
- 3 Look back to page 3 to see what Marco

Polo said about Chinese women. How far do his comments agree with the evidence on these pages?

- 4 How far do you think the ideas of Confucius influenced the attitudes to women and marriage?
- 5 Consider the civilisation chart on page 7, and decide whether the evidence on women in China contributes to your views on China as a civilisation.