

St. Petersburg Times Oct. 1996

BOUND FEET & WESTERN DRESS

By Pang-Mei Natasha Chang

Doubleday. 216 pp

Few women say it is easy, being a woman on the cusp of the new millennium, pinched between the roles and rules of the past and the opportunities opening into the future, the lure of both home and career in a world where you can't have it all.

How magnified those conflicts become, then, in the life of Chang Yu-i, sensitively revealed in this poignant memoir written by her great niece, Pang-Mei Natasha Chang.

In 1983, the author, then an 18 year-old freshman in Chinese Studies at Harvard, saw her great-aunt's name in a history book. Yu-i had earned the mention both because she had been vice president of the Shanghai Women's Savings Bank in the 1930s and because in 1922 she and China's eminent romantic poet, Hsu Chih-mo, had China's first Western-style divorce.

Intrigued, the Harvard teenager located her great-aunt in New York City and interviewed Yu-i regularly for the next five years. In part, the interview process took so long because Yu-i derived from a culture where the dead and the past are spoken of with reverence.

But how long can a woman born in China during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 glorify her past? This is the land where T'ang Dynasty poet Po Chui described his deceased daughter: "not a son, but still better than nothing." In this memoir's first sentence, Yu-i puts it more strongly: "In China, a woman is nothing." In childhood, she obeys her father; in adulthood, her husband; in widowhood, her son.

And so, as China transforms from Confucian to Western, moving from the last emperor to the republican Sun Yat-sen to the warlord era to nationalist Chang Kai-shek to Japanese occupation and finally Mao's communism, we watch Yu-i at three cry out against her feet being bound, then enter an arranged marriage to Hsu, bear his son, then his cruelty, desertion and concubine.

There were in China then seven recognized grounds for divorce, stacked heavily in favor of the husband, the "seven outs." Yu-i found another: incompatibility. Then she moved to Germany, educated herself, and became a teacher and businesswoman. She remarried and lived in Hong Kong from 1953 to 1974 when her husband died, then moved to the Manhattan apartment where Pang-Mei chatted with her over tea and *jiaozi* until Yu-i's death in 1988.

A lawyer now living in Moscow, the Massachusetts-born Chinese history major Pang-Mei is herself a one-person multi-cultural experience. In the tradition of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, she writes perceptively and gracefully and brings her own identity conflicts to Yu-i's tale, helping it resonate and become the universal story of a quest for direction at forks between past and future, East and West, duty and dreams. And quite a compelling story it becomes.