Women across the world have had a dramatic change in their role within society in the last few generations. This change has been particularly dramatic during the last hundred years in China. Chinese artist Hong Chung Zhang illustrates this dynamic shift in the woman’s role though her Three Generations series. Zhang comes from a large family of painters. Both of her parents are practicing artists and have taught art on the University level; they both have very traditional styles, having copied many works from ancient masterpieces. Hong is one of three sisters, all of whom produce art in various media. Her oldest sister, Ling, does very large-scale works using different painting techniques, such as watercolor and acrylics. Her works focus on Tibetan Buddhism and her experiences in Tibet. Hong’s twin sister Bo is a printmaker. Both sisters have studied throughout China and the United States. Many of Bo’s current works bring together the classic traditions of Chinese ceramics, which contrast with the American consumerist style. The Zhang family from North China has raised a very dynamic group of artists that accommodate both traditional and contemporary ideas. This blending of techniques is seen through Hong’s exploration of the woman’s place in society through the experiences of her mother and her grandmother. In her series Three Generations, Hong Chung Zhang illustrates the progressive role of women in Chinese Society during the last century (Hong Chung Zhang).

Hong’s series, dating from 1999-2003, is comprised of three sets, each of three images; all of the works are done on rice paper with watercolors. The series shows the constraints put on her grandmother, mother, and herself and how time has changed and altered those boundaries. Hong uses the Chinese “fine style” painting in all of the pieces. This very detailed and precise style is a technique used by artists for thousands of years (Hong Chung Zhang).

Each woman’s story is told in three separate works. In the first work, Hong’s grandmother sits in a cage sewing a pair of cotton shoes. The cage is closed, and she has bound feet, and wears traditional dress for a woman of her time. A piece of cloth holds her hair close to her head. A large teacup sits near the edge of the cage. Another piece shows her grandmother in a traditional black top with round Chinese emblems. Superimposed on her face is an image of a Buddha, with his traditional attributes: long ears and usnisha. Buddha’s head totally covers the face of Zhang’s grandmother. The head is then encircled by a closed birdcage with a piece of orange fabric waving over the top of the cage. The image rests on a white background. In the final image, the grandmother’s shoe sits in the foreground of the image. It is a very small
shoe with intricate decoration and a locus flower motif; this shoe was to hold her grandmother’s bound feet. In the background against a yellow ground is the same Buddha image seen in the previous work. All of these pieces tell the story of Hong’s grandmother within traditional Chinese culture (The Artwork of Hong Chun Zhang (1999-2007)).

A woman in traditional China was to be confined to her home; many references are made to this confinement in Hong’s work. The cages used in two of the images are closed, imprisoning her. Her hair is very tightly bound, as was customary at the time. The orange scarf waving above the cage suggests that at any moment the scarf could cover the cage, thus inclosing her grandmother deeper within her “home.” The face of Buddha covering her grandmother reveals the influence of the prevalent religion (Blake). Particularly significant are the bound feet. The goal of this binding was to create the perfect “lotus blossom foot” that measured no more than three inches. To create this look, a mother would break the bones of her daughter’s feet by tightly binding them, preventing any further growth. Walking with bound feet caused a girl to have a slight sway, making very tiny steps. This gait was thought to be sexual, catching the attention of men. If a woman did not have bound feet, she was considered unsuitable for marriage. The practice caused great pain throughout life. Without bound feet, however, a woman was unfit for marriage. Hong’s grandmother had bound feet; this is a visible symbol of the binding effects of her culture. As her grandmother sits in her cage, she sews a pair of shoes for her daughter, the first member of her family to have unbound feet (Blake).

The next set of works focuses on Hong’s mother. The cage is now open but still confining. She wears black cotton shoes and a plain green tunic and pants. The top of the cage has a large red circle holding together the top constraint. She wears her long hair in braids tied with red. Her mother hides her face behind her knees. The cup in her cage bears the Chinese character meaning “Red Guard.” Her mother wears a black button-up coat with a green shirt underneath. Her two braids held with red ties hang on either shoulder. The cage around her head seems to be semi-translucent and has decorative symbols; there seems to be a glow behind her head. Over her face is the face of Mao, the leader of Communist China. The mother’s face and hair seem to form a red tent framing Mao’s face. The background is also a plain white. Her mother’s shoe sitting in the foreground of the image is much larger than that of her own mother. It is a very simple black cotton shoe with white stitching. The man shown in the back is again Mao, the leader of her generation and a common household image; a red and yellow sun motif radiates around his head, a ubiquitous symbols of Communism (The Artwork of Hong Chun Zhang (1999-2007)).

The Communists were the first to outlaw foot binding and to support
women holding more jobs outside of the home. For women of the time, these were welcomed changes. They thusly gave the Communist party their support. There were still, however, many constraints on women. In her mother’s cage, the door is open to allow her feet to be free, just as they were free of binding. However, she is still enclosed within the cage, not yet completely free. The top of the cage is red, the color of Communism. In both of the cage images, her mother loses her face to Communism, showing that there is yet no true individuality. Hong’s mother’s shoe is very simple and plain, again not showing any individualism. She wears her hair down in braids, more free than that of her mother, but still held in place by the red ties of communism (Blake).

The last group shows Hong’s radically different situation. She sits on top of her cage without any restraints. The door to the cage is still open. Her hair is long and free, and she wears simple modern clothes and is barefoot. Her feet seem to be slightly larger than life. The cup sitting on top of the cage reads “good fortune” in Chinese. She shows herself as a fetus, and the fluid flows out of her cage. This image is set against a much darker background. Finally, Hong’s shoe has a black heel, showing Western influence. In the background is a contemporary Chinese political leader in front of a tranquil sea of blue. She has escaped the constraints of her forbearers and shows the new step available to her generation (The Artwork of Hong Chun Zhang (1999-2007)).

All of Hong’s self-portraits have a feeling of simplicity and openness. She sits on top of her cage with the door open, reminding the viewer that though she is no longer bound by tradition the door is open to return if she wishes. To enhance further the notion of freedom, she depicts herself barefoot with large feet that engage the viewer’s attention, showing that her feet were never bound like those of her grandmother. She wears her hair long and down, not tied by any constraint. Her fetus flowing out of the cage conveys the idea that after the constraints of birth, she had no others. Hong’s shoe is very different from those of previous generations. It is a Gap shoe, alluding to the “gap” between the three generations. This shoe shows her rising to the next step as a women and bringing together Chinese and Western ideas (The Artwork of Hong Chun Zhang (1999-2007)).

Shoes are a defining characteristic for many women, but few think about what shoes say about their lives. The shoes that Hong uses tell a story about their owner and her importance in society. The grandmother’s lotus shoes betray her small, bound feet, showing the importance and influence that a culture has on a person. Her grandmother did not bind her mother’s feet, thus allowing her to grow naturally. Her mother then wore simple shoes, which were standard in the world of Communism. Hong’s shoes, however, bring her to a place of power and femininity. The heel is an influence from the West, something previous generations had not experienced.
Using traditional techniques and materials, these images tell a very contemporary story. Hong is able to dramatize the story of the advancement of the women in modern China though images of her family’s three generations.

Works Cited
“My Cage” (1999)
16in x 20in
Watercolor on rice paper

“Grandma’s Constraints” (2000)
16in x 20in
Watercolor on rice paper

“Mother’s Constraints” (2000)
16in x 20in
Watercolor on rice paper

“My Constraints” (2000)
16in x 20in
Watercolor on rice paper
“Grandma’s Shoe” (2003)  
11in x 15in  
Watercolor on rice paper

“Mother’s Shoe” (2003)  
11in x 15in  
Watercolor on rice paper

“My Shoe” (2003)  
11in x 15in  
Watercolor on rice paper