

WINE VVS

Remembering Chang and Eng, the original Siamese twins

RN By Mike Ladd for Earshot

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In 1811, on the floor of a fishing boat in a small Thai village, brothers Chang and Eng were born joined at the chest.

Fiercely independent, they refused to be treated as second class citizens.

They lived full and adventurous lives, travelling through Europe and America with their famous stage show, giving the world the term "Siamese twins".

But Chang's great-grandson, Jim Haynes, said when the brothers were born, the villagers first saw them as a bad omen.

"They thought they would bring bad luck, and some members of society wanted them put to death, but their mother protected them," he said.

"Others wanted to separate them, and came up with crazy ideas like suspending them over a wire that would slowly cut through the join."

That reaction was not uncommon. Since medieval times, conjoined twins have been seen as the work of the devil, and the medical community's instinct has been to separate them.

But Dr Alice Dreger, author of *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal*, said it was rare for conjoined twins themselves to want to be separated.

"Through history most conjoined twins have been comfortable with the way they are and even felt it was superior," she said.

"Chang and Eng, for example, said they brought a double strength and a double will to every purpose."

As young boys Chang and Eng soon learned to run, play and swim together, and were just as nimble as other children.

When a cholera epidemic spread through Thailand, their father died along with five of their brothers and sisters, and the twins became the main breadwinners for the family.

Their fame spread to the capital, where they came to the attention of the Thai king, Rama III.

The king liked the boys so much he made them his personal emissaries.

The twins were also noticed by Scottish trader Robert Hunter and his friend, a sea captain named Abel Coffin, who persuaded the reluctant king to let the boys go with them to America.



PHOTO: Chang and Eng Bunker in their later years. (Supplied: Wikimedia Commons)



PHOTO: A poster for Chang and Eng's travelling show. (Supplied: University of North Carolina Wilson Library)

From the king's court to the freak show

When they arrived in Boston, Hunter and Coffin's intentions soon became clear. The men hired a large tent and produced posters advertising "The Monster" and "The Siamese Double Boys".

The twins were exhibited all over America, and in England, where over 300,000 people paid to see them, making a fortune for their managers, but not much for themselves.

Exploitation by others in vaudeville acts and freak shows is a common theme in the lives of conjoined twins.



PHOTO: Conjoined twins were often exploited in touring freak shows. (Supplied: Wikimedia Commons)

But when Chang and Eng turned 21, by American law, they were able to dissolve their contract and take over their own travelling show.

They continued to tour America and Europe but now they were making their own fortune.

Freak shows are now frowned upon. But Dr Dreger asks whether it is any different to the way athletes and models make their living from their bodies.

"Today when people with conjoined bodies appear on TV shows or talk shows they are never paid — the idea is that would be distasteful," she said.

"The result of that is everyone around them is making money but they're not.

"My attitude is freak shows are more just than this, because at least the people themselves are making some money."

Brothers trade performing for farming

Chang and Eng enjoyed being their own bosses, but they were tired of the endless travel and one night stands.

In 1838, they found themselves in Wilksboro, North Carolina. They liked the countryside and decided it was time for a change of career.

They took the name Chang and Eng Bunker, bought land and became tobacco farmers in the pre-Civil War south, owning slaves who laboured on the plantation.

Despite their success, something was still missing in their lives, Mr Haynes said.

"They were lonely. They were in their late 20s and they had been without any women," he said.

"They met two sisters, Adelaide and Sarah Yates. And Chang and Adelaide fell in love."

"Sarah and Eng tolerated each other but weren't love, but Adelaide and Chang's romance couldn't go forward unless Sarah and Eng's evolved into the same level. And they did.

"They decided to have a double wedding. At first the women's father David Yates refused permission. It wasn't because Chang and Eng were conjoined. It was because they were Asians."



PHOTO: An illustration of Chang and Eng with their wives and children. (Supplied: University of North Carolina Wilson Library)

A double wedding followed by 21 children

Finally, Yates agreed to the marriage, which Dr Dreger said was probably one of the first legal marriages between people of European and Asian descent in America.

"It would have been fairly scandalous in the South from the point of view of racial mixing," she said.

"The reason Chang and Eng were able to do it was because they were rich, and members of a Christian church, and well-respected."

At first, Chang, Eng, Adelaide and Sarah, all slept together in the one large bed. Between them they produced 21 children.

Mr Haynes said there was a lot of idle curiosity about how the couples actually managed the love-making, and he gets asked about it all the time.

"Whatever they did, I'm glad they did it, otherwise I wouldn't be here!" he said.

"My own personal theory is that whenever one couple was engaged sexually, the other couple zoned out. They were in a trance, so to speak."

Dr Dreger said there were a number of reasons the sex lives of conjoined twins troubled society.

"One of them is we assume it's a threesome, also we assume there is a kind of incest going on because it's two siblings engaging in sex at the same time," she said.

Eugenics interfered in others' marriage plans

In America in the 20th century, conjoined twins were often prevented from marrying.

This was the case for musicians and movie stars Daisy and Violet Hilton, two sisters who were fused at the pelvis.

"The United States was the world leader in eugenics before Germany," said Dr Dreger.

"In the 1920s and 1930s the state started to become heavily involved in who could marry and what kind of testing you had to have beforehand, so the Hilton sisters were caught in the eugenics frenzy.

"They were stuck in the situation where they were seen as having the body type you didn't want to perpetuate."



PHOTO: Conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton were celebrated musicians and actresses. (Supplied: Wikimedia Commons)

Since then, Dr Dreger said, not many conjoined twins had tried to get married, partly because of the difficulty of finding partners, but also because many feel complete in themselves.

In Chang and Eng Bunker's case, their marriages experienced strains when the house became too small for their growing families and their wives began quarrelling.

The twins' solution was to build another house. Sarah and her children stayed in the original house and Adelaide and her children moved to the new one.

For the rest of their lives the twins alternated spending three nights with one wife, then three nights with the other.

Back on the road after fortune lost

During the Civil War, Chang and Eng lost their fortune, and they went back on the road on exhibition tours of England, Germany and Russia.

On the way back from Europe, Chang suffered a stroke, and Eng had to wait patiently while he recovered.

But Chang also started drinking to excess, causing arguments between the brothers that were severe enough for them to consider surgical separation.

"They went down to see their friend Dr Hollingsworth," Mr Haynes said.

"He had them on the table and he said: 'We may as well cut your heads off at the same time because it's going to amount to the same thing. You are not going to survive.'

"So they stayed together."



PHOTO: A death cast of Chang and Eng's bodies was made following their death in 1874. (Supplied: Mutter Museum)

In the winter of 1874, Chang caught a bad chill, and died in the night.

Eng cried out, "Then I am going!" and died a few hours later.

Their bodies were autopsied and a death cast made, which today is in the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia.

They are buried in the cemetery of the White Plains Baptist Church near Mount Airy in North Carolina.

Today the twins have some 1,500 descendants.

One of them is Caroline Shaw, the great-great-grand-daughter of Chang and Adelaide, and the youngest ever recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for music.



PHOTO: Bunker descendants gathered at the White Plains Baptist Church, North Carolina. (Surry Arts Council)

The second and third generation often kept their ancestry secret, but these days it is a source of pride.

A Bunker family reunion is held each July at Mount Airy, where many of the descendants still live.

The family includes several sets of twins, with one pair named Chang and Eng — but no conjoined twins.

To hear Mike Ladd's full documentary about Chang and Eng, subscribe to RN's Earshot podcast on iTunes, the ABC Radio app or your favourite podcasting app.

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