



Bound Feet & Western Dress

Pang-Mei Natasha Chang , Jennifer Ann Daddio (Designed by)

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"In China, a woman is nothing."

Thus begins the saga of a woman born at the turn of the century to a well-to-do, highly respected Chinese family, a woman who continually defied the expectations of her family and the traditions of her culture. Growing up in the perilous years between the fall of the last emperor and the Communist Revolution, Chang Yu-i's life is marked by a series of rebellions: her refusal as a child to let her mother bind her feet, her scandalous divorce, and her rise to Vice President of China's first women's bank in her later years.

In the alternating voices of two generations, this dual memoir brings together a deeply textured portrait of a woman's life in China with the very American story of Yu-i's brilliant and assimilated grandniece, struggling with her own search for identity and belonging. Written in pitch-perfect prose and alive with detail, *Bound Feet and Western Dress* is the story of independent women struggling to emerge from centuries of customs and duty.

Bound Feet & Western Dress Details

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From Reader Review Bound Feet & Western Dress for online ebook

Gracie says

This was possibly the best book that I've ever read. OMG. Okay, maybe not The best on my list, but possibly a tie for second. It was amazing: a lot of detail, great content, and much much more.

I read this in a day, and let me tell you, it amazed me. In all the books on this genre that I'd read, this was a thriller.

A switch between traditional and ancient times, two women, both marked down with 'no value' stand up for their beliefs and show their uniqueness. Strong, they stand up for their rights, and question their actions.

As culture is streamed through this book, leaking info. of their society and how they struggle reflect their amazing journey. Bound between faith and culture(I'm pretty sure I already said this), the women experience the worst-and their morality ad ethics teach us all--a lesson.

...Okay, my summary might not have been that appealing as the book, but I would definitely recommend it.

Lysmerry says

I really enjoy Chinese memoirs, but this one disappointed. There were some strong parts- for example, where Yu-i is forced to make it on her own in a foreign country with no knowledge of the language. But for the most part Yu-i conforms to the Confucian norms she grew up with, making for a dull tale of duty. She is not a rebellious character, and strives to the ideal wife, daughter, and daughter-in-law. It's an interesting insight into the mindset of the time, but if you're familiar with Confucian culture, nothing special.

The story seems to be centered not around Yu-i herself, but her husband Xu Zhimo. He is the one who forces change, he is the one who rebels against society. He behaves horrendously toward Yu-i, first ignoring her for years and then abandoning her and leaving her pregnant and without resources in a foreign country. But both the author and Yu-i herself seem to have the greatest admiration for him, excusing his cruelty as 'an artist's temperament.' At one point the author's grandfather asks her to 'Be kind to Xu Zhimo' and she certainly follows through. I did not enjoy hearing about about the achievements of a person I had grown to hate through the narrative.

I am also disturbed how class is treated in the book. No mention is made of the fabulous wealth and power of Yu-i's social circle, and the reader might be misled to believe these are average people. When she becomes Vice President of China's first women's bank, the position is directly handed to her by her brother. True, she is a very capable person, but she certainly did not have to strive or rebel to achieve her position. In fact, she declines the presidency itself because one of her brothers is already a bank president, and she does not want to lessen the prestige of his position. For a truly powerful memoir of life and struggle in China, I would recommend 'The Spider Eaters' by Rae Yang.

Emma says

Just excellent.

Camelia Rose says

So, there is a mini genre called China Memoirs? Such as Wild Swans, Mao's Last Dancer and Falling Leaves, and Bound Feet and Western Dress is one of them? I found this book in the summer secondhand book sale in our local library and was surprised that I never heard of it before. I have heard and read many stories about these famous historical figures (how can not I?), but I did not know Zhang Youyi (Chang Yu-i) had a biography written by her great-niece.

Chang Yu-i, born in a progressive family in China at the turn of 20th century, her feet was unbound, yet her upbringing was very traditional. The teachings she received included "a woman is nothing", "a woman's sole purpose is to serve her men (father, husband and sons)", etc... In the book, Chang summarised her story perfectly well:

And now I understand what my amah had meant about being "neither three nor four." I was supposed to be a modern girl with big feet, but Hsu Chih-mo treated me as though I had bound feet. He thought me old-fashioned and uneducated, and did not care for me. Yes I was not traditional enough for Lao Taitai. With her bound feet, she was content to spend every day in the female quarters; I wanted to explore the streets of Xiashi.

This conflict can be seen throughout her life. Deep inside, she was very traditional, but every now and then a burst of courage shone through. After being abandoned while pregnant, she managed to survive and raise her baby son alone in Germany. She did not intend to pursue a banking career but when opportunity was presented to her, she seized it with no hesitation and proved herself to be worthy and capable. She was always attentive to the needs of her husbands, son and relatives, seldom put her own needs above all. She did things she thought "proper" in a time when the meaning of "proper" changing rapidly.

Bound Feet and Western Dress is not about rebellious spirit or working against odds, which might disappoint readers today. Among her brothers, husband and husband's lovers, Chang Yu-i perhaps was the least famous. It's important to hear her story too. It completes the picture of Hsu Chih-mo, the first mega star of the New Poets of China, widely admired by intellectuals in China and beyond.

Today Hsu Chih-mo is less known outside China and the circle of China scholars, nor is Chang Yu-i's brothers (especially the second and fourth brother), nor is Lin Huiyin (Hsu romantic lover, who was a great architect). It is worth to mention that they were among the brightest cultural and political stars of pre-1949 China, and they were the makers of modern Chinese history.

The secondary element of Bound Feet & Western Dress is the rumination of the writer, who, as an American Born Chinese, came to terms with her heritage and upbringing, and reached an understanding of how to be both--American and Chinese.

R.K. Byers says

I was expecting "Memoirs of a Joy Luck Good Earth". I was pleasantly disappointed.

Yi says

I watched ??????/ "April Rhapsody" (2000), the 20-episode series based on the life of the famous 20th-century Chinese romantic poet, Xu Zhimo / Hsü Chih-mo (???), on YouTube a few months ago. Unlike most viewers, I liked the character of Hsü Chih-mo's ex-wife, Zhang Youyi / Chang Yu-i (???), the most. I was amazed by her sheer inner strength to endure all the hardships and cruelty forced upon her by her ex during their marriage. Deeply moved and wow-ed by her bravery and determination in not letting herself be crushed by her daily toil, but to take the chance to transform herself into this independent, accomplished, strong yet kind-hearted, graceful woman!

I wanted to know more about her values and upbringings; to gain some insight into what went through her mind when she was living in Sawston with a husband who constantly reminded her of how much she was not wanted; to see how she struggled to stand on her own two feet, pregnant [with their 2nd son] and abandoned by that cold-hearted poet of a husband, on foreign soil; to find out about her and her son's lives after Hsü Chih-mo died in the fatal plane crash. My mother suggested that I read this memoir written by You-i's great-niece. This book certainly did all that for me. In my opinion, a great read - well-written, engaging, and informative. I see now that the Chinese TV series was very closely based on this book.

Now my respect for You-i increased tenfold. Hsü Chih-mo was regarded as a talented poet, that, he was; but a terrible person, at best, a hypocrite.

Monica says

The beautifully told story of a remarkable life. Chang Yu-i was born in 1900 to a wealthy Shanghai family, one of 12 children, the second of four daughters. She was the first girl in her family to refuse to have her feet bound, the first to get a divorce, a successful business woman, a bank vice-president, a dutiful daughter and daughter-in-law. Her story is told by her great-niece, a first generation Chinese American who learned of Yu-i's story in her Chinese studies courses at Harvard.

Yu-i was married at 15 to a scholar and poet, bore him a son, and left that son with her in-laws to follow her husband to England where he was continuing his studies. When she was pregnant with their second child, he informed her that he wanted a divorce. She was alone in Europe, pregnant, having to navigate her way through the obligations of daughter and daughter-in-law at a distance, finding a way to continue her education. Her return to China was followed by war, revolution, family upheavals, yet through it all, Yu-i made her own way, maintained her family bonds and lived an exemplary life, ending up in New York where she died at the age of 89.

Feisty Harriet says

I love the idea behind this autobiographical/memoir which mostly focuses on Yu-i, a woman born in China at the beginning of the 20th century who grows up and comes of age as her country moves away from its more traditional ways such as foot binding, arranged marriages, socially accepted concubines, filial responsibilities, and a abhorrent preference for sons. Yu-i's story is told by her 20-something great-niece,

Pang-Mei, who was born in Connecticut and is trying to understand her American and Chinese heritage. I loved the story; I loved Yu-i and watching her transform from a subservient woman to a strong independent one who tackled the responsibilities of her life with both Western sensibility and Eastern responsibilities. She truly was an incredible driving force of change and hope for so many Chinese women. That being said, minus one star because I didn't love the writing (this is a first novel) and I didn't love Pang-Mei's additions of her life throughout the book, I felt they were detracting. In creating a dual-perspective story Pang-Mei and/or her editor/publisher did not figure out a way to help the reader determine which woman was being discussed at any given time.

Joanna says

Very enjoyable biography of the author's aunt, with just enough personal story from the author to make this a personal family story rather than a remote biography. This is a small story - the life story of the author's aunt. She's not a hero exactly, though she has moments of extreme grace and strength. She's not a revolutionary, though she was thrust into a more modern life than the one she'd envisioned when she found herself part of one of the first public no fault divorces in China. She lived in interesting times and thus her small story becomes a window into the turning point where China began to incorporate Western ideas. And there's power here.

Another reviewer called this a dull story of duty. I found it more nuanced than that. This is a story of the way that the political changes manifested and blended in the actions of an individual. On the one hand, Chang Yu-i cannot and does not want to abandon her sense of filial loyalty and responsibility for family, however complicated. On the other hand, she decides to be a modern woman, to stand on her own feet, to draw boundaries -- this I will do, this I will not.

I'm glad I read this.

Natalie Awdry says

I bought this on a whim from a secondhand bookshop and had neither heard of the book, the author, or the subject matter. Despite having no previous reference to this story and the importance of Yu-I and her relationship (or more specifically, the breakdown of her relationship) with Hsü Chih-mo, the gravity of their divorce in 1920s China was clear from the very beginning. Considering this, I was struck by how down-to-earth both Yu-I and the author were about their lives. While I don't doubt that Chang loved to spend time with her Great-Aunt while she was growing up in the states, it was really striking how she had no idea about the cultural and historical importance of her life until she was studying Chinese history at university; I imagine that finding this out must have been a humbling experience for the author.

Not wanting to include any spoilers in the review, I will simply say that Yu-i's life was fascinating and I was always disappointed at the end of a chapter. I particularly liked the sections of self-reflection whereby she questioned her belief in her modernity. My only issue was that the final 30 or so years of her life were whizzed through in a matter of paragraphs and I really feel like they would have been just as interesting to read about. Just because of the event of 1931, it doesn't mean that Yu-i's life had ended and therefore does not mean that the story should end. I'm not sure why her Great-Niece decided not to go into depth on the decades after the 1930s but, not being a fly on the wall of their conversations, I do not know whether Yu-I

herself thought that these were not sufficiently interesting as to be written about.

I think that my favourite element of the book was the way that each chapter began with an autobiographical section from Chang before moving on to Yu-i's story. This was a clever way to frame the book and remind me that this wasn't actually an autobiography of Yu-I. I especially liked it when Chang discussed periods of her life from which she drew parallels of Yu-I and, indeed, I found the author's life just as interesting to read about.

Atiqah Ghazali says

Read a quarter of this book for 9 days and finished it all off in 3 hours, I only paused for 5 minutes or so for tissues and hot tea. How can I not love this memoir?

As a wife, as a woman, I wish I could depict Chang Yu-I as a life mentor. And how true her take on love is... What is love, if it has no sense of responsibility!?

Luanne Castle says

While the book cover calls this a dual memoir—that of the author and her Great Aunt Yu-i—to me this is more the memoir of Yu-i as verbally told and recreated on the page by her younger relative. It is mainly Yu-i's story. And what a story it is.

She was born at the very beginning of the 20th century in China. Times were changing rapidly. During the course of Yu-i's life, she must learn how to become a more "Western" woman and still show respect for her elders and her heritage by adhering to the traditions that were most important. Yu-i was the first woman in her family not to have her feet bound, and yet when she was married by her family to a man she didn't know, she acted very traditional, as if she had bound feet.

When he divorces her, she must learn to take care of herself and her responsibilities. She describes the change in herself this way:

I always think of my life as "before Germany" and "after Germany." Before Germany, I was afraid of everything. After Germany, I was afraid of nothing.

Yu-i's story is a triumph of admirable traits, resilience, and a loving family.

And who is this man who divorced her? Hsu Chih-mo, arguably the most famous Chinese poet of his time period. Check out this [Wikipedia link](#) about him. Why did he divorce her? What happened to her after the divorce? Read. the. book.

Hugs says

I have cried while reading this many times. There are good things to take away, like never, NEVER saying a negative word about your in-laws to ANYBODY. I can see where some hardships could be avoided by living this way. Some of the difficult things included not being able to nurse and raise your own infant/child. In contrast, I LOVED that she nursed until she was SIX, and credits that for her strength and not getting sick! Some of the rules of filial piety would do the world good today ("Your body with your hair and your skin is a gift from your parents. You must treasure this gift to be filial." kept her from suicide.), and some were sad. Then there were the "Seven Outs" for a man to divorce his wife: 1. if she disobeyed his parents, 2. if she could not bear him sons, 3. if she committed adultery, 4. if she acted jealous and was unwilling to take in a concubine, 5. if she were repulsively sick, 6. if she talked too much, 7. if she committed a theft. This glimpse of Chinese culture has shed light on so many areas of understanding for me. It makes me want to study Confucianism~not to adopt the ideas and put them into practice, but to further gain understanding.

A quote that struck me as a Christian, a mom, and a wife was: "What was it about marriage that turned a woman with a mind of her own into a woman who followed her husband? What was it about being a Chinese wife that you stopped becoming who you might have been?" I have felt this same way many times~sometimes with a sense of awe and pride even, sometimes with a twinge of sadness. (YES! I realize I am sooo blessed compared to the women of old~don't get me wrong!) As I work through my own life and struggle with how to handle feelings and saying too much I still so appreciate and respect the dignity portrayed by a degree of stoicism. (My last sentence not having much to do with marriage at all...)

I especially cried when I read of how she felt in America. Not American to the Americans, and not Chinese enough to the Chinese. I don't know how to express all the emotions that go with my thoughts on this, but they are heavy and great. Somehow it gets wrapped up in thoughts for my own children as well~will not being white/black enough be a prevalent struggle in their lives? They have been so blessedly sheltered from racial tension, but we have talked about it. We don't want it to come as a surprise, because it WILL come....

Lastly, it was sad to see the breakdown of societal values over time. The dedication and respect and commitment and support to the family and its name. The same thing is going on here today! Of course there are always views that need changing, but there are always some yuckies that creep in at the same time. I'm sure the broken household I was raised in helps to shape my view of sadness here....

Vanessa says

Listened to the audio version of this book. Was great to hear the author's voice even though the production quality wasn't all that great.

I have been a fan of Xu Zhimo ever since I read his most famous poem "Saying Good-bye to Cambridge Again." It's a beautiful poem and even more beautiful in Chinese. My favorite stanza:

"Very quietly I take my leave,
As quietly as I came here;
Gently I flick my sleeves,
Not even a wisp of cloud will I bring away."

His poetry is so enchanting, beautiful, fluid.

Well, you can imagine that I was surprised to find out that he's actually kind of a jerk and an irresponsible father.

This book is about the first wife of the famous Xu Zhimo as told by her grand niece, Natasha Chang. It followed Zhang YouYi's hardships and how she dealt with betrayal, loss, and the ever-changing time period that she lived in. I love reading accounts of Chinese family history. Other books like "Factory Girls" by Leslie Chang and "Falling Leaves" Adeline Yeh Mah are other great examples where you can learn interesting Chinese family stories.

The narrative of Zhang YouYi is very well crafted and her grand niece does an excellent job in putting her own reflections without taking away from the main objective of the story. There was just enough of her voice but not too much to distract. She's a good story-teller.

This is a good read for those who are interested in the history and development of modern China and the thought process of those living in that period.

The amazing thing about family histories are that they follow one story and so you learn about history through a very focused lens, enough to interest a variety of readers. Stories are the most powerful tools of retelling history.

If you have any other recommendations of Chinese family histories you would like to share with me, please leave a comment below. I'm planning on reading "On Gold Mountain" by Lisa See soon.

Trice says

***1/2 Finished *Bound Feet and Western Dress* today. It felt very conversational, as if you were sitting in on a conversation with Yu-i and Natasha, hearing how they struggled with their own identity, their own sense of self and cultural identity. Yu-i says that in traditional China a girl was nothing, and yet the girls in her family seem valued and well-loved, though due to the family's lack of resources at a critical point they don't end up with the same advantages of education as their brothers. It seemed to me that she was made nothing by the actions of a man seeking to be modern, seeking to be part of a world that he saw as valuing people individually, rather than according to duty and family. Although it is also through this man's actions that she eventually seizes upon her own identity and value and enters the broader world with full force. She is an amazing person in her strength and in her constant giving and support to those to whom she feels tied. I definitely feel the added insight into Chinese culture, into the feelings and reasons for action, that this book provides.
