

The Chinese Women (Part One)

--Celebrating Grandma's 96th Birthday

Generation comes and generation goes. The life of a woman today is definitely not the same as the one centuries ago, even decades ago. This is true in all nations. The International Women's Day was originated from the women's movement in this country -- In 1908, women in New York City demanded shorter working hours and equal pay as men. Believe it or not, the right for a woman to vote in the US did not become law until 1920. For the Chinese women, today they don't need to fight for foot-binding anymore! Women, in general, receive equal pay as men --one has to give credit to Chairman Mao Zedong, despite some of his very negative deeds, he adopted the policy to demand absolute equality between genders.



I watched 2009 Chinese New Year Gala on CCTV, there was a comedic episode about the changes in the past thirty years. In a humorous way, the comedians showed the changes in women from the way they dressed themselves to the way they acted in the public. As the by-product of One Child policy, together with the legal status of abortion in China, there are much less girls than boys in the younger population. This odd situation results in a boost of the women's position or adoration --since millions of boys will have tough time find a wife to marry when they reach adulthood.

When I think of a Chinese woman, the first image popped out in my mind is a hard working figure with determination. Especially in a family, a Chinese woman seems carry a much bigger load than a Chinese man. To my surprise, my American friends in Kentucky think differently; in their minds a Chinese woman is a slim, obedient Miss with a shy smile. Apparently, the East and the West have different perspective for the Chinese or Asian women in general. Admit, I used to have an unrealistic image for American women.

My grandma has certainly contributed to the impression I formed about Chinese women. Grandma was born in 1913, two years after the collapse of the Qing, the last dynasty in Chinese history. In 1911, the last emperor, three-year-old Puyi, was forced to abdicate, to give up the throne to the new Republic of China. So, my grandma was born in that turbulent era. The imperial system of more than 2000 years was gone, overnight! Where would China go next?

We call our grandma "Popo 婆婆", which means the grandma from mother's side, her name is Tsai Chien Dee 蔡健娣. Growing up, my grandma was one of the few girls in the Tsai village, Taishan (Hoisan), Guangdong Province, who had education; she had a private tutor to teach her how to read, write and count. Also, she was one of the few that never had her feet bound. She even ran away from home to show her mother that she really meant it-- *three cheers for grandma!* So, my grandma has a pair of big, normal feet. For that, her parents had to pay a large sum of money as wedding gifts--men in those days desired to marry women with the tiny bound feet.

The fashion of foot-binding was initially a practice only in the wealthy and elites, then it spread to the general population. To reach the desirable pointy little feet, some women had to endure the pain of foot-binding at a very young age. “三寸金莲” literally means the three-inch feet like golden lotus. In Beijing where I grew up, I saw many older women with bound feet. I never liked the way they walked, it was hard to fathom how in the world men thought those feet were attractive!



My grandma had a very tough life. When Japan invaded China during World War II, her family shrank to only a handful of people from a large 35 people household! Her husband, the oldest son of the family, died when she was in her late 20's, she never married again. She devoted her life to raise my mother and my uncle. However, she seldom talked about those hard time.

When I grew up, it was a norm for a family of three generations to live under the same roof. Both of my parents worked, my grandma took up the job of child rearing. She made decisions, big and small, for the family. Mom and Dad gave their monthly salaries to my grandma to handle the everyday fare, from banking to buying groceries; from purchasing clothes & school supplies to gifts during holidays; from medicine to everything I could think of. Mom and Dad never had any objections. Maybe that was how I formed the opinion that a woman was the dominant force (顶梁柱) in the family.

We, my siblings, were afraid of her when we were young. Although she took good care of us, she had a loud voice and quick temper; and she never hesitated to correct our mistakes even when we were with school friends. We all tried hard to do things right to avoid being embarrassed, or worse, punished.

Can you imagine the conflict and the hard time when my grandmother immigrated to America to live with my uncle? My uncle was my grandmother's only son, precious at her sight. She sent him to the US to pursue a better life, he was merely 9 year old when he left Hong Kong. So, my uncle was educated in the US. Later, he joined the US army and went through the ordeals of Vietnam war. Until 1972, President Nixon visited China, which opened the closed door to a new relationship between China and America. When my grandma rejoined and lived with him in US, my uncle was a married man with three teenage daughters; he was a manager in the local Safeway store, and owner of a Cantonese restaurant in Portland, OR.

After arrival, grandma wrote to tell us that her house was like a castle fit for a queen! It was the first, unfortunately, and the last happy letter from her. Sadly, there had grown a great distance between the mother and son, the result of long distance relationship and lack of communication through the years. And it was impossible for her to run the house for my aunt and uncle the same way as she did with us. She was no longer a decision-maker. To make a long story short, within weeks my uncle had to move his mother to an apartment; there, she lived alone until my parents emigrated from China.

There are many stories during the period of her waiting for my parents. As a strong woman, she was determined to survive to the arrival of my mother, the only “good” child. The unforgettable one for me was the “looking for salt at the supermarket”. Knowing no English at all, she was told by her neighbor, a Chinese lady, there was a little girl holding an umbrella on the salt carton. Aisle after aisle, shelf after shelf, hours later she could not find the salt—that particular store did not carry Morton salt...



To this day, I still feel the lump in my throat whenever I tell this story. For living, she washed dishes in my uncle’s Chinese restaurant in downtown Portland; my uncle paid her salary, as well as Social Security and Medicare. On the way to work, she always stood in the bus, so she would not miss the landmark of the bus stop since she did not understand the driver’s announcement in English.

All turned well when we emigrated to US; once again, she felt alive and useful for the family again. This time she took up the family fare again when my parents struggled to fit in with the new life in America. With great joy, she watched us, her grandchildren, to marry one by one; she wanted to help us to take care of our babies, too.

Two generations and two countries later, there are still disagreements, but love covers everything. We, my siblings, know how much she has suffered for this family and for us. She gave her life to us, we all felt in debt to her. Even with the love and clear conscience, sometimes, we find it is hard to do things her way.

I remember when my sister gave birth to her daughter Helena, my grandmother was overjoyed for Helena was her first great grandchild! The rare “treat” for Chinese woman is “to sit through the month” or “Yue Zi” 月子 in Chinese, which refers to mother’s first month after the baby is born. In the month, the young mother is to rest, *sit*, not to do any work to replenish from the energy loss during the pregnancy and delivering. The mother and the baby suppose to stay only indoor and not to go out to expose to the cold and wind. The Chinese Medicine theory behind the practice is that a pregnant woman’s “pores” are open, and the first month is the crucial period for the body to return to the “close” position as it is before the pregnancy. A young mother wouldn’t want the “cold” being trapped inside of her body during the closing, since she will not be able to expel the cold out once the closing ends after the first month of delivery. Of course, she may have this chance again during her next pregnancy, when the pores open again. “月子里的病，月子里的补” which means the sickness, generated by inappropriate behaviors in the Yue Zi, has to wait till the next Yue Zi to correct. For some, they may never have a second chance. My mother, who had practiced Chinese Medicine in China, believes that the reasons for so many women in this country suffering from arthritis, are women in the US do not “sit through the month”.

No matter what one believes, one has to admit that this is a delicious break for woman. For many, this might be the only time for the young mother to get served. A husband is willing to pay this price because rearing up a strong baby depends on the health of his wife, especially in the old time when babies were nursed instead of being fed with formula. In the Tang Dynasty (600-900 AD), a woman with a fuller body was considered much more attractive and popular, because, at least partially, she was better equipped for rearing children, yea, body fat is a great energy resource ...

So, it all sounds great, until you actually do “Yue Zi” in a Chinese household! When my sister was in “Yue Zi”, grandma brought food to her bed, she actually enjoyed the restful break, for a while. She was willingly to tolerate lots of things because they meant good for her, especially grandma did



everything out of love. She would tolerate drinking Coke at room temperature without ice, even though Helena was born in August; no shower allowed was OK as long as she could do sponge bath with a warm towel. Until she had a desire for the taste of a fresh, crispy apple! My grandma believed that an apple was too “cold”, not an appropriate food for her. After many pleading, grandma handed her the apple—after warming up a whole minute in the microwave!

I was told by many Chinese mothers how “inconsiderate” the nurses were after their babies were delivered in the hospitals in US. “They offered me water with ice in it!” “They told me it was OK to take a shower!” “The lunch was cold!” ...

If you visit a Chinese mother during her “Yue Zi”, you may see the “black- bone chicken”—the whole chicken looks black, its soup is suppose to strengthen the mother’s bone and replenish blood loss. Another thing was the strong Medicinal wine my Cantonese mother gave me, it was to stimulate the lactation. I was not sure the alcohol content in it, but I always wonder why my son was so drowsy after breast feeding...

When I had my children, my mother and my mother-in-law both took turn to come to Kentucky to help me through the first month. I was thankful that my grandma lived far away, and she was too old to fly even though she wanted to. Instead, I took my infants to see her—so, Peter was merely 3 month old, and Portia was 7 month old when they each made their first flight. My grandma thought that was a very filial act on my side, and I knew that meant a lot to her.

This year my grandma turned 96! I believe the awesome power of prayers. I pray for her a lot especially after my parents became Christians. I ask each one of you, if the Holy Spirit touches your heart, please pray for my grandma. I have spent many hours telling her about Jesus. I want my beloved grandma to be in heaven someday—the only way for us to see each other again. God is merciful, to let her live to this golden age, because He is waiting for her to believe. And I know that Christ died for all mankind, men and women, American and Chinese. So, please add my grandma to your prayer list!

Like a tiny flower in the picture of a huge landscape, it is my hope that through the stories of my family, especially my grandma, you may discover the beauty of Chinese women as a whole, and you may grasp a gleam of their endurance, unbreakable strength and unselfish devotion to their family!

*My grandmother is the example of the older generation of Chinese women. In later cultural letter, I’ll bring you update to focus on the current generation.