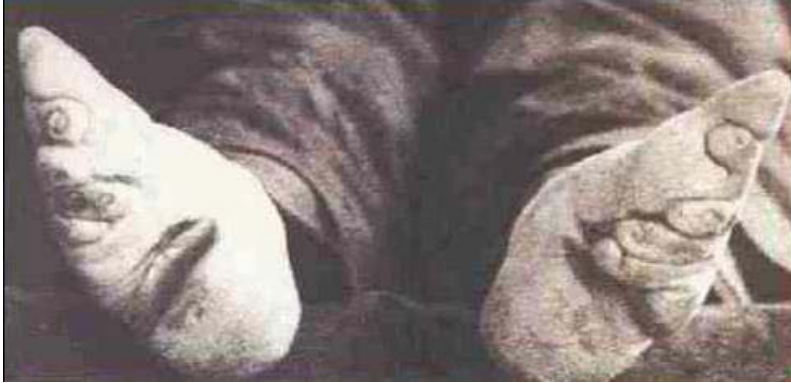


18. Chinese Servants and Tradesmen

My Chinese Amah

I can see her now – she is dressed in faded, blue pants and jacket. Her feet are bound, misshapen and triangular looking, much smaller than feet should be. She pads around the house on them and one cannot hear her steps. Her grey hair is tightly bound behind her head. I can still remember the smell when I sometimes saw her remove the binding from her feet and I observed her deformed feet. I remember that she had very few teeth left; the ones she had were thin and yellow looking.



An explanation of foot binding is required. It was the custom of applying painfully tight binding to the feet of young girls to prevent further growth. It was common in the whole Chinese society except the lowest classes. This photo clearly shows the distorted feet of an adult woman.

I only ever knew her as Amah. To this day, I am ashamed that I never bothered to find out her real name. No photograph exists of her. She was just there for the family - there was no effort made to find out facts about her family. I did not even know if she had children of her own. To me she seemed ‘old’ but probably she would have been about 50 years old when we parted. She was with our family for a very long time and it must have been very hard for her after our departure.

When I was a toddler, my Amah had a unique way to settle me down when I became hyperactive – she put me on her breast! This was the Chinese way of handling toddlers. Mother did not approve of this type of behaviour!

Once, when I woke up in the middle of the night I was shocked to see her standing next to my small child’s bed. I must have been very small at the time as there was a safety rail on the bed. I think she was pulling on my penis. When I asked why she was doing this she said she was trying to make it bigger – it was probably a Chinese custom. I wondered how often she did this to me while I was asleep!

She lived in our house although I cannot remember clearly her sleeping arrangements. I think she had a bed in the alcove on the ground floor near the dining room. Once, when she was quite sick, we placed her in a small cottage located in the back courtyard and we asked the people living in the adjoining houses to look after her.

I enjoyed going to our large kitchen at the back of our house. It is there that I saw her mould her millet buns for cooking. She would give me a portion of the millet bun that I quickly ate up. I thought the taste was wonderful, but my mother was not impressed! She regarded it as peasant food.

My Amah did so much for me and I never did a thing for her. I should have but I just did not have that understanding.

Our Amah lived in a small structure which was really one medium sized room in the back courtyard. In winter it sometimes got bitterly cold in Tientsin and that room did not have any heating.

On one particular occasion, Amah did not appear at our house in the morning. We went over to check and found her in a deep sleep; loud speech did not wake her and neither our attempts to shake her into waking. The Chinese family living nearby came over but they also could do nothing. A local doctor was called and luckily he managed to wake her. Apparently she had overdone the bedding and suffered some type of oxygen deprivation. We were all shaken by this episode.

After this father decided that she had to sleep in our house from now on. There was plenty of space available so that was not a problem.

On our last day in Tientsin, my father gave Amah a substantial amount of cash to help her in her future and she said that she would return to her village. Her younger sister came to Tientsin to help her move. My parents gave Amah quite a lot of goods from our house; we do not know whether she sold them or took them with her to the village.

As we were sitting down, in the Russian tradition, just before our last rickshaw ride from our house, she came around to say good-bye to all of us. I remember father asking her not to cry! As it was the middle of winter I had my gloves on. Larry, quite rightly, was annoyed with me that I did not take them off when she was saying good-bye.

Other Chinese Servants and Tradesmen

I remember that for many years we had a Chinese servant who did all sorts of general work around our house; this included cleaning, which was a big job as the house was quite spacious. He was a tall man, quite old, with a bald head. Other jobs would have been keeping our two yards in an orderly condition. Another job that would have been given to this man was polishing the family silver. He was the servant who stuck strips of paper on all our windows before the communist army took over Tientsin. This was a precaution against flying glass in the event of bombing.

Father also employed a Chinese carpenter to do special jobs. I remember him building all the large storage boxes for the bits of furniture and goods we transported to Sydney. He also constructed a special box to house the currency and other bits used in the Tientsin Millionaire game. We still have this box, which has a sliding cover.



Larry remembers how this carpenter even repaired his records when they broke – sure, they made a click on the joins, but at least they could be played! I was really impressed by his carpentry skills and I remember watching him as he was doing his work. I also remember him as a nice person.

It upsets me to acknowledge that we never took photographs of any of our servants. They were just there for our convenience.

One of the jobs my Amah did was the family's laundry. In those times there were no washing machines of any kind so the work was done the hard way; scrubbing the wet and soapy clothes on a serrated wooden washing board.

There were rooms near the kitchen for servants to use. At one stage, during the time when my grandparents were still living in 86 Rue Dillon, we had three servants living in the servants rooms. So in addition to our Amah we had a cook and a general handyman. After the grandparents left China for the USA we just had Amah for most of the time. Father's salary was not sufficient for us to employ more than one full time servant.

Chinese tradesmen regularly travelled along our street to look for work. Those that we previously employed came to the back door to see if any work was required. There were people who repaired shoes; those who sharpened knives and scissors; and others who repaired pots. There were also vendors who walked the streets carrying their wares slung across their shoulders on bamboo poles. Those carrying hot freshly-cooked food were the most common. Every tradesman had their individual call and we soon learned to identify them.

One of the Chinese tradesmen who regularly called was the hairdresser. If it was summer a seat was placed in our back garden and Larry and I would get our regular cuts. I also remember when I was a bit older going with my father to a Russian hairdresser.

“Many families had the same servants for decades and they became part of the family. Parting caused heartache and the feeling of guilt and helplessness.” Alex Auswaks, from one of his stories in the *Bulletin* magazine of *Igud Yotsei Sin*.