
Briana James

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Bound Feet and Western Dress: A Memoir by Pang-Mei Natasha Chang (Anchor, 1999) is the memoir of Chang mingled with those of her great aunt, Chang Yu-i. The memoir offers an intimate insight into the changing role of women in modern China in the early twentieth century mirrored by the transformation of gender roles of Chinese women in modern America. Pang-Mei Chang’s struggles echo those of her aunt, who describes her experiences with marriage, education, and obedience in a changing Chinese world. Chang lifts the veil of silence hovering over women by illuminating the depth, desire, and strength of the female half of privileged Chinese culture.

Yu-i, born in 1900, begins her story with an eye opening statement: “In China, a woman is nothing.” Females have no individual status in China in the first quarter of the twentieth century and a woman’s duties are to tend to her husband’s household and to her children. The importance for Chinese women to be obedient and dutiful is clearly demonstrated by Yu-i, as she describes the bound feet tradition.

The tradition of bound feet begins with tenth century Emperor Tong Song’s concubine who wrapped her feet to dance for the emperor among lotus petals, which is where the Chinese name for the custom, “lotus petals” or “new moon”, originates. Binding makes the foot “beautiful” and “small” as it slowly breaks the bones in the toes and curves the foot in a half moon shape to prevent unwanted growth. Empress Dowager Cixi attempted a reform banning the practice of feet binding in 1902 and this marks the growing transformation of women in China uprooting them from waiting idly in female quarters to an unknown, yet independent future.

Pang-Mei Chang mirrors her great-aunts memoirs by offering her own relatable reality. Through these lessons the reader is able to establish the differences between Confucian customs and modern Chinese customs. Pang-Mei Chang’s father,

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321 Ibid., 20.
322 Ibid., 23.
who is the nephew of Chang Yu-i, still shares the belief his daughter should preserve the pure Chinese bloodline, and Pang-Mei Chang does feel pressure to follow these customs, but she has a choice in the matter. Chang Yu-i, a young woman schooled in the teachings of Confucius sixty-five years earlier than Pang-Mei, does not have a choice, and she does not dare assert her opinions.

The difference in education becomes a major theme in the memoirs, and both Pang-Mei Chang and Chang Yu-i express the desire to become educated women. Pang-Mei Chang explains education for her is not only learning from textbooks, but learning to cope with her Chinese-American identity in modern America. Pang-Mei experiences an American school with American pressures to fit in and deal with American standards of beauty. Chang Yu-i is told the opposite because her education is a burden to her parents and her in-laws. Her parents refuse to pay for her schooling until her father realizes it is cheaper feeding her at home.

Pang-Mei Chang, in collaboration with her great-aunt Chang Yu-i, presents a bittersweet evocation of China while illuminating the transformation of the role of Chinese women across the globe. These memoirs help to close the gap between women of all ethnicities and continue pursuing equality for all women, not just women of a specific color. *Bound Feet and Western Dress: A Memoir* offers an eye-opening experience not to be missed by any woman.

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