

THINKING LIKE A HISTORIAN

When and Why Did Foot Binding Begin?

Both archaeological and textual evidence indicate that by the end of the Song Dynasty some girls in China were having their feet bound to keep them small. Striking archaeological evidence comes from the grave of Huang Sheng, buried in 1243 at age sixteen. Her feet were bound with a long strip of cloth, and her coffin included shoes measuring from 5 to 5½ inches long, for bound feet. In Song period sources, historians have found casual mentions of foot binding and a couple of discussions of the practice's origins and purpose. Foreign visitors to China began to refer to foot binding in the early 1300s.

- 1 Su Shi, poem, ca. 1060–1100.** About twenty-seven hundred poems by the renowned poet Su Shi (1036–1101) survive. One of these seems to refer to the small bound foot of a dancer.

■ Anointed with fragrance, she takes lotus steps;
Though often sad, she steps with swift lightness.
She dances like the wind, leaving no physical trace.
Another stealthily but happily tries on the palace style,
But feels such distress when she tries to walk!
Look at them in the palms of your hands,
So wondrously small that they defy description.

- 2 Chen Liang, letter to Zhu Xi, ca. 1180.** Chen Liang (1143–1194) wrote this letter in response to a letter he had received from Zhu Xi (1130–1200). In it Chen Liang's reference to foot binding is metaphorical.

■ My whole life I have been obsessed with predicting what is going on among leading people but now I know that it is impossible. I must not stumble about like a blind person who cannot find his cane.... I am so obstinate that I write letters every day to my juniors. It is just like an ugly woman of thirty or forty who decides to chinch her waist and bind her feet — not only is it laughable, but it is also very painful.

- 3 Che Ruoshui, *Jiaoqi ji*, 1274.** Che Ruoshui questioned the morality of binding girls' feet in this short note.

■ No one knows when foot binding began. Little girls not yet four or five years old, who have done nothing wrong, nevertheless are made to suffer unlimited pain to bind [their feet] small. I do not know what purpose this serves.

- 4 Zhou Mi, *Elegant Conversations from the Impetuous Hall*, late thirteenth century.** Zhou Mi (1232–1298) gave thought to the origins of foot binding and concluded that it began with a dancer at the court of a highly cultivated ruler of the tenth century, prior to the Song Dynasty.

■ Slender and beautiful, Yaoniang was skilled in dancing. The ruler made a six-foot-tall golden lotus festooned with jewels, ribbons, and garlands of pearls and gems. Inside the lotus he piled five-colored auspicious clouds. He had Yaoniang wrap her feet with silk; he had them rendered slender and small, curving upward like the new moon. In plain socks she danced to the music "In the Clouds," her posture was as though she was soaring into the clouds.... Later people imitated her, finding arched and slender feet wonderful. Thus is the origin of foot binding.

- 5 Friar Odoric of Pordenone, *Travels of Friar Odoric*, ca. 1350.** Odoric, a friar from Pordenone, in Italy, visited north China in the 1320s and briefly mentioned foot binding in an account he dictated on his return.

■ And with the women the great beauty is to have little feet; and for this reason, mothers are accustomed, as soon as girls are born to them, to swathe their feet tightly so that they can never grow in the least.

- 6 Photographic evidence of later practice, early twentieth century.** Western visitors to China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found the practice of binding women's feet strange and took photographs of women whose tiny pointed shoes could be seen, as well as women who were willing to pose with their feet uncovered, probably for pay. These two photographs were taken in the early twentieth century, shortly before an anti-foot-binding movement led most people to give up the practice.