

CHAPTER 2

Bound to Be Represented

Theorizing/Fetishizing Footbinding

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A specimen of a Chinese foot, the account of which I have the honor to lay before the Royal Society, was removed from the dead body of a female found floating in the river at Canton. . . . Without entering into an inquiry whether this curious dissection and, as we should esteem it, hideous deformity, of the Chinese female foot, had its origin in Oriental jealousy, or was the result of an unnatural taste in beauty, I shall content myself with describing the remarkable deviations from original structure it everywhere represents.

— B. B. Cooper, letter of March 5, 1829

“The Body in Pieces”

As Dr. Cooper, surgeon at St. Guy’s Hospital, London, isolates the bound foot, he presents us with a fine example of the medicalized excision of the body into its parts.¹ And just as this fragment of the bound-foot body was cut off from physical integration, Cooper likewise disconnects the body itself from its social life-world. His only references to that life-world are “Oriental jealousy” and “unnatural taste.”²

Fifty years later, Mary Porter Gamewell, an American missionary in China from 1871–1906, founded one of the first girls’ school that refused admission to the footbound. She faced great opposition from her own community, who thought the custom so entrenched that she would fail and that to concede after the point would be regarded everywhere as a surrender of Christian conscience to heathen principle; and that would be to wound the body of Christ in a vital part.³

What part, we might ask? Its heart? Its head? Its feet? In this case, the Christian critics reduce to “heathen principle” the social milieu that produced footbinding as an index of feminine value and direct our attention, willy-nilly, to another body-in-parts, that of the Christ.

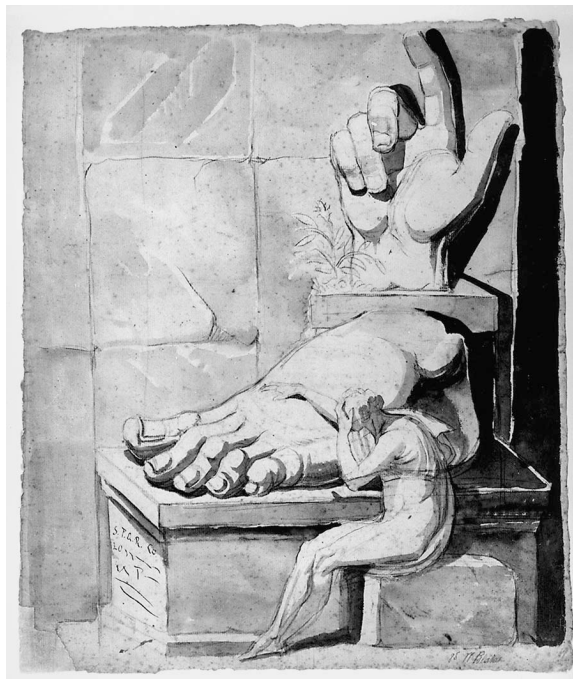


FIGURE 2.1. Henry Fuseli, *Artist Overwhelmed by the Grandeur of Antique Ruins* (1778–1779), © 2003 Kunsthau Zurich. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

What links these two examples of nineteenth-century treatments of foot-binding? Both easily reduce and dismiss living context, while the body itself appears in pieces. To better understand this rhetoric, we turn to a third example of footy fragmentation: the famous drawing by Henry Fuseli, *Artist Overwhelmed by the Grandeur of Antique Ruins* (1778–1779, Fig. 2.1). Art historian Linda Nochlin has brilliantly analyzed the painting of a distraught artist draped over a gigantic stone sculptured foot, calling it emblematic of “the fragment as a metaphor for modernity.” The artist is

by comparison with the fragmented grandeur of the past, lacking. His little feet, almost feminine in their daintiness, seem hardly capable of bearing his weight. The artist is not merely overwhelmed but is in mourning, mourning a terrible loss, a state of felicity and totality which must now be inevitably displaced into the past or the future: nostalgia or utopia are the alternatives offered.⁴

Fuseli’s fragment of the stone foot signals nostalgia. Nochlin describes how, ten years later, that trope was drastically changed by the French Revolution, the “transformative event that ushered in the modern period, which constituted the fragment as a positive rather than a negative trope.”⁵ Here Nochlin

alludes to modernity's endless appetite for the new, as it actually or imaginatively destroys the old. After all, a revolution celebrates ruin; taking things apart is its *modus operandi*.

The early and ongoing fascination of westerners for the fragment of the bound foot, its fetishization, is thus a positively modern phenomenon. That fetishization occurs in a scene of progressive modern dis-integration of the body. Yet is the body not, for sensory creatures, the very primordium that undergirds experience? Both imputations of primordial Utopian plenitude and its modern fragmentation are grounded in scientific ideas of the body's materiality as simply another aspect of Nature. Dr. Cooper's last statement becomes a pun: the "remarkable deviations from original structure it *everywhere* represents" points not only to a foot damaged "everywhere," as in "completely destroyed," but one understood as such "everywhere" around the world because all people share the "original structure." This body of biology provides an ever-firmer basis for community, with everybody's Other body, the "rock bottom of universality, the hard core of nature, the backdrop of any history."⁶ Yet are issues of intercultural corporeality so easily handled? How can the same terrain that grounds our principled sameness also provide ground for specific ethnic identity? And what about that pesky purveyor of difference, Nature's Other, "Culture"?

For the past twenty years, scholars in the human sciences have been meticulously excavating and animating a sense of embodied life from the "bed-rock" of nature into which it had been sunk. To be sure one can study the body as an object. But human beings do not live their lives only as objects. They live distanced from that "nature" by various frames and codes. People experience the world through their bodies in social practice: diet, sex and gender mores, the physical environment, both built and nonbuilt, rhythms of household life and intimate relationships, communal ritual, work, art. Here we find human life organized, often at psychic and social remove, through embodied subjectification.⁷ In short, people become simultaneously objects and subjects, and embodied practices allow us to glimpse that elusive process. Yet the project of accounting for totality continues to elude us, for totalities can never be thoroughly and finally analyzed, but only engaged repeatedly in history as various ideological projects that motivate us as theorists. Footbinding in China provides an excellent example of "embodied subjectification." Young girls were slowly "invited" to take up the subject position (to act and speak in the role) of sexually mature women through the painful process of deforming their feet in binding cloths. Their embodied subjectification has been approached by numerous critics, whose theories for how it could be ended provide a fascinating array of "ideologically motivated projects."

Footbinding has remained such a powerful marker for the Otherness of nonmodern Chinese bodily practice that its *actual demise* has produced retrospectively one threshold for modernity itself in China.⁸ Here I will attempt to theorize this “marker” and its meaning for us today as various moments of its “fetishization.” The essay thus deals less with the social production of the bound foot in China itself (for that, see essays by Blake, Turner, and Ko) and more with accounting closely for the manner in which we have received news of it, and with how it continues to engage us as empowered, theorizing subjects.⁹ I am drawing explicit attention to *theories that are particularly modern*—similarities between the productive preoccupations of colonialist missionaries and merchants with the Chinese bound foot, the postcolonialist usefulness of footbinding as a western feminist fetish, and recent moments in the intercultural analysis of corporeality. It is my contention that footbinding (and its demise *as imagined*) not only marks corporeal modernity in China, but remains also a powerful marker of thresholds of feminist theorizing and displacement.

Fetishizing as Theory

It is in these “disavowals” and “perspectives of flight” whose possibility is opened in the clash of incommensurable difference that the fetish might be identified as the site of both the formation and the revelation of ideology and value-consciousness.

William Pietz, “Problem of the Fetish”¹⁰

Insisting that much engagement with footbinding by Europeans and Americans has been conducted through fetishization may sound oddly dismissive. William Pietz assists in defending this point with his perspective upon the fetish as mode of categorization in cross-cultural terrain. He brilliantly enlarges the fetish as a theoretical object beyond pejorative psychoanalytic reduction by historicizing it when he draws attention to its invention by the Portuguese to describe the objects venerated by peoples of west Africa in the sixteenth century. The term derives from the Portuguese *fetico*, meaning “ignorant magical practices,” a term derived in turn from the Latin *facticius*, “to make.”¹¹ By the eighteenth century, “fetishisme” meant primitive religion; by mid-nineteenth century, Marx had borrowed this usage from Hegel to poke fun at the bourgeoisie’s worship of commodities; only at the turn of the twentieth century did Freud narrow the term to its now-usual associations with masculine castration fear.¹²

Pietz’s complex reformulation contextualizes the current, prevalent psy-

choanalytic usage of fetishization that links it to pathology, drawing out its implications for material cultural investigation. As he says:

Nineteenth century economic, sociological anthropological, and psychological discourses about the fetish constantly stress the idea of certain material objects as the loci of fixed structures of the inscription, displacement, reversal and overestimation of value.¹³

As such, he makes a de facto case for the fetish as modern in the terms that Nochlin has noted: a strategy for dealing with the precious, useful fragments of occluded, ungraspable, socially lived wholes. It is materiality in modern motion, crisscrossing social domains.

Leaning upon and moving outward from Pietz, I will use fetishization in a few specific ways. First, grounded in the trope of synecdoche, fetishization requires the abstraction of one part to stand for a much more complex whole, even as it occludes that whole (as the glove stands for the experience of the beloved and Unconscious desire; as the commodity stands for the process of the creation of surplus; as the bound foot stands for imagined Chinese barbarity). Second, from the psychoanalytic angle, fetishization also draws our attention to the process of displacing and rechanneling energetic investment and the gain of knowledge: While dealing with the world it produces the subject in its engagement with that world. Third, the fetish functions as a veiled marker of alterity, allowing that which is invisible (too complex, too painful) to be made visible, while preserving the innocence of its own process. The fetish allows us to explain what is strange, while marking and preserving its irredeemable alienness. Fourth, the fetish returns our attention to corporeal materiality, to the subjection of the human body “as the material locus of action and desire to the influence of certain material objects” and as a site for the work of cultural practice.¹⁴ Fifth, fetishization engages feminism through the fetish’s close relationship to the materiality of the body, and its ability to link the social and the personal. Thus, “fetishization” has been taken up by feminist thinkers who reread Freud’s scene of male castration as, literally, a drama.¹⁵

Feminist essentialism is resisted through fetishism’s implicit challenge to a stable phallic referent . . . fetishism conceived as a mock performance of phallic women vested with preposterous props and veils springs gender codes loose from the moorings of biological essentialism.¹⁶

Here Emily Apter is not recommending a naïve project of de-reification that would allow “seeing through” to a whole new truth. For her and for me, fetishization could also name for us one strategy of dealing with reification. In

this view, theory is a kind of selective “remembering” that makes visible parts of the necessary process of reification at the heart of culture making. Like the fetishist, the feminist theorist risks mistaking her chosen part for the whole of the object of analysis. She also must remember that, even as she uses these valuable theoretical tools to analyze our world, she is a modern subject, shaped by the same discourses that produce the tools.

“Woman’s Work For Woman”

A Christian woman should have a Christian foot.

Rev. Mr. Talmadge, *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries*, 1879¹⁷

From a modern feminist point of view, both westerners and Chinese who opposed footbinding seem often to have missed the point.¹⁸ From the beginnings of the final critique of footbinding in the late nineteenth century, reformers often slighted the fact that these were *female* bodies in pain (the substitution of the body of Christ for the body of the footbound woman was not unusual).¹⁹ People were horrified because helpless *children* were being maimed.²⁰ Chinese non-Christian elite male reformers reasoned that strong *citizens* were needed in service to the nation. When European women did discuss the pain of footbinding, they often did so in interestingly indirect ways. The specifically female nature of this pain was consistently highlighted only in the late twentieth century, during Second Wave feminism.²¹

Yet this moment of retheorization ended other stories and performed a kind of displacement into silence. A taboo of sorts has lain upon analysis of footbinding as a social process of engendering, one that has been broken only in the past few years. The question this section attempts to answer is: what did the nineteenth-century Christian white women crusading against footbinding accomplish, both socially and personally? In other words, how could their work on the foot be considered “fetishization” in the terms I have outlined here?

Two “General Conferences of the Protestant Missionaries” were held at Shanghai, one in 1877 and one in 1890. From their proceedings we can see a shift in perceptions of Chinese embodied life. The proceedings published in 1879 are greatly preoccupied with issues of ritual and especially bowing in ancestral veneration: Was it idolatrous, and what to do about it?²² But after 1880 there seems to have been increasing attention paid to footbinding at the field level,

as a problem conjoining issues of hygiene and salvation according to the new “social gospel” that sought to address the needs of “whole men and women.”²³ By the General Conference of 1890, Rev. Noyes, still vociferous in his disgust with ancestor worship, also condemns worship of Confucius, reverence for lettered paper, bowing to officials, polygamy, and breaking the Sabbath. For those critiques he finds scriptural support, but despite fact that the Bible does not address them explicitly, he also attacks opium smoking and footbinding, calling the latter “inhuman, refined cruelty.”²⁴

The treaty port world of China was an all-male preserve until the nineteenth century, when wives and unmarried women missionaries arrived. But even then, foreigners rarely met Chinese wives or single female servants. So the absent “Chinese Woman” became the object of desire, an absence to be conjured as a possible missing link in the divine plan for conversion. People steeped in the Victorian cult of domesticity doubted that the work of public salvation could be successfully undertaken without support from the private realm of the family.²⁵ And only women could breach Chinese family walls to penetrate the very ground of everyday life. There they could proselytize heathen mothers, reaching them because they shared fundamental concerns and attributes as women.

Yet the gendered division of labor reflected how the soul remained more important, and women whose writings on footbinding were included in the General Conference proceedings embraced their place within the masculine missionary hierarchy.²⁶ Men held preaching for the soul to be their particular preserve, while women organized bodies in schools, ran hospitals, and modeled the example of good Christian wives. Christian discovery of Chinese bodies attached to souls marked those bodies as terrain for civilizing labors, and missionaries were summoned to abolish footbinding. The same conference proceedings that contemplated the divide between the body and soul, called upon women to bridge that gap. Within this cultural framework, footbinding *naturally* became a woman’s issue. Given such public attention to womanly commonalities of experience and affect, it is all the more startling that, when they wrote about footbinding, they so often deflected discussion away from what many feminists today would count as the main issue—violence done to women’s bodies because they are women.

Anti-footbinding activist Mrs. Archibald Little was an independent-minded novelist of feminist leanings. She lived mainly in the southwest area of Szechuan for twenty years at the turn of the century after her rather late marriage to a shipping magnate.²⁷ She founded the Natural Feet Society in 1895, along with nine other western women of different nationalities. Although it

was a nondenominational effort to secularize anti-footbinding work, it came into being under the aegis of the Shanghai Mission.²⁸

On the question of pain, Mrs. Little notes:

The Chinese as a nation are curiously callous to suffering in either themselves or others, not taking pleasure in the infliction of it, as is the case with other highly strung natures, but strangely indifferent to it.²⁹

How then does she discuss the curious pain of footbinding, which she knows exists, but only as the pain of people who don't suffer? Alicia Little was not at all indifferent herself—she simply approached the specific issues around pain indirectly through three strategies.

One method was to mediate it through the pain of another Other, in this case the Italian Catholic nuns of Hankow who bound their students' feet:

The bandages were only tightened once a week. The children were of course exempted from all lessons on those days. And the Italian sister who had to be present suffered so much from witnessing the little girls suffering that she had to be continually changed. No Italian female being able to endure the pain of it week after week.³⁰

Secondly, in the absence of Chinese testimony (they are “curiously callous” = silent in Mrs. Little's view) she presented expert witnesses to the physiological damage of footbinding through doctors' testimony. In Mrs. Little's memoir, physicians from Shanghai, Nanjing, and Chongking discuss the loss of toes, whole feet, and lives to footbinding.³¹ Little speaks of footbinding pain quite often by detouring through imported voices (mostly male—and although one of Little's physicians was a woman, the medical discourse remained profoundly masculinist).

Finally, and perhaps most often, Little was most direct and eloquent on the issue of pain when she discussed the victims as children:

That expression of helpless rage and agony and hate in the poor little wizened child's face is more than I can ever hope to forget, and would alone spur me on to redoubled efforts to do away with a custom, that has been more than so many children can endure, and that must have saturated so many childish souls with bitterness, before they passed away from a world made impossible for them.³²

What did this rhetoric serve to produce for her and other anti-footbinding European activists?

Homi Bhabha holds ambivalence to be key in how the stereotype functioned in colonial discourse as fetishization. The ambivalence of the stereotype, fixed yet in constant need of reiteration, “turns on the *recognition and disavowal* of racial/cultural/historical difference.”³³ He notes how it acts as a “non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of embracing two contradictory beliefs.”³⁴ Although he concentrates upon race, Bhabha’s connection of subjectivities within ideological formations via fetishization is also useful in understanding gender stereotyping, class anxieties, and the “work” of attention to footbinding. The latter functioned personally for its nineteenth-century discussants by enabling them to displace attention from such painful issues as physical disgust, suffering inappropriate to one’s class station, and anxiety about geographic and social displacement. Little’s equivocal disgust for Chinese women’s bodies and the distanced recognition of Chinese women’s pain seems to have allowed her to displace her own ambivalence, first around class, and secondly around gender.

The issue of class for Europeans and Americans living outside their countries in the nineteenth century was complex. Both men and women found many opportunities to better their standing by emigrating or serving abroad.³⁵ The call to philanthropy and moral reform was also an important way in which women “bettered” themselves—by helping “inferiors.”³⁶ Little stood within a tradition of public service that was “top down” in its bestowal of benevolence. Although she carefully pointed out that footbinding was *not* a mark of status, that all classes suffered equally, she was especially appalled at its manifestation among the upper classes and seems to have felt not only anxiety at having to save their social inferiors, but also a certain amount of consternation that *rich* women could be so abused.³⁷

Mrs. Little could not make up her mind: she had much respect for Chinese women’s modesty, even in prostitution,³⁸ but betrayed disgust and impatience at their bodies and bodily presentation:

Only their deformed feet and faces are seen . . . even the hands are concealed in their large sleeves. . . . Their faces at parties are often so rouged as to look like masks. . . . There is no single feature in the face that we could call pretty, and in accordance with etiquette the face is entirely devoid of expression. I have never been able to find anything pretty about a Chinese female except her hands and arms. . . . Doubtless her feet and legs would be pretty too if left alone. Now her *poor* legs are like two sticks.”³⁹

One of Mrs. Little’s favorite adjectives throughout her memoirs is “poor,” a good bourgeois term of condescending pity that seems to conflate economic

want with painful physical circumstance, even though the women who are described by the term are members of the elite.

The Pain that Engenders

Not only did little feet become the most important factor in women's sexuality: without a "three-inch Golden Lotus" a woman was not able to become a woman.

Gao Hongxing, *Chanzu shi*⁴⁰

Legends of the origins of footbinding are quite telling. There is the empress with oddly small feet who "bound them with fillets, affecting to make that pass for beauty which was really a deformity."⁴¹ Some say the empress was a fox spirit who had to disguise her furry paws by binding them; others that she was clubfooted and hounded the emperor to force all girls to bind their feet.⁴² The idea for the custom may have been brought in a Buddhist tale of a beautiful woman who had the feet of a deer that left mysterious lotus flower prints (symbol of the Buddha's enlightenment). These legends all show a deformity turned to advantage: how a child born female, a condition construed as a terrible social and moral disadvantage, successfully becomes a person called feminine.

Historians fix the beginnings of footbinding during the Song period (960–1279), a time of expanding urbanization and leisure and the onset of a decline in the status and privileges of women.⁴³ It does seem to have originated at court and spread through imitation.⁴⁴ Footbinding reached its apogee, both in terms of class and region, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When the Manchus from the northeast conquered the Han Chinese in the mid-seventeenth century, they tried, repeatedly and unsuccessfully, to ban footbinding by edict (1638, 1644, 1645, 1660).⁴⁵ By 1668, the useless decrees were rescinded for the kingdom as a whole, and only Manchu women were forbidden to bind.⁴⁶ Binding was more common in the north than the south, and it took decades of activist work after the founding of the Republic in 1911 for the practice to cease completely.⁴⁷ Choosing not to bind a daughter's feet, or to unbind one's own, were decisions first made in the upper classes and only later among laboring women. Women were often reluctant to unbind, for relinquishing their lotuses involved considerable pain: physical, social and, psychological. Considering the number of women subjected to (and by) this process, remarkably few died.⁴⁸

The dissemination of the social gospel that gave substance to the cliché "cleanliness is next to godliness" grew up in the wake of a general medicalization

of life in Europe and the United States. But I think this attention to the signs of “difference-as-deficit” borne in the (dirty) body was also stimulated by the new biologized racism that swept the British empire in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁹ By that time Europeans and Americans felt certain that humans were, in their deepest identities, *biologically* raced and gendered in ways that could be scientifically demonstrated.⁵⁰ The Chinese, however, did not share these discursive plots.⁵¹ In the nineteenth century when missionaries were confronting footbinding, Chinese bodies were lived within a cosmology of transforming resonances and were thought to be formed of a complex network of energized matter known as *qi*.⁵² In Chinese medicine (even today), the body’s systems are organized as functional multiplicities, not as subsets of “organs.”⁵³ Health is based in constant and patterned change and circulation, not fixity or stability. People did not consist of divinely endowed or biologically fixed human nature. Instead they are materializations of dynamically contingent positions both in space and in social hierarchy.

The construction of gender was a social performance of this general devotion to patterned circulation and transformation, sharing with medicine the logic of yin/yang. Tani Barlow discusses gender in this light:

What appear as “gender” are yin/yang differentiated positions: not two anatomical “sexes,” but a profusion of relational, bound, unequal dyads, each signifying difference and positioning difference analogically.⁵⁴

These “performances” of gendered positions were accomplished especially within the systematic scripts for social activity called *li* (usually translated as “ritual”). Footbinding, likewise, both marked and produced the ever-shifting world of hierarchical relationships that comprised Chinese socio-corporeal life. By binding a girl’s feet, the contact of cloth (either silk or cotton) and skin exemplified in its grueling daily regime the exercise and effects of agency in a world of interpenetrating strata and layers of embodiment. One widespread body-imaginary in the late imperial period depicted the body as layers of energetic, circulating *qi*, extending outward through its enfolding clothing.⁵⁵ Thus Ko pointed out that footbinding was a ritual of civility akin to clothing the body.⁵⁶ Within this body-imaginary, it functioned as a mark of genteel (feminine) civility, signifying gender difference in ways quite opaque to Europeans.

The organs that were the object of fixation for European gender distinction (the penis, the womb, the breasts) lacked a similar discursive weight and reality in China. Instead, and as a pronounced marker of gender distinction, Chinese women engaged in a process of continual physical transformation, molding a

visible part of the body (which was then, of course, wrapped in shoes almost never removed in the sight of another). Feet were held in common with men, so this somatic gender distinction, rather than being “discovered” in nature, was created through culture, through a process of cosmetic manipulation.

How must encountering this process have affected non-Chinese women who believed implicitly that gender distinctions rested naturally in original endowments of genitalia and breasts? Big-footed missionary women, especially unmarried, literate, professional ones, were *not thought of as women by the Chinese*. This lack of recognition of gender on both sides led to a “profound confusion of sexual stereotypes . . . western women found Chinese men unmanly and Chinese men found western women unwomanly.”⁵⁷ Yet we have noted that the missionaries’ feminine identity within their home “cult of domesticity” was crucial to their missionary work and sense of self.

One can imagine this contradiction as a troubling liberation, allowing them to discuss footbinding as torture, but not gendered torture. For if western women admitted bound feet as gender markers, rather than scars of barbarity, they would have been admitting the existence of a kind of femininity quite different from their own, admitting that they were not, in local terms, women. Here lies another reason why footbinding, as painful oppression, may have often been displaced by nineteenth-century women from gender to age or citizenship. They could object to pain inflicted upon children, upon human beings, but not upon women *as women*.

As the anti-footbinding movement spread, Mrs. Little grew more and more delighted with the willingness of Chinese women to attend meetings and to speak out; she herself “began to forget that anyone had ever laughed at her.”⁵⁸ In her memoir, even at this point, however, she extensively incorporates a Chinese male voice into her anti-footbinding campaign. The “Suifu Appeal,” the first document of its kind to circulate in thousands of copies, contains two arguments against footbinding put forward by Mr. Chou, a literatus. The arguments are both internally and externally oriented: First, he mentions an earlier (seventeenth-century) edict banning footbinding that has been ignored; he calls this a crime against the dynasty. Second, he says:

The present is no time of peace. Foreign women have natural feet; they are daring and can defend themselves; whilst Chinese females have bound feet and can barely bear the weight of their clothes. . . . Of England, France, Germany, America, only the Chinese voluntarily incur suffering and injury.⁵⁹

With the Suifu Appeal the discourse on footbinding shifted. Nineteenth-century western women’s articulating the pain of footbinding at a distance, as

not *merely* a gendered discourse, allowed Chinese intellectuals to incorporate anti-footbinding into the nationalist discourse. Anti-footbinding would now move from a focus, however indirect, on women's bodily pain to become, in the hands of male reformers, a fetish for the Chinese nation as crippled. As Pietz explains the term fetish, footbinding was now reified, historical, territorialized, personalized; it was also an obstacle to nationhood.⁶⁰ In the early twentieth century, a second discursive context thus overtook and absorbed footbinding. The physical pain of Chinese women was abstracted and revalued as the pain of the national body.⁶¹ The footbound woman became a fetish for the Chinese only when it summarized and made visible the problems of colonial oppression, as a "feminization" of China, one that necessitated the naming and alienating of something called "tradition."

What is gained and lost in this historical shift? In the long term, the connection of woman = victim = struggling nation set up the burial of the "woman question" under nationalist concerns in postmonarchical and postrevolutionary China. The shift also bequeathed to late twentieth-century feminists a tendency to reverse the equation to read backwards: third world = victim = woman.⁶²

Footbinding still wields great influence as a feminist fetish in the sense I have used that term here. In the seventies both Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly wrote influential texts on footbinding that were emblematic of the "cultural feminist" turn within radical feminism. Alice Echols notes that cultural feminists reject earlier radical questioning of gender distinctions in favor of recuperating an essential femininity upon which women could unite.⁶³ But the idea of Universal Sisterhood breaks down quickly when confronted with differences of race, class, or cultural experience.

Mary Daly's influential *Gyn/ecology* on violence against women describes such practices as reenactments of murder of the goddess. Audre Lorde's letter to Daly, reprinted in the *Sister Outsider* anthology, lays out an eloquent criticism of Daly's book: Women of color have no goddesses but instead appear only as quintessential victims in the later chapters on Suttee (*sati*), footbinding, and African genital mutilation.⁶⁴ Lorde accuses Daly of racism, but how does this racism play out? Stating that there are no non-European goddesses is tantamount to saying that non-European women have no history, that is, no sense of a past narrative upon which to build rational future choices. This disregard for "the historical" goes beyond heady abandonment of dusty academic convention (Daly gives good footnote) to have real moral consequences for her text. She intermixes past practices that have ceased, like footbinding, witch burning, and Nazi medicine with other practices that continue unabated today.

With no discussion of how the now-defunct practices were overcome through the active contention of their victims, we miss an opportunity to learn about resistance. Daly's "snapshot" of human female misery provides a deeply felt call to arms that disempowers the very people she hopes to enlist by depriving them of historical lessons. She does this equally well for Chinese, American, and European women. But as non-Europeans, Chinese women are doubly deprived of both their own history of resistance and any "matriarchal" history upon which Daly might base resistance to patriarchy today.

This failure of cultural feminists to historicize is a famous weakness. Dworkin likewise fails to contextualize footbinding. In her book *Woman Hating* she devotes a chapter to "Gynocide: Chinese Footbinding."⁶⁵ She is particularly sensitive to the damage done to the mother-daughter relationship when the mother takes on the role of patriarchal enforcer and binds the daughter's feet. But she completely neglects the Chinese context of the practice—in her treatment we are in the realm of "all cultures, then and now."⁶⁶ Thus we never understand how this particular physical pain serves as both focus and veil for the pain of impending separation when the daughter must marry into another family, usually into another town or village, and is, in any case, identified as a temporary member of her natal family from birth. In the institutional context of strict virilocal marriage, one must be careful not to overly romanticize the mother-daughter bond.

Why has the problem of bound feet lingered in a way that engages our voyeuristic indignation? What does it make visible? What does it hide? How does it enable those who invoke it?

Daly and Dworkin both seem to rely upon a version of the Universal Body of nature and medicine with which we opened this essay—what women have in common, all over the world, is their bionature. The problem remains today; however, there are no more feet to unbind. The numbing foreclosure effect of *Woman Hating* and *Gyn/ecology's* doomsday forever-victim shows up in any classroom where one tries to teach about Chinese women. It empowers no one to spring into action in the world.

On the other hand, Christian women of the nineteenth century who lived in China were both personally and publicly empowered by their fetishization of footbinding. Their anti-footbinding agitation may have only borne fruit when the cause was taken up by Chinese men with a nationalist agenda; nonetheless, their contribution to ending footbinding was quite real, even if its indirect benefit to national liberation and the end of missionizing had ironic consequences for them as they were forced to leave China.

In once sense, however, footbinding does serve cultural feminism in ways similar to its colonial function for nineteenth-century Christian reformers:

it empowers by providing others to save. In crusading against footbinding, Christian women could displace “more direct self-referential feminism” away from themselves—where it surely would have caused trouble at home—onto a Chinese cause.⁶⁷ Their inability to confront the problematic of their own status nonetheless empowered them as agents of capitalist, imperialist empire and progress. Cultural feminists, by blaming women’s oppression solely upon patriarchally motivated bodily violations like footbinding, can disengage from the necessity to confront the material legacy of imperialist capitalism—they can ignore racism and poverty—and empower themselves as feminists of a certain sort. Radical cultural feminists like Daly and Dworkin are part of the larger failure of first-world white feminists to account clearly for the fact that the oppression of “women” is not (and has not historically been) based solely on sexed gender difference from men, nor is it solely perpetrated by men. Racism, colonialism and neocolonialism, class-based exploitation, homophobia, and religious intolerance form a complex web that hampers all women in varying degrees.⁶⁸ These issues present one itch that feminist practice has been scratching for at least twenty years, and I would like to announce that we can stop. However, recent work in “international feminism” harbors within it many of the same contradictions that can be found in these early texts.⁶⁹

Tani Barlow’s work on “International Feminism in a Global Frame” treats it as an ideological formation that operates to make contradictions under global capital disappear, rather than simply an innocent project of the ethically correct. She describes how international feminism succeeds in naturalizing the scene in many ways: first, as a type of “internationalist” discourse, this feminism? “reinforces, legitimizes and naturalizes” the very nations it is supposed to be superceding.⁷⁰ Secondly, it “presumes most women’s work and reproductive obligations bring us into routine proximity to nature” and “assumes an anatomically fixed category.”⁷¹ Third, through ecofeminism, it offers nature itself as something that contains geopolitics and national politics, where “national questions are male and natural matters are female.” In the Chinese case, the issue that has replaced footbinding as the current horror is female infanticide.

How do such moves by scholars of “international feminism” repeat earlier patterns of fetishization in feminist engagement and theoretical practice? Briefly, the ingredients for the fetish are here: There is the concentration upon the female body, the reduction of that body to its injuries and what that reduction occludes—class, race, economic, political, and religious tribulation; there is also what the reduction enables: the working through of issues of feminist import at home (i.e., violence in the family) through discussion of “others.”

There is also the equally important question of why the body itself—and especially the bodies of women—remains such significant sites for the simultaneous production of senses of self, collectivity, and alterity.

Telling Painful Secrets

And meanwhile I understand that each of the western theories can only work as a mirror or metaphor for the one-thousand-year-old mystery of the Chinese male erotic fixation. And the reflections from the mirror are as fragmentary and partial as the fetishistic gaze itself.

Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty*⁷²

The work of Wang Ping, poet and scholar, shares, and yet deforms in specific ways, some of the assumptions and outcomes outlined here. Her book, *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China*, opens with a flurry of discussion linking the bound foot back to its body, but the body Wang conjures is precisely the biobody of sex and death.⁷³ Explicit in her desire to reclaim her female ancestors and break the taboo of silence around their pain, Wang's work presents rich examples of fetishization as a theoretical turn, albeit in a postcolonial and post-structuralist vein. For Wang, the stubbornly engaging and glacially transforming trope of fetishizing the body of the Other Woman becomes the site of reclamation. I will return, in my discussion of her work, to the four usages of the fetish outlined above.

First, *Aching for Beauty* engages footbinding as cultural practice, an outcome of expressly erotic violence so transforming that it turned Chinese women's bodies into mediating, hybrid objects. Reminding the men who encountered them of beasts, vegetables and objects for collection, these feet incited riots of poetic language: "Violence renders the feet sacred."⁷⁴ Wang turns our attention fully upon this fetish as "the material locus of action and desire."⁷⁵ Second, she abstracts footbinding as the summarizing part of Chinese women's lives, and it soon ramifies metonymically to touch upon "the context of their everyday lives and work environment, of the their social economic and linguistic backgrounds,"⁷⁶ the part that provides perspective upon the whole.

Third, and what sets her apart from second-wave feminists, is her wish to speak openly of footbinding as "something that can generate" feminine sexuality and women's agency. She recognizes its power in preparation for marriage and in articulating women's hierarchies, and thinks of it as a form of secret, female knowledge, "the place of honor, identity and livelihood for many women."⁷⁷ She reads the textual silence around footbinding as "an oral culture exclusive to women who passed it from body to body, mouth to mouth,

handiwork to handiwork . . . their writing/handiwork/speech allow them to . . . redefine and reconstruct their fetishized bodies as a whole.”⁷⁸ In my view, Wang herself fetishizes footbinding, but in order to displace and transform painful moments of destruction into something of utility, even beauty.

Fourth, Wang spends the first half of the book exploring in horrific detail the connections between footbinding and death and violence, reaching a crescendo in her comparison of it with the gory execution practice of the thousand cuts.⁷⁹ Only after footbinding has been firmly established as the marker of the alterity of China past do we move onto explaining and redeeming its otherness. Its redemption lies, for Wang, in its creation of a kind of hybrid and androgynous body that mediated sex and gender difference, “producing the body of an immortal or a god.”⁸⁰ How does this project enable Wang Ping in terms of self-creation? She ends her book quoting a gender-bending stanza from Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* where leather jackets, silk stockings, tuxedos and pink boas blend as vaginal fashions, and adds:

What contemporary American women imagine or practice had already been translated into reality in China a thousand years ago. For a millennium, Chinese women bound their feet (their symbolic vaginas) and dressed them in all manners (binding, covering, piercing) and styles (transvestites, animals, plants, objects) just as twentieth-century Americans imagine in their vagina monologues. Across time, space and culture, the currents of eastern and western female imaginations have finally merged.⁸¹

Though Wang means to end the book on a gendered note, competition between east/west racialized knowledge creeps in. What we really have is another hybrid transformation: one achieved through her use of theories that bend and reshape her narratives of footbinding. The success of the final merging of eastern and western female imaginations rests upon Wang’s ability, as a Chinese diasporic writer, to achieve a distanced domestication of the horror of the bound foot.

Coda

In my discussion of colonial(ist) writings on footbinding and pain we see something of the complex process that lies behind the historical artifact that some feminists would call “Footbinding as Female Torture.” I suggest that the gap between the narrative of the (painful) process and the (contrived) sign of the accomplishment of its end is analogous to the distance traversed between “coloniality” and “postcoloniality.” Current uses of footbinding illustrate the

temptation to engage in a constant and early foreclosure, but one that seems to be, paradoxically, built into the process of making/writing history itself.

Bound feet literally disappear as a problem for Chinese women whose limitations now take on other, less striking forms. Bound feet reappear as a trope for white feminists like Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin. Colonialism ostensibly disappears after independence as the colonizer departs. But of course, the history never goes away. Current debates over postcoloniality as a phase, or postcolonialism as a discourse, readily allow us to reconjure the colonial in a contained fashion, as “postcolonial” contains “colonial.”

If we view it optimistically, perhaps “postcolonialism” operates fetishically in a fashion analogous to the way footbinding operated for missionaries: domesticating the difficult and bringing it near. Like a very long handle with a hook on the end, postcoloniality as discursive fetish device can allow different people get a grip on the colonial past and drag it onto the shores of perceptibility.

So fetishism can be seen as a process bound up with colonialism, capitalism and modernism. I find it directly relevant for critical cross-cultural work on women and gender because it seems to tell by displacement (in true fetishistic fashion) the story of the consolidation of a European bourgeois subjectivity. That subjectivity required a literal racial Other, took the form of a neutral liberal subject to earn alienated wages through the production of commodities, and created forms of gender distinction that reified lived bodies into medical symptoms of inferiority.

In this essay I have tried to move beyond fetish as merely perverse to extend Pietz’s and Bhabha’s more Foucauldian ideas of the fetish as a discursive enabler, productive in the sense that ideology is productive of subject positions. Thus I suggest that we might also find new possibilities in postcolonial theory’s slippery relations of containment that both enable and erase. Perhaps it contains the “colonial” as only a *seemingly* abandoned object and allows us to think in two times at once, seeing the past in the present. In intercultural work we must learn to cope with our fetishizations—they are bound to be represented.

Notes

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Epigraph. Cooper, *Chinese Repository*.

1. The title of this section is from Nochlin, *Body in Pieces*.
2. Cooper, *Chinese Repository*.
3. Tuttle, *Mary Porter Gamewell*, 66; Little, *Intimate China*, 99.
4. Nochlin, *Body in Pieces*, 8.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Latour, *War of the Worlds*, 13.
7. See Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*.
8. See Ko, "Bondage in Time," 200.
9. Blake, "Footbinding"; Turner, "Locating Footbinding"; and Ko "Body as Attire."
10. Pietz, "Problem of the Fetish," 12.
11. *Ibid.*, 5.
12. Freud, "Fetishism."
13. Pietz, "Problem of the Fetish," 9.
14. *Ibid.*, 10.
15. Freud, "Fetishism." See also McClintock, "Angel of Progress" and *Imperial Leather*, chaps. 2–4.
16. Apter, "Introduction," 4–5.
17. *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10–24, 1877*.
18. The title of this section is the name of a Presbyterian missionary journal.
19. Ropp, *Dissent*, 120–151.
20. Chen Roshui (1280) provides an extremely early example of this line of critique. Levy, *Chinese Footbinding*, 65.
21. See Daly, *Gyn/ecology*; Dworkin, *Woman Hating*.
22. See Zito, "Secularizing Pain of Footbinding."
23. Hunter, *Gospel of Gentility*, 9.
24. *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 7–20, 1890*, 607; see also Rev. Ohlinger, 604–605 in the same work.
25. See Hunter, *Gospel of Gentility*, 128–173; McClintock, *Imperial leather*, 258–195.
26. Mrs. T. P. Crawford advises that women need not worry about producing books. *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10–24, 1877*, 151. Miss Mary Laurence: "We do not want to raise the cry of women's rights, nor in any degree countenance the Chinese error that in our honorable country women have the upper hand because the British scepter has for so many prosperous years been swayed by a woman's hand" (*ibid.*, p. 469).
27. Alicia Helen Neva Bewick, in the convention of the times, signed her books as "Mrs. Archibald Little" after her marriage. Elizabeth Croll presents a very sympathetic portrait of her in *Wise Daughters*, 23–62.
28. Drucker, "Influence," 189; Little, *Intimate China*, 102.
29. Little, *Intimate China*, 93.
30. *Ibid.*, 96. By 1898, the school's girls were no longer binding their feet.
31. *Ibid.*, 96–98.
32. Little, *Blue Gown*, 289.
33. Fanon cited in Bhabha, "Other Question," 23.

34. Bhabha, "Other Question," 32.
35. Callaway, "Dressing"; Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, 127.
36. Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, 128.
37. On class differences see *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China Held at Shanghai, May 10–24, 1877*, 133, 137. As her anti-footbinding movement grew, Mrs. Little happily pointed out that "Best of all, Chinese ladies of distinction [were] coming forward to found a school for girls of the upper classes." *Intimate China*, 163.
38. Little, *Intimate China*, 116.
39. *Ibid.*, 125, emphasis added.
40. Gao Hongxing, *Chanzu shi*, 2.
41. Du Haide cited in Levy, *Chinese Footbinding*, 37.
42. Levy, *Chinese Footbinding*, 37.
43. See Gao, *Chanzu shi*, 17–18; Ebrey, *Confucianism*, 220–221.
44. Fairbank and Reischauer, *China*, 42–43; Eastman, *Family*, 22–23. Both sources are popular textbooks.
45. Gao, *Chanzu shi*, 25–26.
46. *Ibid.*, 24. Ko has noted astutely how footbinding was further emphasized as a sign of Han patriotism and civility in the face of barbaric conquest. Ko, *Teachers*.
47. See Turner, "Locating Footbinding," 456.
48. Levy, *Chinese Footbinding*. In Chinese see Jia, *Zhongguo funü chanzu kao*; Yao, *Cai-fei Lu*; and Gao, *Chanzu shi*.
49. Ware, *Beyond the Pale*; Hall, "Missionary Stories."
50. Laqueur, *Making Sex*; Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*; Young, *White Mythologies*.
51. The essays in Zito and Barlow, *Body, Subject and Power in China*, suggest that, in the absence of scientific biologism, Chinese bodies and subjectivities were organized along other discursive lines. See also the essays on China in Kasulis et al., *Self as Body*, 149–294. Cole offers a provocative discussion of Buddhist organization of gendered bodies. Cole, *Mothers and Sons*.
52. Zito, "Silk and Skin."
53. Kaptchuk, *Web*; Farquhar, *Knowing Practice*; Porkert, *Chinese Medicine*.
54. Barlow, "Theorizing Woman," 259. See also Furth, *Flourishing Yin*.
55. Hay "Body Invisible"; Zito, "Silk and Skin."
56. Ko, "Body as Attire."
57. Hunter, *Gospel of Gentility*, 204; Gao, *Chanzu shi*, 2.
58. Little, *Intimate China*, 156.
59. *Ibid.*, 160–162.
60. See Ko, "Body as Attire."
61. Little, *Intimate China*, 155–162; Little, *Blue Gown*, 253–304; and Drucker "Influence of Western Women," 194.
62. Mohanty et al., *Third World Women*.
63. See Echols, *New Feminism*.
64. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.
65. Dworkin, *Woman Hating*.
66. *Ibid.*, 120.
67. Hunter, *Gospel of Gentility*, 87–88.

68. See Mohanty, *Third World Women*, especially essays by Mohanty, Chow, Russo, and Johnson-Odim.

69. In discussions on “international feminism” that follow, I am indebted to Tani Barlow for sharing with me her unpublished work on “Teaching International Feminism.”

70. She quotes Malkki, “Citizens of Humanity.”

71. Barlow, “Teaching International Feminism.”

72. Wang, *Aching for Beauty*, 101.

73. Wang cites George Hershey’s sociobiological work on the function of secondary sex characteristics in sexual selection and Bataille on the flesh as the implacable Other of rationality. Wang, *Aching for Beauty*, 14, 48.

74. Wang, *Aching for Beauty*, 4.

75. Pietz, “Fetish,” 10.

76. Wang, *Aching for Beauty*, 146.

77. *Ibid.*, 6–9, 19, 53; quote from introduction, xi.

78. *Ibid.*, 145–146.

79. *Ibid.*, 137–142.

80. *Ibid.*, 4.

81. *Ibid.*, 233.