

Sole Survivors

Craig Smith The New Mexican, August 5, 2005



at left, Mimi Chen Ting at 59; at right, her grandmother at 60; center, a merged image of the two - courtesy photo

The French have a saying: *Il faut souffrir pour être belle* — if you want to be beautiful, you must suffer. Throughout history, women in every culture have borne the brunt of that dictum and crippled themselves in the names of fashion and custom.

Roman face-whitening paint that leeches lead into the system. Corsets laced to the point of suffocation to produce 19th-century wasp waists. Tattooing and body scarification, found in both ancient jungle tribes and among modern urban-jungle rebels. And scores of painful foot treatments, from high-laced shoes to the millennium-long Chinese custom of foot-binding. Cinderella's stepsisters, who cut off toe and heel trying to fit into the glass slipper, had nothing on that.

As part of its exhibit *Magic & Mystery in Taos: The Trammell & Margaret Crow Collection of Asian Art*, the Harwood Museum of Art presents two events on foot-binding Saturday, Aug. 6. At 1 p.m., Feelie Lee, an affiliated scholar of the UCLA Center for Chinese Studies, gives a lecture on the custom. At 2:30 p.m., visual and performance artist Mimi Chen Ting presents *Ghosts Revisited*, a performance piece that draws on her own family experience of the practice.

Chen Ting's performance piece, *Ghosts Revisited*, draws on her own experiences of foot-binding in her family's older generations. Growing up in China, she lived with a grandmother and great-aunts who all had "lily feet."

"She was the last generation to have it done," Chen Ting said, speaking by phone from San Francisco. "As I was growing up in the household, it was just the normal

thing. It had to do with either actual status or assumed status — I think in my grandmother's case it was more assumed status.

"It rendered her rather handicapped. I remember my mother telling me that when my mother was a young girl, when they went out, she had to carry her mother on her back. I think because I spent so much time with my grandmother, somehow in my psyche I've absorbed some of the pain. Even to this day, I always have trouble with my feet. And as a dancer, it's almost a constant reminder. I call it the Little Mermaid syndrome" — referring to the Hans Christian Andersen story of the mermaid who traded her tail for feet but felt sharp knives stab them at every step.

"I think the first time I did it, it was not Ghosts Revisited, it was just Ghosts," she said of her piece. "The first time I did it was in 1979, shortly after my grandmother died. I was a much younger person then. My empathy and identification with her was more from observation. Over the years, and especially now, where I'm a grandmother myself, I think the empathy is a little more far-reaching. So I'm really glad to have the opportunity to do it again and to do it for a new audience. I'm 59, and I have a picture of my grandmother when she was 60. It feels strange."

Ghosts Revisited changes with every site, the artist said. But there is a constant: her attempt to assume her grandmother's identity for a short time. "I walk her dreams, and I walk her disillusion about life. I actually simulate some kind of the binding process, and then I walk with my feet bound — of course not like hers. What I do is simulate how a woman's body changes when your base becomes very small and you sort of teeter."

In addition, there will be a brief photo projection of Chen Ting's grandmother on the wall. "I see it sort of as a moving sculpture that I am part of. Most of the sound will be natural sound of cloth and feet gliding on the floor." But she also is considering using Strauss' Four Last Songs as accompanying music.

Chen Ting feels that foot-binding "is a very small, specific instance of women having their fullness taken away from them because of a certain ideology." But echoing Lee's comments, she noted, "Seriously, we keep buying into it. I'm back here for a wedding; I keep thinking I need a pair of fancy shoes to go with my dress. I've shopped for two days. The shoes look good on the display shelf, and I put them on. I cannot see myself walking in them. I ended up, 'I'm going to wear a pair of sandals.'"

"My granddaughter is now 5 years old. She's running around. And when I see her, sometimes I think about my grandmother, what the difference was."