

# Bound Feet & Western Dress

by Pang-Mei Natasha Chang

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## About the Book

### The Story of Yu-i and Pang-Mei

Pang-Mei Natasha Chang was nine years old when she first met her great-aunt Chang Yu-i in 1974. Yu-i had just arrived in New York City, after living in China and then Hong Kong for most of her life. Fourteen years later, after Yu-i entrusted Pang-Mei with her life story, Pang-Mei sat close by in her great-aunt's studio apartment, listening to Yu-i's labored breath the night before she died.

Yu-i's mother, striking an aristocratic pose.

By that time, Pang-Mei had spent years listening and recording her great-aunt's story, gently urging this traditional woman to share her remarkable personal history. It was 1983 when Pang-Mei first came upon Yu-i's name in a textbook for course work in Chinese Studies at Harvard College. Until then she knew little of Yu-i's life, just a few bare facts the family rarely mentioned. To Pang-Mei's astonishment, she discovered that Yu-i had been married to a noted Chinese romantic poet, had received what is often referred to as "the first modern divorce in China," and was vice president of the Shanghai Women's Savings Bank. Growing up, Yu-i's family said of her that she was part man, because she was strong and willful. As an older woman, she was often quiet at family gatherings, appearing almost lost behind her thick-lensed glasses; there was little to suggest the deeply held passions and great strength of this retiring woman. Who was this woman to whom Pang-Mei felt such a deep and immediate attachment?

Yu-i's father, a respected doctor who ruled the household with a firm hand.

Pang-Mei began asking Yu-i questions and listening to her answers in earnest. And in the process of encouraging Yu-i to remember her story, gently urging forth details from her life, both women changed. Yu-i became more open, sharing her innermost feelings with her great-niece, and coming to a new understanding of her relationship with the husband who had abandoned her and their young son for the sake of his artistic pursuit. At the same time, Pang-Mei became less self-

conscious about her Chinese heritage and learned to reconcile the opportunities presented to her with the responsibilities and expectations attached to them--to study and do well, to marry a Chinese man, to care for family.

Eighteen-year-old Yu-i with her first son, the pride of the Hsü family.

By book's end, the echo of recognition that welled during Yu-i and Pang-Mei's first brief meeting resounds more deeply. They are bound together: two women from different eras who have struggled to come to terms with the traditional and modern values before them, with the choices and responsibilities they've been given, with the love and trust they feel for each other and their family.

### **Words as Passages to Memory and Meaning**

Whether writing fiction or literary nonfiction, one of a writer's goals is to create a believable world for readers. To be believable, this world must contain details that snag a reader's attention. For it is through the physical details that the author delivers the universal emotional truth of a life, whether the setting is early-twentieth-century Shanghai, as in Yu-i's case, or Pang-Mei's late-twentieth-century- Connecticut.

A writer who wants to bring a scene to life begins by describing things. For instance, when remembering her mother, the writer might mention the scarlet lipstick she wore, the way she arranged the chairs just so around the kitchen table, or how she read a book while she folded laundry. Layer by layer, these emotionally accurate details lead to truth. Toni Morrison, in her essay "The Site of Memory" (from **Inventing the Truth**, William Zinsser, ed.), says, "I have suspected, more often than not...that I know more than my grandfather and my great-grandmother did, but I also know that I'm no wiser than they were....These people are my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life. Which is why the images that float around them--the remains, so to speak, at the archeological site--surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth."

Yu-i with her brothers and sisters, gathered in Shanghai in 1927 for their parents' funeral. Seated, from left, First and Fourth Sisters, and Yu-i. Standing, Third Sister and two sisters-in-law. Seated, from left, First, Second, Eighth, Fifth, and Third Brothers. Standing, Seventh, Fourth, and Sixth Brothers.

Pang-Mei knows this route well, and she uses it to bring us deep into Yu-i's story and her own, offering a web of details spun with Chinese words that are loaded with meaning. The list below, the things defined in **Bound Feet & Western Dress**--a dumpling, wisdom, a pen stroke, integrity--are embedded in Yu-i's life. They help us make connections that bring us closer to the truth at the heart of her story.

### **Discussion Guide**

1. In Yu-i's family, each child was assigned a role from the start, so that a child was often limited (or given opportunities) on the basis of his or her name. For instance, "Yu" means goodness, and "i" means propriety. Did Yu-i live up to her name? Did your name play a part in making you who you are?

2. Pang-Mei tells the story in Yu-i's voice, after introducing each chapter with anecdotes from her own childhood or young adult life. Does this choice limit our understanding of either Pang-Mei or Yu-i? Did you want more or less of either woman's story?
3. Yu-i believes that her family's misfortune made them strong, a common theme in many immigrants' stories. Does the struggle always mean something? Or is the need to believe in its importance a form of self-protection?
4. As a girl, Pang-Mei felt safest within her Chinese heritage when she was with Xu Ma, her amah. Do the children of immigrants, with a foot in each culture, bear the brunt of their parents' decision to leave home?
5. How did family secrets harm the Chang family throughout its history?
6. Food often provides more than sustenance in Yu-i's story. Discuss its importance.
7. Did Yu-i believe the legends and myths and rules that decreed that girls were not as valuable as boys?
8. Yu-i's modesty is forceful--everything about her is understated. Do you think she knew how strong, smart, compassionate, and wise she was?
9. Yu-i describes a few incidents in which her family was not above bending the truth. Is there a contradiction between these actions and the Changs' deep-rooted belief in responsibility, familial duty, and personal integrity?
10. Yu-i has conflicting feelings about her "big" feet, saying for instance, "...they could not make me educated. Nor could they make my husband care for me." Yet she also states unequivocally that she would never bind a daughter's feet. Discuss the ways Yu-i was bound to tradition.
11. In China, up until ninety years ago, they bound young girls' feet. In America today, young girls inflict serious physical damage upon themselves by starving or binge/purging as they try to meet unrealistic standards of physical beauty. Discuss the physical price women pay because of gender. Do men pay such a price?
12. Much of Hsueh-shan's treatment of Yu-i can be explained based on Chinese culture. Does this explanation excuse him? Or does a higher universal morality demand that people rise above "acceptable" standards of behavior in the times and culture they are born into?
13. Many artists, writers, performers, composers, and poets have been accused of being selfish, obsessive, irresponsible, even immoral--think of Rilke, Gauguin, and Wagner. Should we separate the person from the work he or she creates? Or is, to paraphrase Emerson, character more important than intellect?
14. Ultimately, Yu-i says, she loved Hsueh-shan. Do you believe her?
15. Discuss the different silences in Yu-i's life. Is the silence always oppressive?
16. Was Hsueh-shan's remorse at Peter's death a pose? If not, does it excuse his earlier irresponsibility toward his son?
17. Yu-i says she never believed the gossip that Lao Ye and Lao Taitai loved her more than they loved their son, Hsueh-shan.

Chih-mo. She excuses them by saying they "just did not understand Hsü Chih-mo." Do you agree? Or did they see their son's character clearly?

**18.** Did the act of talking to Pang-Mei bring Yu-i to a new level of understanding her life, making her, in a sense, more modern, less traditional? Did the means become an end?

**19.** Pang-Mei wears two dresses at her wedding, wanting to incorporate her heritage with her modern life and American husband. On the basis of her family story, do you think she'll be successful?

## Author Bio

I was born on the Fourth of July in Boston, Massachusetts, and grew up in suburban Connecticut as American as everyone else around me. I spoke English at home, loved *Nancy Drew* and the *Hardy Boys*, and even considered myself like Harriet the Spy. But, filled with stories of China from my parents and my amah, who had brought up my father in Shanghai and was now in charge of my siblings and me, I dreamed of other lands, and felt drawn to know more about my Chinese heritage.

In 1980, I visited China for the first time on a six-month sabbatical with my father, a professor at Yale. I met with many relatives and even lived with some for several weeks, sharing a room with six other people, and a bathroom and kitchen with nine other families.

I recently married and moved to Moscow with my husband. Before that, I lived in New York and worked as an attorney.

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