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Through Pearl S. Buck's Writing: Women with Bound Feet in the Republic of China

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Recommended Citation
Geng, Sophia. 2022. Through Pearl S. Buch's Writing: Women with Bound Feet in the Republic of China. *China-US Journal of Humanities,* 7: 15-25.

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CHINA-US

ISSUE 7

JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES

Books Beyond Boundaries
ROYAL COLLINS

China-US Journal of Humanities (Issue 7)

First published in 2023 by Royal Collins Publishing Group Inc.
Groupe Publication Royal Collins Inc.
BKM Royalcollins Publishers Private Limited

Headquarters: 550-555 boul. René-Lévesque O Montréal
(Québec) H2Z1B1 Canada

India office: 805 Hemkunt House, 8th Floor, Rajendra Place,
New Delhi 110 008

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ISBN: 978-1-4878-1092-4

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2 Through Pearl S. Buck's Writing: Women with Bound Feet in the Republic of China

Sophia Geng, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Pearl Buck's writing on women with bound feet in the Republic of China. In the 1920s and 1930s, a prominent theme in the would-be Nobel Prize Laureate Pearl Buck's writing was the capricious fates of women with bound feet. *Asia* magazine published some of Buck's earliest literary creations. Among them, "A Chinese Woman Speaks" (1926), "New Modes of Chinese Marriage" (1927), and "The First Wife" (1931 and 1932) gave sympathetic accounts of the mental and physical suffering of women whose hobbled feet became symbols of old fashions and ignorance in the new Republic. Through her keen observations, Pearl Buck called attention to the bodily, marital, and life crises that these women were going through, asking for compassion and solicitude. Although Buck was not the first *Asia* magazine contributor who wrote on Chinese women with bound feet, her voice was distinctive in that it came from the discernment of her lived experiences. Additionally, it is a realistic reflection of men's privileges and women's subjugation in the shifting marital relationships in Republican China.

KEYWORDS

Bound feet, Pearl S. Buck, *Asia* magazine, marriage freedom, divorce in the Republic of China

INTRODUCTION

Existing since the tenth century, foot-binding was the long, excruciating process of breaking the arch and most toes of young girls' feet in order to stop their growth and alter their shape (Ko 2005, 109–144; Wang 2000, 29–53;). Although for over a millennium, the three-inch golden lotus—a euphemism for women's tiny and curved bound feet—was a mark of beauty and social status, by the early twentieth century, social organizations increasingly advocated for the ending of this brutal custom. In 1912, the newly established Republic of China stipulated laws to prohibit foot-binding (Ko 2005, 50–63). In the wake of its outlaw, the practice largely stopped in the cities, saving tens of thousands of young girls from the suffering of crippled feet and restrained mobility. However, girls in the rural areas of China were still subjected to this cruel custom until the 1950s (Favazza 2011, 118; Bossen and Gates 2017, 1–23;). Women and girls who had bound feet found

themselves victims of both the cruel custom and the new world. Disabled at the hands of their mothers or grandmothers at an early age, these women were now despised. Their bound feet became a symbol of decadent traditions, and were an embarrassment to the new republic. With this came dwindled marriage prospects and lower chances of fulfilling domestic lives. For women with bound feet in Republican China, their bodies as well as their lives were in crisis.

Like their stunted feet, these women's voices were spurned. However, Pearl Buck—a Presbyterian missionary—took the theme of bound feet in her writing for *Asia* magazine, and presented the issue in a new light to her readers. *Asia* magazine existed for 49 years, from its inception in 1898 as the *Journal of the American Asiatic Association* to its merger in 1947 with *Free World* and *Inter-American* to initiate a new journal, *United Nations World* (Eperjesi 2005, 86–104). In 1925, a little-known author named Pearl S. Buck began to submit stories to *Asia* magazine. When *Asia* introduced her as a new author, it highlighted her decades-long experience of living in China and her deep knowledge of its culture and people:

> Pearl S. Buck is the daughter of missionaries to China and has spent practically all her life there. The Chinese language is to her a second mother tongue. From childhood she has worn Chinese dress at times and lived in the Chinese fashion. Her friends and her associations are for the most part Chinese. Her interpretation of Chinese thought, Chinese emotion, is rooted in knowledge and flowers delicately in understanding. Both Mrs. Buck and her husband… are teachers in the University of Nanking. … The University, chartered in 1911 by the Regents of New York University, represents a strenuous, serious-minded "Young China." (Froelick 1926 no. 1, 5)

This introduction emphasizes Pearl S. Buck's and her husband Dr. John Lossing Buck's knowledge of China, and their credentials as university teachers. Additionally, the university that they worked at was an important symbol of "Young China." This claim renders social and cultural significance to the issues covered in Pearl Buck's short stories. The editor of *Asia* magazine drives home the relevance of Buck's stories on traditional Chinese women with bound feet by asserting that "[i]t is a story that, although cast in the form of fiction, is in all essentials true" (Froelick 1926 no. 3, 193).

"A CHINESE WOMAN SPEAKS": A HAPPY ENDING WITH SYMPATHY AND ADAPTATION

The well-being of traditional women with bound feet is a prominent and repeated theme in Pearl Buck's writing. One of her early pieces on this theme is the story "A Chinese Woman Speaks." Due to the story's considerable length, it appeared in Volume 26 of *Asia* magazine (1926) in two installments. The story takes the form of a private letter from Kwei-lan to a foreign sisterly friend. Kwei-lan's name is composed of two fragrant flowering plants—sweet osmanthus and orchid. It is a common old-fashioned Chinese name. Kwei-lan married a Western-educated doctor, and was troubled by her husband's indifference to her, which compelled her to write to a friend that she addresses as "my sister." This sister has "lived among us all your years. Although you belong to those other lands where my husband studies his Western books, you will understand" (Buck 1926 no. 4, 304). This sister is someone like Buck herself—a Caucasian who has lived in China for many years. Working as a missionary's wife, Pearl Buck probably listened to many stories like Kwei-lan's. The format of a confiding letter from a native Chinese woman to her foreign sisterly friend also augments the truthfulness and authenticity of the story. In fact, *Asia* magazine informed its readers that Pearl Buck's story had "the double attractiveness of being a tale true in essence and full of delicacy and charm as a piece of literary art" (Froelick 1926 no. 4, 283).

The protagonist Kwei-lan grew up in the inner chambers of her natal home, following her mother's advice that "[a] woman before men should maintain a flower-like silence and should withdraw herself at the earliest moment that is

possible without confusion" (Buck 1926 no. 4, 304). Kwei-lan's mother was proud that her daughter was well versed in all the duties, manners, and etiquette of a gentlewoman. But it was Kwei-lan's small feet that her mother was most proud of. As she noted, Kwei-lan knew "the cunning of shoes upon your little feet—ah, me, those feet of yours and all the tears they have cost! But I know of none so small in your generation" (Buck 1926 no. 4, 305). Kwei-lan was betrothed to the son of her father's brotherly friend, who was six years older than her, and had lived for twelve years in the West, studying medicine. On their wedding night, her husband told her, "You have been forced into this marriage as much as I have" (Buck 1926 no. 4, 308). Since Kwei-lan had spent all her life preparing for her marriage, including binding her feet to perfection, her husband's view of their marriage as forced was troubling to her, as was his coldness to her in the days after their marriage ceremony.

The pivotal point of Kwei-lan's marriage came when her husband asked her if she would consider unbind her feet. Her initial reaction was shame and rejection: "I drew my feet hastily under my chair. I was stricken at his words. … I bowed my head to hide my tears. I thought of all those restless nights and the days when I could not eat and had no desire to play…" (Buck 1926 no. 4, 357) When she finally agreed to unbind her feet in an effort to please her husband, his tenderness surprised her. Kwei-lan expected her husband to merely give her directions from his medical knowledge, instead he offered to take care of her unbinding personally. His kind and sympathetic words, such as "How you have suffered!" (Buck 1926 no. 5, 417) and "How wretched a childhood—and all for nothing!" (Buck 1926 no. 5, 417) revealed his gentle nature and gave much comfort to Kwei-lan, who had to endure the great pain that came with unbinding her feet:

> Unbinding was a new sacrifice: For when my feet had been soaked and bound again more loosely, intolerable suffering set in. Indeed, the unbinding process was almost as painful as the binding had been. At night my eyes were swollen with weeping, and my voice rough with sobs I could not control. (Buck 1926 no. 5, 417)

Kwei-lan's willingness to consider unbinding her feet presented itself as a connection between this new couple who had lived in two different worlds. It is noteworthy that the Western-educated husband was portrayed in a positive light, as kind, tender-hearted, sympathetic, and patient. Forced into an arranged marriage, he was as much a victim as his wife, but he was never harsh or cruel towards her. As a newlywed, he was distraught about his imposed marriage, but chose avoidance and indifference rather than meanness and spite towards a victim weaker than himself. When his traditional wife showed an interest in learning about the modern way of life, he gave her encouragement and support. As he was the one who possessed privilege, power, and knowledge in the relationship, he could very well have shown impatience and complacency, but he did not.

"A Chinese Woman Speaks" has a happy ending. The couple's mutual willingness to compromise and to adjust to the new expectations of married life made them appreciate each other. Their marriage culminated in the birth of a son. Kwei-lan presented her firstborn to her husband:

> "My dear lord, behold thy firstborn son. Take him. Thy wife gives him to thee."
> He gazed into my eyes. I was faint with the ardent light of his regard. He bent nearer to me. He spoke,
> "I give him back to thee. He is ours." His voice was low and his words fell through the air like drops of silver.
> "I share him with thee. I am thy husband who loves thee!" (Buck 1926, no. 5, 452)

After the 1912 ban on foot-binding, the fate of the women who had to live with their disfigured and scorned feet became increasingly capricious. Pearl Buck acutely discerned the injustice that arranged marriage thrust upon the young. Never judgmental or preaching, through pieces such as "A Chinese Woman Speaks," Buck offered sympathy with the physical and mental suffering of the wives, and gently called for support from modern-educated husbands.

Pearl Buck's stories and articles about the crises encountered by women with bound feet in Republican China were a crystallization of the suffering of these women, whose mutilated bodies were discarded by the times and the society in which they lived. In the political arena, national leaders such as Chiang Kai-shek rejected their arranged marriages and went on to marry women who had received Western education. Nevertheless, the intellectual circle deserves more detailed scrutiny because intellectual leaders are traditionally supposed to be upholders of ethics in both the public and personal realms. Pearl Buck was acquainted with quite a few well-known intellectuals of the early twentieth century, such as Hu Shi and Xu Zhimo. It was likely that her interactions and communication with these people matured her thinking on the fates of traditional wives. Thus, it is worth looking at these intellectuals' handling of their own arranged marriages, and viewing them as a litmus test of Pearl Buck's writing on women with bound feet in terms of whether she reflects the essence of their crises from a humanistic perspective.

Hu Shi's marriage with Jiang Dongxiu shared many similarities with the main characters of the story "A Chinese Woman Speaks." Since Hu Shi was the leader of China's New Culture Movement, we can conjure an image of his marriage with Jiang Dongxiu based on biographies and less formal essays (Yi; An; Liu; Wang). Jiang Dongxiu was a distant relative on Hu Shi's mother's side. In 1904, the two families arranged their engagement, but the two never met in person. As Jiang was one year older, Hu Shi addressed her as "older sister" in his letters to his mother. After their betrothal, Hu Shi left for the U.S. to get his Ph.D. In 1911, he wrote to Jiang Dongxiu, encouraging her to read books, improve herself, and unbind her feet, setting an example in their hometown by doing so. In Hu Shi's letter to his mother dated July 4, 1914, he wrote, "In your previous letter, I learned that older sister has agreed to unbind her feet. Hearing it, I was very glad" (An).

While Hu Shi was studying abroad, his mother gently reminded him about careful conduct, especially avoiding any entanglements with female peers. Responding to his mother's precept, Hu Shi wrote in his letter dated May 19, 1915:

> Nowadays, the young often advocate for free marriage. Sometimes, they even break marriage contracts that have been arranged, which caused conflict and unrest in their houses. Sometimes, the influence of this breach could damage several families. This is what your son could not agree with. (An)

Hu Shi returned to China after receiving his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University. On December 1917, he married his fiancée Jiang Dongxiu. In their marriage, Hu showed respect to Jiang, including tolerance of her hobby of playing mahjong (Liu). His marriage to an illiterate woman with bound feet stood in juxtaposition to his role as the leader of China's New Culture Movement, and incited ridicule from some of his modern-minded contemporaries. A talented, good-looking scholar, Hu Shi did not lack admiration from educated "new women." However, he and Jiang Dongxiu spent their lives together. The couple had two sons, and their marriage lasted for forty-five years until Hu Shi's death in 1962, at the age of seventy. Eventually, his decades-long marriage gained acceptance and even respect among his friends. One of them, Tang Degang, wrote a couplet that light-heartedly expressed his admiration:

> Hu Shi's name is well known universally,
> his wife with bound feet can also accompany him. (Liu)

Hu Shi's upbringing and his immersion in traditional Chinese education had much to do with his long marriage with Jiang Dongxiu. With his father Hu Chuan's guidance, Hu Shi had started to practice Chinese calligraphy and recite the *Three-Character Classic* and the *Thousand-Character Classic* at the age of two or three. He had also thoroughly studied many Chinese classics and history books as well as more than thirty classical novels. In 1904, he said goodbye to his mother and his native village, and went to Shanghai for Western-style education. However, his nine years of traditional education were foundational to his character and ethical shaping, and compelled him to be a gentleman who lived to high moral standards. In Hu Shi's *Self-Narration at Forty* (*Si Shi Zi Shu*), he devoted an encomium to his father, celebrating Hu Chuan's heroism, uprightness, and accomplishment as a loyal minister of the Qing

court. In this chapter, he also expressed his appreciation for his mother's traditional virtues as a self-sacrificing wife (Ng 2003). Always close to his mother, who was widowed at an early age, Hu Shi had a keen understanding of traditional women's selfless devotion to their families. These deep-rooted values compelled him to be gentlemanly and kind-hearted towards women, especially those whose fates would be heavily impacted by his actions.

"THE FIRST WIFE": A BAD ENDING WITH CRUELTY AND ABANDONMENT

Pearl Buck paid sustained attention to the fate of women with bound feet. Her concerns over the ruthless abandonment of traditional women were expressed in the story "The First Wife," which was published in *Asia* magazine in 1931 and 1932. The anonymous First Wife was married to Yuan, the only son of the Li family, who grew and sold tea. They lived in a town that "was not on the coast nor near any place where the railway ran. It was a small, quiet city in the midst of a wide plain where farms were set closely beside a slow and shallow river" (Buck 1926 no. 12, 747). The First Wife came from "a good gentry family in the country" (Buck 1926 no. 12, 749). At the time of their marriage, she was considered ideal for the Li family's learned son. The portrayal of the First Wife's physique and demeanor are an iconic embodiment of duty and propriety. Mother of a daughter and a son, the First Wife

> was a woman less than thirty years of age, a woman neither pretty nor ugly, with small, neat, regular features and exceedingly beautiful hands; in her hands she now held a piece of pale-pink satin on which she was embroidering very minute crimson flowers and a small green bird on a bough. Every now and again she bent to whisper to a little girl, some ten years or so of age… (Buck 1926 no. 12, 748)

As an integral part of a traditionally raised woman, her feet were bound into "tiny flowered satin shoes" (Buck 1926 no. 12, 748). In her parents-in-law's eyes, the First Wife was "the best and kindest daughter and the carefulest of mothers and everything a daughter-in-law should be in the house" (Buck 1931 no. 12, 748). However, in her Western-educated husband's eyes, she was onerous baggage. Her husband Yuan had studied abroad for seven years. Upon his return, he was cold to his wife. His intolerance of his traditional wife was apparent in his blunt words: "Not to have an educated wife is my great handicap. I have no one to keep such a home as I must have and to entertain for me, to be a companion to me. I am anxious even now because my children are not taught as they should be." (Buck 1932 no. 1, 50) and "My father, you see for yourself! How could she manage a house like this, how could she be the sort of wife to me that I need? She cannot even read and write. I would be ashamed of her before my friends and their wives!"(Buck 1932 no. 1, 55)

As Yuan could not tolerate an illiterate wife with bound feet, he demanded that the First Wife go to a foreign school in a coastal city to become a Western-educated new-style woman. However, the First Wife could not focus on her studies:

> When she tried to fix her mind upon these letters, it would fly of its own accord to her home, and she could think of nothing else. She could only wonder if they had thought today to put warmer coats upon the children since the wind blew to chill, and she fell to thinking of her duties in that house and whether they were done or not, and suddenly the hour would be gone and she had not learned what she ought to have learned, and the teacher was impatient and she was ashamed. (Buck 1932 no. 1, 56)

On realizing the impossibility of becoming a new woman, the First Wife made a heartbreaking concession. "I cannot be two women for you. If it be you must have the other kind also, then, although it breaks my heart in two, take one of that sort to be with you where you are; as for me, I will stay at home and care for your parents and take care of the children"

(Buck 1932 no. 1, 56). However, Yuan was far more resolute in his determination to build a modern life. He soon betrothed himself to a young woman who had been a schoolmate when he studied abroad, and he insisted on divorcing the First Wife. Yuan's father proposed that the First Wife continue living with them, but it was not acceptable to Yuan. He went back to his ancestral home to send the First Wife away and to take their children to his new home in the city. He announced his decisions to his father, without talking to the First Wife at all:

> The bill of divorce is drawn, and it must be signed by the two of us to be divorced. My wedding is set for the sixth day of next month. It is better for this one, here, to withdraw to some quiet good place with a relative, because it will be too difficult for me to bring my wife home… (Buck 1932 no. 1, 59)

Hearing this shocking news, the First Wife "turned a strange white" (Buck 1932 no. 1, 59), and spoke directly to her husband for the first time: "But I have nowhere to go at all. There is no relative who will take me and the two children" (Buck 1932 no. 1, 59). Her husband was dismissive of her feeble protest. He responded that the children would come to his new house where they could "receive the benefits of my wife's education" (Buck 1932 no. 1, 59). His only promise to his First Wife was that he would take care of her financially after she left his ancestral home. Yuan's ruthless decision robbed her of everything valuable in her life, and there were no more concessions that she could make. "It did not take her one moment more to know what she must do for them all. Yes, for Yuan and for the children she must do it—for herself, also" (Buck 1932 no. 1, 59). Treated as a burden to be cast away in haste, the First Wife decided to end her life: "She tied the girdle firmly and steadily, and she took one long look about this beloved room. Then she pressed her lips together and closed her eyes. With quiet decision she thrust one foot off the bed and leaped into the air and felt the girdle tighten and jerk" (Buck 1932 no. 1, 59).

In this time of change, married women were deprived of the protections warranted in traditional societies. The First Wife in this short story would not be driven out of her husband's family, as her situation fell into "Three Conditions Preventing Divorced." In dynastic China, although marriages were arranged in the best interests of the husband and his family, women still had a thin layer of protection. Under three conditions, the husband and his family could not divorce a wife. Firstly, if the wife's parents were alive when the couple got married, and then died during her marriage, leaving her with no home to return to, her husband could not divorce her. Secondly, if she had mourned the passing of her husband's parents for three years, he could not divorce her. Thirdly, if her husband was poor when they got married and became well-to-do, he could not divorce his wife (Dong 1995, 292). In the case of the First Wife, her parents passed away after she was married. Her brothers had divided up her natal home, and she had no place to return to.

In Republican China's intellectual circle, it was the popular poet Xu Zhimo who displayed callousness towards his wife after their arranged marriage, much like the ruthless husband of the First Wife. The following synopsis is based on widely read biographical writings on Xu Zhimo in print or on the internet (Xu and Liu; Chang; Lan Meng Dao Zhu; Chen Bing Du Shu; Bai Nian Cang Sang; Laoziliao;). Appreciating Xu Zhimo's talents, Zhang Youyi's elder brother arranged a betrothal between the two. Xu Zhimo thought of Zhang as a "country bumpkin" and entered his marriage with great reluctance in 1915 (Chen Bing Du Shu). After the birth of their son in 1918, Xu Zhimo left for America to study. Upon graduation from Columbia, Xu went to the London School of Economics for a Master's degree in Political Science (Chen Bing Du Shu). In 1920, Zhang went to Europe to join her husband. However, Xu Zhimo treated Zhang with irritation and impatience, as he was infatuated with Huiyin Lin (Laoziliao). Lin was the daughter of a minister in the Republic of China's government. She had received a modern education, and was known for her literary talents. In 1921, Xu Zhimo demanded a divorce, even though his wife was pregnant. When Zhang refused to divorce and abort their child, Xu left London in rage, leaving Zhang stranded there (Lan Meng Dao Zhu). In March 1922, shortly after the birth of their second son, Xu Zhimo

pressured Zhang Youyi to a divorce. Xu announced the divorce in the *New Zhejiang Newspaper* and accidently created a precedent—it was the first recorded civil divorce in the Republic of China (Bai Nian Cang Sang). For Xu, his divorce was an escape from the darkness of hell, freedom from the shackles of worry, and joyful news to be announced publicly. For Zhang, divorced and alone in Europe with her newborn son, it was an ordeal that drove her to suicidal contemplations. In 1925, Zhang lost her second son to illness. In 1926, she returned to Shanghai. The same year, Xu Zhimo married Lu Xiaoman, another talented and controversial "new woman" of the Republic of China (Lan Meng Dao Zhu). Although Xu Zhimo's treatment of Zhang Youyi shared much of the callousness of the First Wife's husband, Zhang's destiny was quite different. After the death of her second son, Zhang Youyi felt there was nothing to lose and therefore nothing to fear (Xu and Liu 1996, 294). From her agonizing ordeal grew courage and resilience. She completed her schooling in Germany, then worked as a college instructor, banker, manager, and businessperson. When Xu Zhimo died in a plane crash in 1931, Zhang became the backbone of her ex-husband's family. She took on the responsibility of taking care of her ex-husband's parents and son. After Xu's death, Zhang also gave financial support to his second wife Lu Xiaoman (Lan Meng Dao Zhu).

From Pearl Buck's story "The First Lady" and the real-life marital struggles of Xu Zhimo and Youyi Zhang, it is clear that men, as the heirs to their families' bloodlines, occupied an advantageous position in the familial hierarchy in the Republic of China. Men could demand and take what was in their best interests without much consideration of the consequences for the women in their lives. Women who spent their girlhoods preparing for traditional marriages, including going through the excruciating process of foot-binding, suddenly found that their preparations did not fit the new Republic, where Western-style education and natural feet became the yardstick for marriageability. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the educated young men of China had to choose between keeping or breaching the contracts of traditionally arranged marriages. For those who had already married and fathered children, their choices had a decisive impact on their wives and children. While the majority of the educated youth denounced arranged marriage and lived separate lives from their first wives, they acquiesced to the arrangement that their divorced spouses could stay in their ancestral residences as "foster daughters" to their parents. Husbands like Xu Zhimo and Yuan, who believed that divorce was a liberation for both parties in a marriage and that divorce would give their wives the freedom of (re)marriage, were either naïve or hypocritical. In Pearl Buck's story, the First Wife could not face the bleak future of a divorced woman, and hanged herself. In real life, it took even a resilient woman like Youyi Zhang decades to emerge from the shadow of abandonment and divorce. Over thirty years after Xu's death in a plane crash, having become an established businesswoman, Zhang received a marriage proposal from a doctor named Su Jizhi in Hong Kong. Asking her son's permission to remarry, Zhang wrote, "As a widow, it is only natural for me to listen to my son's opinion on this matter." It was only when her son replied with "If Mother has found someone suitable, I request to treat him as I treat my father." that Zhang accepted Dr. Su's proposal (Lan Meng Dao Zhu).

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF PEARL BUCK'S WRITING ON WOMEN WITH BOUND FEET

Asia magazine was one of the earliest American magazines to focus its gaze on the continent of Asia. Before Pearl Buck's 1926 story "A Chinese Woman Speaks," other contributors had written about women with bound feet. For instance, in Richard Washburn Child's 1917 piece "The Way of Chinese Business," he regarded the tea merchant with whom he was doing business as old and conservative. To support his point, Child emphasized the fact that the tea merchant's wife "had bound feet and whose daughter bound the upper part of her body into a tubercular flatness" (Child 1917 no. 7, 341). Clearly, having wives with bound feet was seen as a symbol of conservatism.

The July 1919 issue of *Asia* magazine published William L. Hall's "Tales of a Chinese Village." One of these tales was the story "Only A Girl." In it, Hall used the metaphor "ogre" to describe the power and brutality of foot-binding as a custom, from which little girls had no way of escape (Hall 1919 no. 7, 679). Commenting on the cruelty of the practice, Hall stated:

> To the baby-girl is now bequeathed a life-long burden of suffering, and torture from which she knows no escape. In making an estimate of the success of the binding of any feet there is only one important consideration—the feet must be small. Pain and shape and awkward helplessness count as nothing, if the feet have been kept small. The smaller the foot the more fashionable—and the greater the wedding-gift later on! (Hall 1919 no. 7, 679)

In this account, Hall drives home the message that foot-binding was a cruel and painful custom. However, in his later travelogue, his sense of sympathy for women with bound feet diminished. In Part II of his "A Fortnight on a Cargo-Boat" series, "Hochow to the River Gorges," Hall writes: "The Captain's wives toil not… Both the women and the girls have bound feet and they go hobbling about like crippled animals" (Hall 1922 no. 4, 296). Then, in Part III of this series, "Through the River Gorges to Suining," Hall recounts that "A girl with tubercular sinuses in her bound feet tells me that she is to be married soon and says that her future husband will beat her if she comes to him in poor health" (Hall 1922 no. 5, 352). By this point, Hall was telling such grotesque and saddening stories in a merely matter-of-fact way. Perhaps sustained exposure to the cruelty of foot-binding had numbed his earlier, more sympathetic response to the suffering women.

In the June 1921 story "My Chinese Marriage," the author M.T.F. focused on the interracial love story and marriage between Chan-King Liang, a Chinese student in the U.S., and his classmate Margaret. Liang rescinded his betrothal to fiancée Li-Ying in order to date and marry Margaret, who confided:

> I took great interest in this little girl, who flitted through Chan-King's stories like a brilliant butterfly seen through a mist. Her name was Li-Ying, and she was only three years old when she ran, with her little feet still unbound, through those sweetly remembered green gardens of childhood. Somewhere now she was sitting, her little feet meekly crossed, embroidering shoes, waiting until her father should betroth her to another youth. (M.T.F. 1921 no. 6, 548)

In Margaret's romanticized portrayal, Li-Ying was part of the mist that constituted Chang-King's Chinese past. Neither Liang nor his innocent, good-natured American wife had robbed Li-Ying of a secure marital life. Li-Ying, with her bound feet meekly crossed, would be betrothed to another suitable young man. If this were a true story, due to the long wait for Liang's return, Li-Ying would have passed her prime years as a would-be wife and mother, and her prospects for a secure and suitable marriage would have very much diminished. However, M. T. F. did not tease out the impact that Liang's revocation would have on Li-Ying's life, or to put it more pointedly, that Margaret's happy marriage was at the cost of Li-Ying's happiness.

John P. Rice's "Sword and Pen in the City of Long Sands" appeared in the 1923 edition of *Asia* magazine. Introducing the eponymous city (Changsha), Rice writes:

> Of the balustrades of a granite bridge blackened by time and filth and spanning a stream the nose refuses to fathom; of basket of raw fish; of buckets of dirty water; of chunks of meat hanging from hooks with stray dogs scavenging among them; of swarming children; of women hobbling on bound feet; of chickens, pigs and goats; of ragged, pestilential beggars; (Rice 1923, no. 8, 571)

This portrayal indicates that women with bound feet were a component of a strange and exotic Chinese city – part of the mosaic of the filthy, smelly, and crowded City of Long Sands. Stella Benson similarly describes women with bound feet as exotic in her 1925 article "A Secret City":

> Sometime little shy, fastidious ladies totter from shadow to shadow on bound feet, the deep, bright frills of their umbrellas hiding their faces so that all their fascination is perforce confined to their tiny, flower-like shoes. (Benson 1925 no. 1, 28)

These examples show that many *Asia* magazine authors prior to Pearl Buck portrayed Chinese women with bound feet as a symbol of a mythical China. Women hobbling on tiny feet were an exotic image. The cruel, barbarous practice of foot-binding was part of the mixture of China's foreignness, dirtiness, and backwardness. Although William Hall's earlier portrayal of foot-binding had a tone of sympathy, he wrote from the perspective of an outside observer. As the shock over the practice's cruelty dwindled, so did his sympathy for its victims.

Among *Asia* magazine's authors, Pearl Buck was the first to bring women with bound feet to the front and center of the storytelling. Thanks to her daily interactions with women in her missionary work, she was able to tell the story of their suffering in their own voices with assurance. Thanks to the experience she had gained through proxy and empathy, she had the confidence to describe the women's inner thoughts as well. As well as *Asia* magazine's promotion of the truthfulness of her stories, Pearl Buck herself included pictures of Chinese figures throughout her story. For example, there is an image of a smiling little boy at the center of a page in "A Chinese Woman Speaks" with the caption "Kwei-lan's son, with a lotus-pod" (Buck 1926 no. 5, 416). These pictures present real-life images that could truly be the characters in her stories, thereby creating concrete images for her readership to consume. It is an effective strategy to create truth and authenticity in the readers' minds.

What is more, compared with her contemporaries, Pearl Buck's portrayal of the difficult lives of Chinese women with bound feet is a lot more vivid and in-depth. For instance, in "A Chinese Woman Speaks," Pearl Buck gave a detailed description of the suffering induced by unbinding the feet. This portrait adds a layer of complexity to an otherwise binary story about unbinding, in which bound feet represent old fashions and decadent traditions, while unbinding represents emancipation and progress. The First Wife's feeble protest of having "nowhere to go" is another example. In the Republic of China where old customs were dismantled in the name of freedom, married women were deprived of the protections that had been warranted in traditional societies. The First Wife in this short story would not be driven out of her husband's family, as her situation fell into the "Three Conditions Preventing Divorced." Pearl Buck's keen observations and genuine sympathy come from her deep roots in Chinese life. It is her keen observations and sympathy that make her stand out among her contemporaneous writers and commentators on China and eventually helped her to become the Nobel Laureate in Literature.

CONCLUSION: A HUMAN RESPONSE TO A SOMATIC CRISIS

Although foot-binding was outlawed in 1912, when Pearl Buck was traveling in a section of northern Anhui Province thirteen years later in 1927, she found that the custom was still being practiced. She could not help but express her regret when she saw a mother in northern Anhui about to bind the feet of her seven-year-old daughter (Buck 1927 no. 8, 650). Pearl Buck's daily encounters with Chinese women meant that foot-binding was a persistent theme in her work as a missionary and in her career as an author. In her article "New Modes of Chinese Marriage" published in *Asia* magazine in 1927, she commented insightfully:

> Though the old era is passing, the time-honored Chinese custom according to which marriageable young people are betrothed by parents or guardians early in childhood but do not see each other until the wedding-day is still prevalent in country districts and among old-fashioned families. And even among the more progressive, who wish to educate their sons according to modern methods and allow them some freedom, it is usual to plan for the girls of the family in the old manner. (Buck 1927 no. 8, 650)

The discrepancy over boys' and girls' upbringing created a disjuncture: when these boys grew up and demanded new marriages that would match their modern education, what would happen to their wives and fiancées with bound feet?

Although an arranged marriage between a Western-educated youth and his traditional wife with bound feet was a challenge for both, Pearl Buck wrote sympathetically about the traditional and illiterate wife, understanding the very real likelihood of re-victimization. After enduring the agonizing process of foot-binding since the tender age of five or six years old, the traditional wife now had to swallow the humiliation that her maimed feet brought her, since they had become a sign of backwardness in the Republic of China, or even worse, a reason for her husband to demand the nullification of their marriage. In her writing, Pearl Buck called for humane treatment of women with bound feet. She wrote:

> When the betrothal is broken off, the brunt of the tragedy falls upon the woman, who, since she has been repudiated by her fiancé, even though for no fault of her own, loses face and must marry into a lower social class. For her to remain unmarried is, if she is uneducated, almost impossible. (Buck 1927 no. 8, 652)

If the marriage was consummated and children were born, a husband's decision to divorce his wife with bound feet could very well push her to desperation, if not utter despair.

Pearl Buck's response to the crisis had two aspects. First of all, she commended adaptations made by women them-selves. In "A Chinese Woman Speaks," Kwei-lan's willingness to explore unbinding her feet was an important step that signified new possibilities and connection-making in her suffocating marriage life. In real life, poet Xu Zhimo's first wife Zhang Youyi set an example of the power of adaptation. Zhang's resilience and her sense of responsibility earned her the respect of the Xu family. Xu Zhimo himself praised his ex-wife's fearlessness (Xu and Liu 1996, 294). However, more im-portantly, Pearl Buck called for a relational solution to the unstable situations of women with bound feet. She asked for gentleness and kindness from the people in these women's lives, especially compassion and patience from their educated husbands. In her story "A Chinese Woman Speaks," Pearl Buck lauds the gentleness and kindness that Kwei-lan's husband showed to his wife. In "New Modes of Chinese Marriage," Pearl Buck cited another example:

> The man patiently teaches his wife to read Chinese three evenings out of the week, takes her with him to call on his foreign friends and explains to her carefully certain rules of behavior. She is bewildered, but she clings to him with a blind, devoted gratitude beautiful to see. I attempted to put something of my feeling about them into halting words to him one day and failed because it was like trying to collect the dust from moths' wings. But he comprehended and said gravely: "She is no more to blame than I for this situation. It is better to make it bearable for each other." (Buck 1927 no. 8, 653)

Like Kwei-lan's husband, the man in this example understood that both the husband and wife were victims of their arranged marriage. He did not use his privileges and power to escape his burden. Instead, he showed patience and kindness towards the more fragile one. Although Pearl Buck employs a neutral tone in her writing in "The First Wife," she reveals the selfishness of men like Yuan. They took it for granted that they should get the best from both the old world and the new. Even their minimal considerations of their wives were deemed as kind and proper while they ruthlessly pushed the women

to the brink of despair or even suicide. Although the reader does not know if cruel husbands like Yuan would repent, the First Wife's suicide signifies the irreversible destruction of the family. How insulated could Yuan's new marriage be from the destruction left by his First Wife's hanging?

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