

# CCDR Newsletter

Number 13

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## CHINESE FOOTBINDING AND BALLET POINTE SHOES

### Introduction

Patricia A. McNeal-Goolsby, M.F.A.

This paper presents the hypothesis that sanctioned mutilation of women's feet is a form of female exploitation. The cross-cultural exploration discusses two patriarchal societies, one from the East and one from the West, and their practices of Chinese footbinding and ballet pointe work, respectively. Although there is extensive literature on both subjects, this comparison shows startling parallels and implications.

Studies of humankind cannot overlook the importance of wearing apparel and footwear as symbols of cultures. Clothing has evolved from a functional necessity to a social and cultural statement. Fashion can transform an imperfect figure into the ideal. Unfortunately, for women these methods often involved painful constrictions of the body or body parts. In the East, women were subjected to the fashion practices of the Japanese obi, the Burmese neckring, and the Chinese bound "lotus foot;" in the West, women were bound by steel ribbed corsets, whalebone stays, and an assortment of painful and impractical shoes. These "fashionable" garments took away freedom and hobbled ability to move comfortably.

Women are expected to suffer and struggle to attain the beauty that is defined for them by men. A survey of cross-cultural standards for women reveals that women are taught to equate prettiness with self-worth (Freedman 1986:28). Women, time and time again, have proven their willingness to be exploited, to conform to any standards no matter the cost, pain or disfigurement, in order to achieve men's approval

Butler outlines the features of exploitation: 1) there must be present two or more differing factions with a power imbalance; 2) the group in power must use this authority to their own advantages with little regard for the consequences to the lesser empowered faction; 3) the weaker faction is unable to resist the actions of the stronger; 4) the action has no bearing on the survival of the groups (Butler 1985: 61-63).

Chinese footbinding represents a clear-cut model for female exploitation. Westerners tend to express revulsion at the method and functions of footbinding. But Freedman questions if Western culture has liberated the female foot (1986:93). The too high-heel, the too narrow pointed front, the unsupportive clog, and the paper-thin sole are a but a few contributions to women's footwear. Another Western development was the invention of the ballet pointe shoe.

### Chinese Footbinding

Chinese footbinding dates back to feudal China, between the end of the Tang dynasty (906 A.D.) and the beginning of the Sung dynasty (960 A.D.). In early China the role of women was clearly defined. The woman's authority was limited to the house's boundaries, and much of that was limited, also. The man was ruler of the outside world. Women had no rights in property control, no political rights, and limited rights in marriage, divorce or separation. Women's duties centered around providing male offspring, educating the children in moral matters, and keeping the home and her place in society (O'Hara 1971:255-270).

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## LOCAL SCENE

# Old cultures of Arizona inspirational

By CATHERINE ELSTON

Sun Correspondent

Ancient lands and ancient peoples inspire creativity in choreographer Nancy Zendora. The antiquities of northern Arizona have brought Zendora to Flagstaff, where she has been selected the fifth annual Halla K. Kealiinohomoku Research Choreographer-in-Residence.

Zendora, an accomplished dancer, has traveled the world finding inspiration from natural landscapes, ruins, antiquities and artifacts. Since 1977, she has developed a series of dances and movements inspired by the art, aesthetics, ceremonies and atmospheres of older cultures.

For the past four years, Zendora has studied among the ruined cities of the Near East.

"My involvement with older cultures has been present since the early part of my dance career, when I found the movements of T'ai Chi Chuan and their images from nature provided poetic inspiration for my original pieces," said Zendora, who has performed in the United States, Europe, South America and Japan.

"What I found most striking in my travels in Turkey, Syria and Egypt was the interconnectedness of landscape, history and culture," Zendora said. "This was responsible for a series of what I think of as the 'archaeology dances.' Two of my pieces...came after seeing the dervishes dance in Turkey, and walking amidst lemon trees, searching for Roman aqueducts and Byzantine churches. Other dance inspirations came from seeing Assyrian cylinder seals and the beauty of the Theban tombs."

Zendora said her work at Cross Cultural Dance Resources, which provides their resident scholars with a house and living expenses for a semester, will deal with cycles of life. Parts of her dance are influenced by Native American pictography. She said she will utilize CCDR's library sources and observations at Wupatki and other ancient Southwestern sites for further inspiration.

"The purpose of our annual spring residency is to assist an established choreographer to pursue research while completing a work," said CCDR Director Joann Kealiinohomoku.

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## UPDATE ON ZENDORA IN RESIDENCE

Zendora gave a participatory introduction to Seitai, Katsugan, at an April 11 Soup Seminar. Afterward Laura Apostalou and Kenjiro Tokioka showed slides that targeted Japanese aesthetics.

On May 7 Zendora will share her choreographic process at a Soup Seminar that she calls "The Atmosphere of Place."

NOTICE: APPLICATIONS FOR THE 6TH ANNUAL RESEARCH CHOREOGRAPHER'S RESIDENCY WILL BE ACCEPTED THROUGH JULY 31. For information write CCDR or Phone (602)774-8108.



Photo by Lois Greenfield

"Aleticia," choreographed and performed by Nancy Zendora, New York, 1987.

The DTW Bessie Schonberg Theatre, "Fresh Tracks" Series is presenting Zendora's piece "Dissolution" April 21, 28, and May 5.

## FORMER RESIDENT PREMIERS WORKS

Helen Pelton presented three new works at the Pyramid Arts Center, Rochester, New York, on February 14, including "Yellow Print," the work she researched during her residency.

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Footbinding evolved to restrict a woman's mobility, "to confine the woman to the boudoir" (Levy 1967:29-30).

Footbinding has roots in the court of the emperor Li Yu. He requested that his favorite concubine and court dancer bind her feet so as to "dance on the image of a large lotus flower" (Kristeva 1977:81). At first the custom was limited to the privileged aristocracy and became equated with beauty and wealth. As so often occurs, the masses soon emulated the aristocracy and footbinding became widespread. Upper class ladies became prisoners of bedchambers and their conjugal fidelity was insured.

The process of footbinding is vividly recalled in the passage from Cusack's work *Chinese Women Speak*:

During the old days you must have feet as small as possible... not be more than three inches.... Footbinding started generally when you were about five... the work of binding was done with strong cotton strips about five feet long and seven inches wide. These were drawn over and over the four toes, leaving only the big toe free, till gradually the toe bones were broken and they lay as flat as possible under the sole. They were drawn so tightly around the heel that the pressure curved the arch bone (1954:42)

The pain from foot binding is unimaginable. The process was repeated, each time tightening the cloths, over a period of 10 to 15 years. Toes would fall off and the skin became putrescent (Levy 1967:26) The pain was endured to attract a wealthy husband. The "lotus foot" became a new erogenous zone, only to be touched and smelled by a husband. Young Chinese girls were instructed to conceal their feet to maintain the privacy of the treasured part. Crystal or embroidered slippers were given as rewards for the endurance of the agony. Many pairs of these slippers were painstakingly embroidered as part of a bride's dowry.

### Foot Mutilation in the West

This standard of the beautiful tiny foot encased in an elegant slipper was not unique to

the East. In the Grimms' fairytale of Cinderella the evil stepmother instructs her daughters to cut off their toes or pieces of their heels in an effort to fit the shoes. She placates their pain and horror with the thought that as a Queen they will have no need to go about on foot. There is no explanation of why the tiny foot was a symbol of beauty for women only, except that, in contrast, largeness connotes power and masculinity.

The origins of the ballet pointe shoe are obscure but pointe work made its first appearance in the early 19th century. Most memorable among the early performers of "toe dancing" was the Italian dancer Marie Taglioni, as the sylph in *La Sylphide*. Her satin slippers were carefully darned at their tips, allowing her to momentarily balance on the tips of her toes. The development of the ballet and the role of the ballerina were irrevocably changed. Marie's father, Filippo Taglioni, the creator of *La Sylphide*, was a relentless task master who managed Marie's career with an iron hand, bent on creating a ballet legend. As the ballet sylph, Marie was the embodiment of all that was desirable in females; a combination of frailty, beauty, grace and submissiveness.

Like the bound foot, the pointe shoe created an image of a delicate creature in need of male support and authority. Pointe work brought women into the limelight and focussed the audience's attention on the ballerina, but offstage men retained control as choreographers, ballet masters, directors, producers and managers.

The acquisition of a young ballet student's first pointe shoes is eagerly anticipated. Those beautiful pink satin slippers represent the dream of every young girl who enters the hallowed halls of a ballet school. They symbolize the success of the novice dancer to achieve specialized training through hard work, discipline, and obedience. Here is a description of this rite of passage from *The Unmaking Of A Dancer; An Unconventional Life* by Joan Brady:

There is a coming of age in first squeezing the feet into tiny satin shoes with soft sides and stiffened toe pieces, a confirmation of sorts;

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...even the pain they cause, which can be awful, takes on a mystical significance of its own, like the first blood drawn in battle. I squeezed my long narrow foot, normally 7 1/2 AAA, into a tiny 2 1/2 D. It took years for the fruits of such footbinding to manifest themselves; but at the time, I was delighted. What a toe shoe succeeds in doing is no less radical than changing the nature and function of the foot altogether. The purpose is to support the underside of the arch and bind the toes together, thereby transforming them from five rather weak digits intended for delicate adjustment in balance into one solid digit strong enough to bear the entire weight of a body performing elaborate acrobatic tricks atop it. After class blood stained shoes were removed to reveal blood stained tights. No tears were shed, but special fortitude drew special notice among teachers and peers (1982:16).

Behind every dedicated ballet student is often found the stage mother who will do whatever it takes to get her daughter to the top while ignoring signs of unhealthy behavior and medical advice. With the continuing demands for the execution of difficult steps the dancer is also at risk of various physical injuries, all in the name of art. Pointe shoes produce their own medical woes in the forms of corns, bunions, inflammation of the sesamoid bones, tendonitis and rheumatoid arthritis. Dancer Gelsy Kirkland, in her autobiographical expose' *Dancing On My Grave*, refers to surgical procedures that break and reset the dancer's foot for a better point (1986:33).

Despite the physical and monetary demands ballet remains the preferred choice for dance study among parents because of its elite status and upper class values. Dancing *en pointe* remains the ultimate feminine characteristic of ballet. Even today the ballerina and pointe shoes are often the subject of art and advertising. Ballet symbolizes the high ideals of dedication, commitment, artistry, and feminine beauty.

### Cross-Cultural Analysis

In China footbinding functioned to provide sexual excitement for males. The "lotus foot" was featured in Chinese erotic art for almost 800

years. Footbinding reinforced ideas of male superiority and female subjugation. The woman was reduced to being a fetish, and, confined to the boudoir, she was always available to the man but unable to follow his infidelities on the outside world.

The pointe shoe, although not normally thought of as a form of eroticism, contributes subtly to the sexuality of ballet. Anatomically, it lengthens the appearance of the female leg and reshapes its contours. Dancing *en pointe* projects an image of fragility and innocence, the helpless virginal woman who is freely manipulated in the hands of the dominant male dancer.

The functions of exploitation, as identified by Levy (1977) show direct parallels of pointe work with Chinese footbinding. Both established and confirmed a woman's role, put her on a pedestal and reaffirmed her dependence on a male counterpart for support and authority. Both established an aesthetic and sexual model, associated with refinement and elitist upper class ideals. Both provided monetary and social status. Both clearly illustrate cultural values about gender and power.

Butler's criteria for exploitation apply to both footbinding and pointe work practices, one from the East, one from the West. There is power differentiation between females and males. Men, the power group, use their authority to control the lives of the women involved. In the past, Chinese women would not dare to unbind their feet, even if their feet could tolerate being unbound, lest they would not find husbands. Ballet dancers are afraid to admit injuries and are willing to follow dangerous practices in pursuit of the ballet ideal. Female dancers are encouraged to achieve and maintain an unhealthy weight. When doctors consulted with ballet masters of the country's major ballet companies about the prevalence of anorexia and amenorrhea among young ballerinas, they were met with an alarming lack of attention on these serious issues (Gordon 1983:160). Although there is apparently an increasing concern for dancers' health, judging by conferences on dance medicine and articles in dance focussed journals, within the last few years, the real message that ballerinas receive is still that they must forever suffer for their art.

Ballet technique has advanced at an astounding rate with little regard to the injuries of dancers; it is a survival of the fittest. Ballerinas, in constant competition to maintain their places in a company, must be willing to do whatever it takes to maintain that position. Men are still the primary power brokers and they determine the physical and mental requirements for females in ballet. A woman who questions the validity of these requirements is told, "if you don't like it you can leave" (Gordon 1983:133).

It is almost a moot question to ask if pointe work is necessary for the survival of ballet; it has become an integral part of the technique. As an interesting comparison modern dance developed as a matriarchal dance form, partly in reaction to dissatisfaction with the system of ballet. Modern dancers discarded the corsets and pointe shoes of the ballerina and sought to present women as flesh and blood. Modern dance flourishes despite the lack of pointe shoes but it must be noted, also, that ballet continues to be held in higher esteem than modern dance in Western cultures.

Through cross-cultural comparison of Chinese footbinding and the ballet pointe shoe, the similarities in socio-cultural functions become apparent. The recurrent themes of restriction of females, male domination, sexual fulfillment of masculine needs, male prescribed aesthetics, the acceptance of pain and suffering as a woman's role in life and as a trade-off for economic and social gains, and the desire to please a male dominated society are present in both traditions.

It is obvious that footbinding was physically more debilitating than the use of pointe shoes, which may have contributed to the demise of the custom. After the bourgeois revolution, footbinding was outlawed by Emperor Kangxi. He saw this practice as unhealthful to the economy of China as half the work force was crippled. Despite the condemnation of this practice, Chinese women refused to give it up and cases of new footbinding were recorded up until the 1940s. There are still elderly Chinese women who are afflicted with the crippling results of earlier footbinding.

It is also interesting to note that while the pointe shoe created new avenues for choreography in ballet, footbinding seriously stunted

the growth of dance in China. However, present day ballet is facing some lethal problems as a direct result of ballet aesthetics. In this age of enlightenment it is incomprehensible to this writer that some women continue to allow the abuses of ballet and, even worse, contribute to it.

Twentieth century scholars have viewed Chinese footbinding as a form of female exploitation. Future scholarly studies of ballet and the pointe shoe will undoubtedly support the hypothesis of this paper, that ballet, developed in a male dominated society, exploits females, also.

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NOTE: PATRICIA MCNEAL-GOOLSBY is currently the director of the dance program at Saguaro High School in Scottsdale, AZ, and also teaches evening courses at Scottsdale Community College. She received her MFA in dance choreography and performance from Arizona State University. This paper was written in 1989 during her studies at ASU in a Dance Anthropology course taught by Pegge Harper Vissicaro.

From Levy, *Chinese Footbinding*  
1967, p.115.

From Grishko ad. *Dance Magazine*, March, 1992.



## CCDR PRESENTS TIBETAN, NEPALESE, AND SEPHARDIC PERFORMANCES

### TIBET

After Tibet's Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, he decreed that March 10, 1991 - March 10, 1992 would be "The Year of Tibet."

Responding to the decree the San Francisco based CHAKSAM-PA, TIBETAN DANCE AND OPERA COMPANY, accelerated their efforts to bring new awareness of Tibetan culture to the U.S. and Canada by touring for a year.

Chaksam-pa means "bridge building" in the Tibetan language. The name is a metaphor for the cultural bridges being built among Tibetans and others through dance and music.

Seven friends, all of whom had trained at the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts in Dharamsala India, collaborated for this tour. They presented "Dances From the Roof of the World," a program of dances, drama, and music, rich with beauty and humor.

On February 9, CCDR provided one of the last venues for the year-long tour with an afternoon workshop and evening performance. The first was held at CCDR member Beverly Lauer's Flagstaff School of Ballet, and the latter at the Coconino Center for the Arts.

At present, TASHI DHONDUP, one of the founders of Chaksam-pa, and his wife, TSERING WANGMO, both performers, live in San Francisco. They performed at the Ethnic Dance Festival in 1990. Another founder, SANAM TASHI lives in Canada. The three have recently released a tape recording "Rainbow Tibetan-Hjah", contemporary Tibetan music played on traditional instruments. The other four of the

### NEPAL

Narayan Shrestha and the Lions Club of Boulder, Colorado initially brought THE ROYAL MUSICIANS OF NEPAL to the United States for their 1992 tour.

The performers, Mssrs, Upadhyaya, Regmi, and Misra are considered by many to be Nepal's premier artists. CCDR was fortunate to present these consummate artists in performance on February 28 at the Coconino Center for the Arts, and at a work-shop the evening before at the School of Music, Northern Arizona University.

HOMNATH UPADHYAYA- The finest tabla player in Nepal Mr. Upadhyaya was the Royal Musician at the King of Nepal's coronation, and has performed worldwide, including France, Switzerland, Hong Kong, and the United States.

DHRUBESH CHANDRA REGMI- The grandson of Shree Deva Chandra Regmi who introduced the sitar to Nepal, continues the lineage of sitar masters. Mr. Regmi has won numerous national and international awards and has performed in India, Hong Kong, and Thailand. This is his first visit to the United States. In July and August he will perform and teach in Japan, invited by the Japanese Ministry of Culture.

SURESH MISRA- A master of the classic Katak dance form, Mr. Misra has performed extensively throughout the world, Europe, Asia, and Australia, including a command performance in London in 1982 for HRH Prince Charles. He is the Dance Director of Nepal Cultural Corporation (National Theatre).

touring group have returned to their homes in exile in India, Nepal, and Germany.

### SEPHARAD

In order to commemorate the quincentennial of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, CCDR sponsored a four-part, two-day set of events, on March 22-23.

All four events were held on the campus of Northern Arizona University, commencing with a lecture about the inquisition by ABRAHAM CHANIN, author, journalist and historian, of the University of Arizona.

The lecture was followed by a symposium about the role of music and dance in affective culture. Participants included Chanin, DR. SANDRA LUBARSKY, Dept. of Religion and Humanities, NAU, and DAVID HARRIS and JUDITH BRIN INGBER, performers and scholars, both from the group VOICES OF SEPHARD. Both the lecture and the symposium were partially funded by the Arizona Humanities Council.

VOICES OF SEPHARD is a performance group that explores in song and dance the Jewish Cultural traditions that originated in medieval Spain. The group includes JUDITH BRIN INGBER, well known scholar, author, dancer and choreographer; DAVID HARRIS, music director of the group, who has traveled throughout North America, Europe and the Middle-East to learn Judeo-Spanish songs; SCOTT DAVIS ('Mateo'), guitarist; and MICK LaBRIOLA, percussionist.

CCDR was particularly thrilled with Ingber's artistry, and with welcoming her, a long-time member to Flagstaff.

#### COMING IN JULY-

CCDR will host the Arts Group of Chinese Minority Nationalities in July for a symposium, workshop, and performance of representative dances. Details will be forthcoming.

Dear Member,

The 1990-1991 year was a very exciting year for us as we celebrated our tenth anniversary. This current year of 1991-1992 is continuing the excitement.

CCDR was the recipient last year of several grants from the Arizona Humanities Council, Arizona Commission on the Arts and the City of Flagstaff General Funds and Economic Commission. So far this year we have received additional grants from the Arizona Humanities Council and the City of Flagstaff. These monies enabled us to have a parttime student worker, purchase a computer, partially fund the Executive Director's position, and sponsor CCDR's newest program which combines symposium and workshops with dance performances. The symposium and workshop held before a performance, and the opportunity to interact with the performers informally increase understanding and appreciation of the guest artists and their artistic traditions, and greatly enrich the enjoyment of the evening's performance.

Last spring we presented a multi-cultural, comparative program of flamenco, East Indian and Middle-Eastern dance; the Bauls from India; and West Africa Folkloric group. So far this year, we have presented performers from Tibet, Nepal, and the group "Voices of Sepharad" that performs music and dance of the Spanish Jews.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our members for helping to make our tenth anniversary a memorable one, and for launching us into the second decade. Without your generosity throughout the years we would not have been able to host five research-choreographers-in-residence, hire a parttime director, publish the newsletter, and increase our membership. Private donations were also responsible for the purchase of a camcorder, fax machine, and a new dance floor. Thank you all!

Of course maintaining the content and quality of this organization is an ongoing effort. We urge your continuing support so that we may add to our inventory and research materials, continue the HKK memorial residency program, and present dance performances that will emphasize cultural understanding through the arts, as well as other programs of research. We need more cash, more space, more help!

We are proud that you have chosen to be part of Cross-Cultural Dance Resources. We urge you to continue your support of CCDR through renewing your membership (membership year is July 1 through June 30), donating to the HKK or General Funds, purchasing Gertrude Kurath's Half a Century of Dance Research, and the informal notes of silougraphs that support the residency program. We look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you again for making our tenth Anniversary unforgettable and for helping CCDR continue to flourish.

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#### NEW MEMBERS OF CCDR

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#### DONORS TO CCDR INVENTORIES

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Welcome to the following new members:

Arizona Friends of Tibet, LaJeanne DeWalt, Dr. Alice G. Dewey, Earth Tones, Dolores L. Gmitter, Greg Gombert, Andrea J. Josephs, Florence Karlstrom, Beverly Lauer and Family, Nancy F. Lob, Marilyn E. Murphy, Tom Murray, Maegan Patenaube, Carol Robertson, Elisa L. Sargent, Ian Sunderland, Martin Werner, Eleanor Weisman, Letitia Williams, Vicky Wulff.

**NOTICE!**

Monograph #1 has been temporarily delayed due to shortage of funds.

#### COLLECTIONS:

Anya Adler-Friess, Chaksam-pa, Kristin Eberhardt, Rhoda Grauer, J. Richard Haefer, Judith Brin Ingber, Joann Kealiinohomoku, Quetzalcoatl Productions, The Royal Musicians of Nepal, Phil Schaeffer, Andrea Simon, Voices of Sepharad, Martin Werner.

#### EQUIPMENT:

Gina Darlington, Rhoda Grauer, Edy Greenblatt, Cynthia Knox, Ruth Kurle.

#### LIBRARY:

Catherine Feher Elston, Stephen Germick, Jr., Leslie Getz, Janet Goodridge, Katy Hayward, Joann Kealiinohomoku, Barbara Mettler, K.C. Patrick, Kathleen Williamson, Jessica Yu, Nancy Zendora.



**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR HONORED**

Kathleen Stemmler, CCDR's Executive Director, is one of seven persons selected by the local city government to serve a three-year term on the newly established Flagstaff Arts and science Commission. She had previously distinguished herself as an elected officer of the Flagstaff Arts Council.

Congratulations, Commissioner!

**HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT ACTIVITIES AT CCDR**

In November CCDR gave an Evening in the Middle East as a fund raiser for the H. K. K. residency. The elegant dinner featured cuisine by Hassib, and a performance of Raks al Sharqi by dance artist Phaedora, who is also a member of CCDR.

Candice Tsutsui, master of Naginada, demonstrated this Japanese woman's martial art, at a Soup Seminar in January.

\* \* \*  
CCDR showed a 30-hour video series, "Anthology of World Music and Dance" by JVC (Japan Victor Corp.) over a period of six Saturdays, in 5 hour increments during January and February.

\* \* \*  
This Newsletter was typeset on CCDR's new Macintosh by Althea Lomahquahu.

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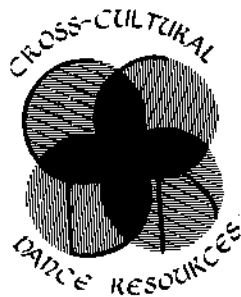
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